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The International Telecommunication Union

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Introduction

The principal aim of this contribution is to highlight the literature covering the EU’s approach towards the governance of telecommunications and internet at a global level, and to place this in the context of the EU in international institutions. The role of this chapter is to show how the literature examining the internet and telecommunication sectors (which can also be referred to as elements of the ‘global information society’) examines the contribution and role of the European Union in the institutions that have emerged at the global level. It outlines some of the literature that discusses the EU’s role in the governance of global telecommunications, specifically looking at its role in the multilateral organisations charged with management and coordination at a global level.

The chapter will start by introducing some of the key institutional actors in the domain. It will cover the literature that looks at how these organisations, such as the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and the relatively new Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) have evolved, and how the literature has treated the role of the EU therein. It complements the chapter on the EU’s performance in the institutional landscape of the internet by Christou and Simpson in this collection, by placing the internet in the context of broader discussions on the information society.

Notably, at this global governance level, there has been a shift in recent years in the perceived dominance of traditional international organisations in managing the global telecommunications regime, which has led to studies that examine how these new actors (including the EU) have not only shaped, but also been shaped by the policy environments as they have matured. This has been made apparent by the creation of new institutions to govern the converging policy-making space between the internet and telecommunication worlds. Additionally, within the EU itself, there have been significant changes in the way that national and European regulators work (for treatment of the European telecommunication sphere and shifts in regulation, see Humphreys and Simpson, 2005; Sandholtz, 1993; Thatcher, 2000, 2001).

By looking at the two cases of telecommunications and internet governance within the context of the global information society policy environment, this contribution shows the EU’s evolving approach to both sectors, which are of course highly interconnected, and yet have
provided the EU with the opportunity to try out different approaches to playing a role in global governance. With some exceptions, the literature in the field tends to focus either on one of the two cases, and do not often reflect the convergence of the two domains: this may well be due to the institutional environment that has emerged in recent years. On the one hand, the telecommunications environment has developed from a very traditional background of intergovernmental governance, having been embedded within the ITU (a UN organ). The internet’s governance, on the other hand, provides an example of the emergence of a completely new set of governance mechanisms at the global level. These cases provide some insights into the factors that have changed the EU’s approach towards the variety of global mechanisms that have emerged over the years in internet and telecommunications governance. This approach started with very strong support (notably from the European Commission) towards a global, intergovernmental approach to managing technological change and the emergence of the ‘information society.’ In 1993, the European Commission provided support for, and hosted a G7 Summit in Brussels on the topic, and was keen to work with the ITU on issues of internet governance, through the ITU-driven Internet Ad Hoc Committee. However, with the creation of ICANN and the shift of focus away from the ITU on internet governance-related issues (see, for example, Shahin, 2006, 2011), this support has waned.

Given the wealth of literature that examines the frameworks for global governance of the information society, it is worthwhile showing how this encapsulates different approaches to governance of digital networks, and how the literature on the EU’s governance intersects with this. Four different schools of literature are referred to in this chapter. First of all, the literature predominantly emerging from the field of International Relations tries to show the shifts in our understanding of global governance frameworks. Second, a body of literature exists that focuses on how digital technologies influence these shifts. Third, there is a wealth of literature which examines changes in internal EU governance, which examines the increasing role that the European Union’s supranational institutions take in different policy fields such as the information society. Finally, there is a body of literature that examines the EU’s international interactions with multilateral institutions, much of which is covered in other contributions to this collection. This contribution attempts to show the nexus between the internal and external EU governance literature, revealing future potential areas for research in this dynamic field.

**Actors and institutions in the global governance of telecommunications**

In the evolving telecommunications sphere, many changes have taken place in recent decades (see, for example, Bauer, 2010). The entire international system that maintained and regulated the international telecommunication environment has had to deal with the shift from analogue technologies to those based on digital communications. The contribution first briefly addresses the ITU as an institution, and outlines its core activities to show the position it holds in the governance of global telecommunication. This shows that the role of the ITU on the global scene has shifted dramatically since its inception. Secondly, the contribution briefly describes some of the aspects of global internet governance. It examines the main institutions involved in these processes, focusing on those that are part of the UN system. The contribution finally addresses the evolving EU approach to the UN-based activities, and then tries to provide some reasons for this behaviour.

**The ITU: context and core activities**

Originally established in 1865, the ITU emerged as the outcome of an agreement between twenty European states, and was set up to ensure interoperability between international telegraph
networks between its signatory members (Zacher, 2002). Over sixty years ago, it became a UN agency (Coddington, 1991).

Prior to the establishment of an international body to deal with telecommunication standards, communication beyond borders was strongly restricted. Communications networks would stop at borders, as standards between countries were incompatible, having been designed according to national requirements. There was a need to ensure that communication could work across borders, and the ITU was set up – initially in Western Europe alone – to allow communication to take place through the setting of international standards and the establishment of agreements on costs and payment mechanisms for international communications. These were primarily national considerations requiring international agreement, as telecommunications operators were bound to national governments. In most cases, these operators were run as public services and had monopoly status in their respective countries (Levy, 2001; Natalicchi, 2001).

The governance gap between national monopoly telecommunication providers and international cooperation that was traditionally filled by the ITU has shifted dramatically from technical governance institutions towards the economic field due to the liberalisation of national markets (Sandholtz, 1993; Schmidt, 1998; Thatcher, 2000). The emergence of the internet, which showed that technical rules were best made outside of governmental control, has played a defining role here (Mueller, 2001). This has yet again changed the ITU’s mandate, and subsequently, the ITU has had to change its role in the turbulent global telecommunication environment. Its current mandate, ‘to connect the world’ is exercised in three main ways:

- Managing the international radio-frequency spectrum;
- Maintaining standards for telecommunications services;
- Ensuring access to ICT for the developing world.

Although the membership structure of the ITU is not entirely unique in comparison with other international organisations, it has had a defining impact on the role it has taken in global telecommunications governance. Here, the focus has been less on broader policy-related principles, and more on technical aspects of telecommunications services.

The telecommunication field has seen great changes in recent years, which have been dominated by two major factors. First, the transition of global telecommunications from a regime controlled by state-owned monopolies to a liberalised environment characterised by global competition has meant that governments no longer control the means of communications in their countries (Berben and Clements, 1995; Kim and Barnett, 2000). Second, the changes in the global telecommunications environment have been driven by the emergence of the internet as the dominant infrastructure for global communication: the internet evolved under separate global governance arrangements and made use of separate institutional bases as starting points. Both factors combined have challenged the logic of the underlying institutions that govern global telecommunications.

It is not surprising to see that the ITU now exists as one actor within a complex of instruments and institutions that have emerged to deal with different aspects of the communications environment, which covers such technical issues as radio frequency allocation, and standards development for telecommunications services as well as more politically-oriented discussions on internet regulation and governance, access to information, global trade and services in and over telecoms services, and the development of infrastructures for
telecommunications across the globe. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the debates over internet governance.

**Internet governance frameworks**

The internet and the increasingly liberalised and global telecommunications environment provide cases for shifts in the locus of authority and power away from states and the traditional mechanisms of international governance. Some policy analysts and enthusiastic policymakers at the European level saw opportunities to enhance the role of the European Union in governing the international framework for digital communications, especially with the focus shifting from technical regulation to economic governance of the networks that drive our current ‘information society’. In part, this focus on economic management emerged from the story of the internet’s birth and initial growth.

The internet’s early days were characterised by an organic growth pattern, which took place mainly within the confines of one state: the United States. This took place through funding from DARPA’s IPTO and subsequently the NSF, with private networks also playing a crucial role (Abbate, 1999; Hafner and Lyon, 1998; Shahin, 2006; Shahin and Finger, 2008). The openness of the TCP/IP standard and the willingness of ARPA and NSF project managers to allow external networks to connect to the backbone helped create an environment where it became highly beneficial for any type of institution to be connected to the internet. Due to this untraditional development of the communication network, traditional understandings of governance have great difficulty in dealing with its emergence. Hart, Reed and Bar have noted that ‘the policy mechanisms which have permitted the growth of the Internet, and which are now envisioned to guide its future, are actually quite foreign to the telecommunications debate’ (Hart, Reed and Bar, 1992: 667–68). Given the number of actors that were involved in just the first steps of the internet’s development, and particularly the mixture of private and public networks that were involved, it was difficult to establish a direct source of accountability. The internet was largely confined to academic researchers and private corporate networks in its early stages. Advisory groups effectively carried out the management of the internet and there was no apparent need for a traditional governance structure to be developed. The structure of any such organisation, in any case, would have been highly challenging to develop.

To fully understand the role of the European Union in developing the internet’s standards and markets and supporting institutional organisations, it is necessary to realise that the European Commission has played various roles from both technical and political stances. Given that the public bodies traditionally endowed with responsibility for communications networks have largely relinquished their roles in the new global information and communications literature that analysed emergence of new actors and, consequently, new forms of governance emerged. The European Union (and the Commission in particular) has been shown to have acted in many of the different modes of governance used to deal with the internet, and thus forged a number of roles for itself in this complex picture.

Several categories of actors can be discerned through an analysis of the debates surrounding the main developments in the internet’s standards. These actor types have motivations and desires that are shown to be distinct. Whilst this categorisation is helpful, it is arbitrary and does not provide an absolute picture; it merely enables analytic clarity. These actors and their preferred models of governance are outlined in Table 16.1. A categorical breakdown enables analysis of the differing models of governance, which reveals how different actors contribute to the internet’s maturation. Actors sometimes act together to achieve agreement, but even if this is the case, agreement on outcomes has been difficult to achieve in practical terms.
The EU’s approach to internet governance

In contrast to the approach taken by the European Commission with respect to the ITU, the debate has been far more polarised regarding the role of governmental agencies in regulating the internet. One the one hand, there are organisations that wish to keep governments entirely out of what they consider to be a technical activity. On the other hand, there are governmental agencies that consider the future of the internet’s infrastructure so important that governmental intervention was a requirement. Both approaches are reflected in different literatures and theoretical traditions dealing with international relations (see, for example, Dutton and Peltu, 2007; Mueller, 2010). Prior to the development of ICANN, an alternative had been proposed by a consortium led by the ITU; it was called the International Ad Hoc Committee and had generated a report in February 1997 which suggested that all countries sign a Memorandum of Understanding to create a set of committees and bodies that would take over the management of the gTLD-DNS system and ‘pursue enhancements in the administration and use of the “international” Top Level Domain name space’ (International Ad Hoc Committee, 1997). The Policy Oversight Committee (POC) was to be composed of technical organisations that had been responsible, until that point, for the internet’s management (IAB, IANA, and ISOC) alongside other international organisations such as the ITU and WIPO. The Policy Advisory Body (PAB) was to be constructed of ‘relevant governmental organisations, non-governmental organisations, industry, and Internet operations organisations’ (International Ad Hoc Committee, 1997).

The Governmental Advisory Committee (GAC) finally established as part of ICANN, due to the insistence of the European Commission and others (Halpin and Simpson, 2002; Mueller, 2001; Paré, 2003), did not resemble the PAB in any meaningful way. Due to its position in the ICANN structure, its participation as a subordinate advisory body to the not-for-profit corporation established under Californian law was questioned by some. The European Commission, which played a decisive role in developing the GAC, continues to play a central role in this body (Halpin and Simpson, 2002: 290), but its role (and the role of the GAC) is apparently more informal than formal. In the early stages of ICANN’s growth, the European Commission reiterated its concern with the dominance of the US government’s role in the management of the internet, claiming that the Department of Commerce has ‘reasserted its rights of supervision over [certain] ICANN policies’ (European Commission, 2000: 14). The Commission was of the opinion that the ‘necessary governmental oversight of ICANN should be exercised on a multilateral basis, in the first instance through the Governmental Advisory Committee’ (European Commission, 2000: 14).

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<tr>
<th>Actor category</th>
<th>Models of governance</th>
<th>Example institution</th>
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<tr>
<td>Academic / Epistemic</td>
<td>Bottom-up (decentralised), lightly coordinated where necessary</td>
<td>IANA, IETF</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Pre-existing model – informal epistemic community, self-regulation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>Non-governmental, market-based, self-regulation</td>
<td>ICANN, TRUSTe</td>
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<td>Shares libertarian approach with academic model</td>
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<tr>
<td>Governmental and International</td>
<td>Hierarchical, top-down, co-regulation with different actors</td>
<td>IAHC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation</td>
<td>Regulation, based upon formal epistemic communities</td>
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The need for governmental intervention in the ICANN process was highlighted by France, Australia, and the European Commission. The establishment of the GAC can be seen as a result of increased pressure to highlight the importance of the internet’s naming and addressing conventions to the global information society.

The literature in this field has been quite positive towards the European Union, showing that it provided a clear leadership role in the early stages of the internet’s global governance. As will be shown below, most of the literature has focused on the empirical side of the debate, leaving space for lesson-drawing and improving our understanding of the EU as an international actor.

Governance of digital networks, and the nexus of EU internal/external debates

The debates surrounding the emergent digital networks attempt to deal with the apparent redefinition of the nature of global governance, and particularly for this contribution, the participation of the EU in the development of these networks. Although there is a paucity of literature that focuses on the interaction between the EU and international organisations in the global governance of the information society, there is a substantial amount of discussion on the impact of technology on international relations, and the implications of technological developments for global governance. From both theoretical and empirical angles, many attempts have been made to develop arguments for change, and conversely, continuity in international politics in the field. The elaboration below tries to encapsulate many of these debates from different perspectives.

IR debates and digital networks

A wealth of literature has examined the role of global technologies on inter-state interactions over the years. The globalisation of telecommunications networks and services has led to the enhancement of international cooperation in the field in recent decades (Cowhey, 1999; Haas, 1975; Krasner, 1991; Ruggie, 1975; Zacher, 2002). Zacher highlights the role of technology in creating emergent regimes (Zacher, 2002: 63), which subsequently contribute to the decay of the ‘Westphalian temple’ of state sovereignty. These regimes are based upon authority accorded by the state, but often contribute to the decline of state autonomy in the international system. This ‘involves an enmeshment of states in a network of explicit and implicit international regimes and interdependencies’ (Zacher, 2002: 64). This understanding of global governance as a network relies not only upon the state as an important actor, but places the state within a network context. In other words, this network contains many other actors, as well as the state. Some of this literature pointed towards the EU as an ‘intermediary’ actor between global and national (Levy, 2001).

One of the EU’s key characteristics has been the facility to engage with other stakeholders in an international environment. Much of the literature is described in Christou and Simpson in this volume: below, a discussion on the emergence and role of non-state actors in global governance frameworks is elaborated.

Authority

Our understanding of the role of the state as the central point of authority in a global environment is rendered difficult through an analysis of dominant international relations theory, which causes
us to look for answers in other areas. Through use of boundaries, these dominant theories attempt to locate authority at one single point. Rosenau’s description of a ‘turbulent world’ broadens the debate from being concerned with rules, regulations, norms, and principles (activities which are established by the state) to one of management, steering, and coordination (processes which can be established by states, but which generally involve other actors as well). In Governance without Government (Rosenau and Czempiel, 1992), several authors attempt to map out the changes in order in world politics. Rosenau’s model encourages the reader to think beyond, or across, the traditional divide between domestic and international affairs, which becomes increasingly important when looking at the evolution of the internet. Another example of a different approach towards understanding political institutions is provided by Ruggie, who described how the notion of ‘unbundled territory’ is useful for understanding the role of modern transformations in political institutions (Ruggie, 1993). ‘Unbundling’ territory has profound consequences for the understanding the notion of authority in both political and economic spheres. Ruggie describes how traditional theories of IR ‘cannot, ontologically, apprehend fundamental transformation’ (Ruggie, 1993: 171). Similar debates and actions were well underway in the telecoms sector in the EU and beyond at the World Trade Organization (Melody, 1999; Sandholtz and Zysman, 1989; Thatcher, 2000).

Reinicke (Reinicke, 1998) uses the notion of unbundled territory to create a framework for understanding and explaining the role of the state in a globalised environment. The framework distinguishes between internal and external sovereignty, which enables creation of a scenario where the ‘implications of globalisation for public policymaking … will be path-dependent and thus mediated by the primary form of political organisation in the world today; the modern and territorial democratic state’ (Reinicke, 1998: 53). Thus even in a global environment, states will be the predominant arbiters of regulation. This has been played out in several empirical studies on internet governance (Mueller, 2001; Natalicchi, 2001; Shahin, 2007; Singh, 2008). However, Reinicke sees that the only way for governments to achieve internal sovereignty ‘is to pool, and thus share, internal sovereignty in those sectors in which globalisation has undermined the effectiveness and efficiency of internal sovereignty at the national level’ (Reinicke, 1998: 71). In effect, domestic (EU) debates over telecommunications legislation have taken this path.

**Resurgence of the state**

Monroe Price highlights the role of a state’s foreign and domestic policy in managing global media, particularly in areas of content regulation (Price, 2002), an area in which the EU has been encouraging supranational action, particularly in the areas of illegal content. Lukasik goes further, claiming that the internet ‘is a domain for the exercise of sovereignty’ (Lukasik, 2000: 519). The author outlines action to protect the global information commons, recommending that sovereign states take co-operative and competitive postures to ensure the stability of the global information commons (Lukasik, 2000: 520). The thrust of Lukasik’s argument is that states can take action unilaterally as well as multilaterally to ensure that the stability of the internet (and thus the information society) is ensured. These actions are firmly rooted in international law (Lukasik, 2000: 524–25). However, Lukasik does maintain that alongside sovereign state activity, there are also specific roles for private organisations to undertake. Another commentator presents the tensions between state and market in the information age from a realist perspective. He suggests that ‘as markets strip states of some of their power and prerogatives, states will resist and seek new powers’ (Rothkopf, 1998: 341). But, by recognising the challenges that digital networks such as the internet pose to the contemporary state system, he continues:
The reaction to ... globalisation may be nationalism and a battle to maintain separate identities. The reaction to disaggregation and decentralisation of power may be efforts to create central supranational authorities (whose supervisory, regulatory and enforcement capabilities will be just as ‘enabled’ by the Information Revolution as are the capabilities of the markets they will be overseeing.

(Rothkopf, 1998: 341)

New actors, new markets

Ronit (2001) describes the role of private organisations in a framework of globalisation. Claiming that the discussion over whether the state loses power or not is difficult to measure, Ronit looks to other forms of influence on global policymaking, such as civil society and private authority. These organised bodies provide substantial input into global governance, through self-regulation. This growth in private actors has also happened in the development of the information society. The development of the third stage of the internet, after intense interest from the commercial sector has meant that the societal aspects of the internet are generally subjugated to those of commercial concern, even by public administrations and governments.

From the discussion on liberalisation of telecommunications markets at the global level, it became apparent that questions of governance were being raised, with the European Union at the core of these debates as one of the principal adherents of global regulation of the information society. The concept of authority is challenged by the creation of these global markets which are, in part, facilitated by the development of digital networks. Authority ‘involves the surrender of private judgment and the recognition of the right to rule’ (Cutler, 1999: 63), and it is the state’s right to rule that has been challenged in recent years, in part by the consequences of the internet’s development along commercial lines (McMahon, 2002). The establishment of recognised authority is a crucial antecedent of any governance mechanism. As Baer notes, ‘governance of the GII [Global Information Infrastructure] seems one element of a larger shift of authority from the political to the economic realm’ (Baer, 1996). The internet and evolving telecommunication networks provide a concrete example of a shift in our understanding of the source of authority in the international arena (Kobrin, 1998: 370–75; Shahin, 1999, 2006; see also Mathiason, 2009; Mueller, Mathiason, and Klein, 2007; Singh, 2009).

The internal/external nexus of EU governance

Garnham has stated that ‘the Information Society and the Information Superhighway project is a continuation of a well established policy path’ (Garnham, 1997: 327). The need for European intervention in this global environment had been raised and agreed upon, and strategies had been conceived, if not always successfully implemented. Well before the 1993 landmark White Paper by Jacques Delors, which raised the internet as a tool for enhancing competitiveness and delivering growth in Europe, discussions had been started regarding the impact of new technologies on the economic, social, and political make-up of the European Community. In the pre-1993 actions of the Commission and Council, we can see discussion of many of the issues that were to be raised later on and which are being brought to the fore again today. This reoccurrence of information society policy questions is telling of a more fundamental, underlying debate on the governance of the EU.

Global competitiveness was brought to the fore in 1993: ‘To be able to compete worldwide, European industry must exploit all possible ways of improving its competitiveness by making growing and effective use of ICTs’ (European Commission, 1993: 93). Globalisation of markets,
and the lack of educated workers that inhibited Europe’s continued role as a key player was to be tackled, in part, by ‘investment in training and knowledge’ (European Commission, 1993: 16), which harks back to previous Commission statements on the topic. The need for international coordination in the field of the information society, raised by the European Commission in 1993 at the Brussels-hosted G7 summit, was raised again in 1998 (European Commission, 1998).

Global communications and shifts in patterns of governance are debated at both the international and national levels. At the European level, however, outside of the policy environment and several excellent contributions from the discipline of communications science (Raboy, 2004; Raboy and Landry, 2005; Webster, 2006) there is far less discussion on the relationship between the internet and governance. Natalicchi’s comprehensive framework, outlined in Wiring Europe, shows one approach to dealing with this conundrum: he provides a syncretic approach to understanding the role of the EU in governing telecommunications frameworks both within and outside the EU’s borders.

Any discussion of the relationship between the global information society and the EU results in the necessity for a rethink of political institutions and structures: existing roles have evolved and new actors have emerged to fill in the gaps that have been created by new technological developments. Even though the status quo is not explicitly changed, evolutions in EU governance are facilitated by the shift from predominantly national to global communications. We would expect, for example, in discussions on the infrastructure of global communications which take place at the global level, that the European Commission would become involved, due to the fact that interaction is not solely at the intergovernmental level but also between different types of actors. This would be a clear example of supranational governance; where the Commission takes the role of policy entrepreneur at the global level in the place of the member states. Similarly, in the EU itself, one would expect that the European Commission work towards developing the regional aspects of the information society, since this is where its competences lie. We would also expect the European Commission to try to use the internet to overcome one of its most important present-day challenges: that of the EU’s democratic deficit. Opportunities for institutional revival are provided by the growth of new communications technologies that provide possibilities to reconfigure existing institutional arrangements.

There is a counterargument to contemporary discussions on use of (EU) governance literature in considerations of the EU as an international actor in the global governance of the information society. The literature in the field of EU governance studies focuses on an understanding of the role of the European Union’s institutions in the EU (Cowles, 2003; Héritier, 2002), and not on how these institutions interact in the international environment. Indeed, the relevance of the general literature on governance to EU governance studies is questioned by some academics. Alberta Sbragia claims that governing the European Union requires a different understanding of the basic concept of governance. ‘Most of the literature and debates about governance’, it is contested, ‘are based on certain core premises, none of which apply to the European Union’ (Sbragia, 2002: 2). The EU’s governance system is a completely different system with a different understanding of the concept of governance. Notwithstanding this critique, the way in which the EU has had to come to grips with domestic concerns of telecoms and internet governance is highly pertinent for a better understanding of its role in global governance institutions.

**Conclusion**

Two specific fields of discourse have come to the fore in these discussions: a) the institutional structure of the EU itself, and b) the impact of the ever-increasing capacities of European institutions on policy-making in the EU. Ultimately, the two are intrinsically linked, and in
order to gain a full understanding of one, the other must be studied. These two areas have, until recently, been treated quite separately.

The Internet’s novelty as a case for global regulation has created complexity, and the determination of a set of stable standards and procedures for its management has not been smooth. The Internet only became a global technology when it was recognised that harmonisation on a global scale had to take place in order for national economies to benefit completely from the digital and information ‘revolutions’. This need for harmonisation was reiterated at the international level throughout the mid-1990s by all actors (who often disagreed upon how that coordination and harmonisation should take place). Certainly work to create connected digital infrastructures had been taking place since the late 1960s, but the increasing awareness that this now global (as opposed to transnational) infrastructure needed different forms of governance in order to be successful only became apparent in more recent years. These questions stimulated a new discussion both within and outside literature on the EU, raising discussions on how governance of the new information society should be carried out. Naturally, as more competence has been allocated internally in the EU to these policy areas, it is obvious that the EU itself has taken on a bigger role at the international level. The involvement of the EU has also naturally influenced the shape and form of the institutional arrangements at this level.

This started with very strong support (notably from the European Commission) towards a global, intergovernmental approach to managing technological change and the emergence of the ‘information society.’ For example, the European Commission provided support for, and hosted a G7 Summit in Brussels on the topic in 1993, and was keen to work with the ITU on issues of internet governance, through the ITU-driven Internet Ad Hoc Committee. However, with the creation of ICANN and the shift of focus away from the ITU on internet governance-related issues, the support for formal intergovernmental institutions to manage the internet has waned.

The subject of the EU’s role in the governance of the global information society is an area where plenty of stones remain unturned in terms of future research. As the global internet becomes more embedded in our lives, the importance of the technology will not be ignored by national politicians and international policymakers alike. As private actors take on more important roles in our digital lives, we may need to start regulating global corporations’ use of our personal data; as information infrastructures become even more critical to the operation of our basic infrastructural needs, risks of ‘cyberwar’ become more apparent. The creeping competencies of the EU vis-à-vis national policymakers, which includes policy making in the area of the internet and its associated technologies and services, has led for a call to further understand the manner in which the EU governs and is governed. There is still a need to investigate the relevance and effectiveness of the EU’s role in the different institutional arrangements that are used to govern the global information society, but the rationale for the EU’s support for existing solutions is, as described in this chapter, relatively clear.

Shaping the research agenda

As can be seen, this dynamic area of research is often overlooked when examining the role of the EU in international institutions. This can be for two main reasons. First, the fact that this issue is primarily an area concerned with ‘low politics’. Traditionally, the politics of telecommunications has principally concerned technical and regulatory issues of a very complex nature, which do not lead to major new insights concerning international interactions. However, it is hoped that the above elaboration has shown this to be somewhat unfortunate preconception. Second, the complex nature of the debates around the institutional developments have been perhaps limiting.
Despite these limitations, there remains, however, plenty of research to be carried out in the near future in this area. One of the most pressing calls is for further research in the way that technology impacts upon political institutions, and particularly in how they shape international interactions. ICTs have been used with great consequences to organise and coordinate information sharing within various global fora. At the same time, the internet has been used to help give a voice to protests against contemporary international organisation. Thus, more detailed theoretical and empirical research into the relationship between technology and international relations is necessary.

As this contribution shows, there is the need to focus more deeply on the theoretical frames used to understand how internal governance within the EU impacts upon the external capacity and ability to act, particularly in the field of telecommunications, which is becoming more and more a global concern. As global technologies change the way in which political interaction is perceived by citizens, there is also the need to see how changes in internal governance within the EU will impact upon its external behaviour. The internet has also been hailed as a tool which can help enhance government effectiveness in service delivery, revitalise democracy, and even change the way that governments interact with their citizens, as well as with each other. These topics raise fundamental questions for political scientists, such as: ‘what is the nature of political authority in contemporary society, and who wields power in an age of networks? Does the internet enable, or even promote new forms of governance?’

Clearly, approaches that wish to focus on this empirical case need to look at multiple levels and dimensions of governance: for example, both the EU’s institutions and other, national, bodies are involved in governance of telecommunications; in the field of internet governance, multistakeholderism has become a driving principle, engaging different actors from more than just traditional international governance mechanisms (Cave et al., 2007; Goldsmith and Wu, 2006; Marsden, 2008). Research in this area should therefore examine the growth of new actors involved in international governance of the infrastructures and frameworks which comprise our ‘information society.’ Against a backdrop of academic research into the design, implementation and evaluation of political institutions and policymaking processes, new research should contribute towards developing expertise in the field of international policy analysis in ICT-related transformation in political societies. Within this complex and dynamic environment, the role of the EU is of utmost scientific, political and societal interest, as it has often tried to take the role of international leader in new policy areas (not least in the area of Internet governance). This should also lead the way to comparative research across policy areas.

Another future area of research lies in more traditional fields of international analysis. As information networks become more and more embedded in our daily lives, international organisations have realised that the threat of destabilisation of these networks potentially emerges as an increasing threat to peace and security: the so-called discussion on cybersecurity. As the security of these networks becomes an issue of ‘high politics’, more research will be needed as to the international responses necessary to counter such instabilities.

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