The role of intellectual / academic work in a policy forum[*]

The two sides in the Internet governance debate argued past each other, across the entire five or so years of WSIS.[1] One side argued there must be more multilateral governance. The other side argued that the stewardship model currently in place protects the freedoms necessary for the Internet. But neither argument could lay a hand on its opposite – as the positions were formulated, each argument addressed its own universe but failed to speak to the other side. The two propositions sailed past each other, like the proverbial ships in the night.

Each position arose from a base of assumptions hidden from view. Until those assumptions come to the surface, so that some common ground – for *dis*agreement – may be found, this argument will wander fruitlessly, into an indeterminate future.

To discuss a disagreement – and also make progress – means finding common logical ground where the opposed positions can meet and be directly compared with each other. Intellectuals / academics deal in logical systems where one function, among several, is to make explicit the underlying primitives or assumptions.

Here we look at the role of intellectual / academic work in a policy forum.

We begin by asking how such work may help to unearth underlying assumptions. That is the necessary first step to productive dialog when disagreements present positions that seem incommensurable. Broader use might contribute to more direct – and more productive – international dialog, such as in UN affairs. We also see how intellectual[2] work is, in a key way, the opposite of civil society advocacy.

Then, we step back from this focused concern and ask more generally about the role of intellectual work in a policy forum. The vital, but involved, relationship between policy and intellectual work leads to a schematic model. The discussion summarizes with a couple of points to take away.

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[1] World Summit on the Information Society. IGF – Internet Governance Forum.

[2] Here forward, 'intellectual' will stand in for 'intellectual / academic,' to get beyond the awkward construction.

THE UNSEEN ASSUMPTION

How might underlying assumptions be brought to the surface?[3]

Intellectuals do a very great deal more, of course, than identify the primitives in a logical argument. To characterize intellectual work, we could speak of disciplined and methodical analysis – in brief, logic applied to data.[4] But the primitives must be the starting point for any logical system erected. The premises, the assumptions are the foundation for any logical structure.

Properly organized, a group of intellectuals might address the question: what are the unseen assumptions[5] that underlie the two sides in the 'Net governance debate? Such work might find the common ground[6] where the two positions actually confront each other, logically. Then there would be the starting point necessary to measure one position against the other, so all proponents might begin to argue in terms both sides can understand.[7]

A 'properly organized' group of intellectuals is a short phrase for a not-trivial process. We go into that below, when we look generally at how intellectuals and policy makers work together. Then we can ask just how the above might work and what comes after the assumptions are explicit. We can also ask whether logic has a place in politics and its exercise of power.

But already we see some useful implications.

Accurate arguments to facilitate and speed a diplomatic culture

Diplomatic language 'keeps the peace' when there are differences in a debate, particularly heated differences. With assumptions revealed and arguments facing each other accurately, on common ground, peaceful discussion might also get somewhere. With some change already afoot in the UN way of doing things, perhaps this is one more step forward to consider.

Intellectuals and civil society – opposite (and complementary) core missions

The intellectual behavior described here is the 'pure' form – inquiry without fear of, or favor for, one side or the other. Do academics come in the pure form? No more than anyone else. But abstracting in this way highlights a key difference.

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[3] We proceed with the sound presumption that there is a logic underlying both sides.
[4] In particular, gathering and analyzing data, also perhaps formulating and recommending policy options. Here we do not discuss intellectual work in detail; the footnotes add particulars as appropriate.
[5] Woven, in the end, into some system of thought.
[6] By identifying assumptions at a deep enough level that common ground, in the form of some logical structure, becomes evident.
[7] Building from the common ground for assumptions, the disciplined line of intellectual inquiry tries to understand and expose the evidence behind each conclusion, thus rendering it comprehensible.

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Civil society, by function, engages in advocacy that is inherently political. By contrast, intellectuals and academics, when they hew to their core, are trenchantly committed *not* to favor one or the other starting point. Their mission is to seek to understand accurately, to seek to be open to data and their implications quite regardless of predispositions.[8]

Civil society is disciplined perhaps in its function as an advocate. But it can look to the intellectual / academic community for a special brand of rigor that intellectuals marshal as part of their mission. Applying a particular discipline to their processes and their logical constructions, intellectuals strive to offer reliably accurate descriptions of complicated real world facts. In return as we discuss later, intellectuals may look to the whole of the policy world, civil society and all others, for education and data about policy realities.

While civil society by its nature is committed to a course of action, intellectual work – in its characteristic incarnation – eschews bias and keeps itself open to all views and conclusions, consistent with empirical evidence.[9] These pure forms, of intellectuals and civil society, are the opposite of each other. That is one impetus for further devolution in the UN categories of participation, perhaps with a separate category for the intellectual / academic somewhere in the scheme.

Do academics take advocacy positions? All the time. The best, I believe – particularly of those working in communications policy – make a point of welcoming other, directly contrasting, views. That is how they, and we, all learn – by inviting that which we have not previously understood!

Academics thereby signal their commitment to the independence, from bias, that is the foundation for sound intellectual work.

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[8] It is important to make the distinction between general intellectual / academic work and the work of those intellectuals who created the Internet – and who continue to this day to move it forward. Sometimes there is confusion – all intellectual work is lumped with that of the Internet's progenitors. To be clear: here we consider all intellectual work, with the founders' (ongoing) work a subset.

(That intellectuals such as the founders and their followers, and others, may often act as advocates is next in the text.)

[9] Of course intellectual work draws conclusions – about the intellectual questions. Those conclusions remain open to further data and comment.

INTELLECTUALS AND POLICY WORK

What – in general – do intellectuals bring to a policy forum?

This timeline maps successive stages in a point-and-counterpoint between policy protagonists[10] and intellectuals.

• *time proceeds from the top down, in successive steps*

policy protagonists	intellectuals
	get to know each other !
Air the different positions on a topic.	
get to know each other !	
	Array all stated issues within a common template.[11]
Using template, refine the topic, to the issues that will in fact be addressed.	
	Derive unstated assumptions and plumb for common ground.
• *the next steps may proceed* in parallel *between the two sides, rather than serially*	
Juxtapose and vet arguments, now with common ground.	Collect data, analyze iteratively arguments and data, present results.
Draw conclusions, negotiate, formulate tentative policy recommendations.	*present* competing *analyses ?*
	Test conclusions analytically.
iterate *these intermediate steps ?*	
Firm the policy recommendations.	

Some key features emerge.

Intellectuals bring analytic firepower, the policy side chooses – both have a *stake*

The intellectuals and policy protagonists work, in fact, as partners with complementary functions. As such, they want to be neither too close to nor too far from each other. Not too close – the academics do not tell the politicians[12] their business. Not too far – the academics are not 'hired guns,' in town for a fight and then gone. Rather as

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[10]To reiterate: all and each of governments, civil society, the private sector and intellectuals-when-they-put-on-the-policy-hat.
[11] So that *topics* can be viewed in relation to each other; common logical ground comes next.
[12] And of course the civil servant doing what will in time become political work.

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partners, they *both have stakes in the outcome*. To get there, each brings a complementary competence – one from the 'thinking' side, the other from 'doing.'

In particular, with reference to steps in the timeline:

- The policy protagonists narrow their topics. The intellectuals can lay out the template on which to do so; then the policy side has legitimacy actually to choose.

- The academics do not tell the politicians what to think. Most especially, they do not make choices of values, the quintessential political choice. Intellectuals may analyze the internal structure of normative systems, or they may formulate comparative bakeoffs between competing value systems. But only the politician can make the values choice.

Trust. A global intellectual community, getting to know it – and to know itself

The intellectual community brought to the task must be as wide and as global as the policy group that is making choices. Styles of analysis vary around the globe; a good bit more importantly, the value systems embedded in logical structures can be entirely culture-specific.[13] Only when wise people from each culture lend effort to the intellectual side can there, for instance, be hope to identify the unseen assumptions.

Not to mention, policy makers from diverse parts of the world will expect participation by academics from their region.

Pivotally – notice that the stages of the timeline will operate effectively only when there is trust among the parties. Thus the time spent 'getting to know each other' is pivotal, so that trust has the possibility to grow from familiarity. Let me say this again. The trust could not be more foundational.

The linchpin for trust between policy and intellectuals? As derived earlier: that intellectuals will render views, for use by policy, without cant or favor for interested parties.

Such trust grows only with time. Examples at the national level from different countries, and at the regional level within for instance the EU, illustrate. Years are spent building relations between academics and national or regional policy makers. Time spent 'getting to know' will be of the essence. Typically this is best done in a structured task.

The intellectual community, particularly in communications policy, is itself only beginning to globalize. In a worldwide effort, some intellectuals will be only slightly familiar with each other – for many others, not even that. The intellectual community's 'getting to know' *itself* is a first and not-small task. Trust and new working relations

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[13] We leave for another occasion questions of 'pure logic,' independent of values. Here the focus is the operating logics that structure practice.

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among intellectuals are the first order of business. That means some significant investment in 'getting to know' – first, within the intellectual community itself.

Policy realities – in the theory? New ideas – a receptive atmosphere?

Part of the data essential for intellectual analysis is the realities of the policy making process, the practicalities of power and its exercise. Intellectuals must incorporate the data of policy practice into their theories. Notably, timeliness and an acuity for the policy process are critical to success.

On the policy side, intellectuals can be useful only to the extent that the policy atmosphere is flexible enough to take on board new ideas.

Each of these two partners, policy and intellectuals, needs an unvarnished perspective on the other. Practitioners want – and must judge whether they are getting – academic theories that account for policy realities. Intellectuals want – and must test whether the atmosphere makes for – a policy process receptive to new ideas of quality.[14]

Teaching

Besides research, the other principal activity for academics is teaching.

Teaching may address the subject as a study, such as the history and analysis of competing approaches to 'Net governance.

When the teaching trains practitioners, on the other hand, a given view of the matter typically molds the curriculum. Then teaching moves toward the policy side and promotes a particular approach. Especially until the present deep divide on the subject finds some resolution, training for practitioners becomes an incisive form of advocacy.

Just as the research intellectual may opt for advocacy or not, so the teacher also makes the choice, one side or the other.

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[14] Which, if you are interested, brings us back to whether logic is relevant to the politician's exercise of power. This is a larger topic. But to begin – with value systems embedded, logics can be culturally specific. So understanding a particular use of power can be specific also. Then, can we say there is a logic to a given policy maker's given choice, in response to the forces at play in the mind and on the ground? That is only to begin …

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AN ACCELERATED PROCESS?

Resources available to bring all this to bear are inevitably limited. Time frames will be tolerant of only so much effort, even if resources are found. Can the timeline be compressed?

The stage of development for a given topic offers some leeway. When WSIS began, much of the discussion was still 'early on,' new, and yet to be structured. Now, by the time of IGF a large record has accumulated, and some topics have already been narrowed. The later stage can allow for some time compression.

Also, if sub-areas[15] have already found common ground – so that opposing arguments can accurately face off against each other – the amount of 'plumbing for common ground' could also contract.

Timeline fitted to IGF

So if we specify this for IGF, what might an accelerated process look like?

First half of the timeline

Picking topics: The topics are largely in hand, now. There will not however be consensus on ranking, and some participants would still add topics.

Plumbing, to find common ground: The core disagreements about Internet governance – the intro to this piece – have yet to meet in a shared logical space. Some time must be spent unearthing common ground so there can be real dialog. That unavoidably requires time, additional time that surely is not planned in anyone's calendar at the present.

What of topics that are not directly the core disagreement? Some of these also lack common ground between two sides. As discussed elsewhere,[16] these too could yield usefully to a search for a common space. Topics briefly considered there, only as examples, include multilingualism, spam and affordable Internet access.

In fact, the need for trust argues cogently to put these less incendiary topics at the beginning of IGF's five years. Only as trust builds – because there has first been successful engagement on topics that are not so divisive – may there then be more solid footing to tackle core issues.[17]

As said above, this trust is the primary and most compelling requirement.

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[15] While the main arguments still remain uncalibrated against each other.
[16] "IGF – Framework for design," page 2 bottom http://intgovforum.org/contributions/IGF_Framework-A4.pdf   alternate: http://davidallen.org/papers/IGF_Framework-LTR.pdf
[17] As also suggested in the Design framework referenced in the footnote above.

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Second half of the timeline

The second half – which may proceed in parallel between the two sides, policy and intellectuals, rather than one waiting for the other – can go forward more fluidly interactive, more in real time. Though the intellectual side needs adequate time to do quality work, particularly in response to an evolving discussion, the pace here can come closer to expectations for typical negotiations among policy makers. And as part of interaction between the two sides, the process can iterate naturally as may be indicated.

When there are competing analyses among intellectuals – as is often the case in a policy debate – the policy side probably will benefit by seeing the contrasting analyses side-by-side.

Trust – where the time is also spent

To recap, the most important time is spent 'getting to know': only then may trust be built. While that takes an extended time, it has to start somewhere. At least the process can begin, both among the intellectuals and between them and the policy side. Work among the parties will proceed, however, only as personal ties actually do firm up.

Modalities – how to 'do it'

On the policy side: When IGF has working groups, their work programs create in effect the temporal canvas necessary to take advantage of the offer from the intellectual side. Then policy and intellectuals have the space in time to work with each other.

Until there are working groups, with some existence beyond a given moment, the temporal space necessary to allow back-and-forth between policy and intellectuals does not exist yet.

[On the intellectual side: We take up implementation for the intellectual side in a separate piece.]

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TO TAKE AWAY FROM THIS DISCUSSION

Trust – views without bias

Trust, among intellectuals from across the globe and especially between intellectuals and policy, is the tie that binds. The time necessary to nurture trust must be invested assiduously. IGF offers a five-year frame over which to begin and to then build that trust.

The essence of that trust emanates from the warranty by intellectuals to policy advocates, as each plays its opposite and complementary role: While civil society (or individual governments, or the private sector) aims precisely to advance particular views, the intellectual warrants to deliver clear thinking that is not beholden to any such view.

Thinking, to do – partnership

The divide between intellectual thinking and policy doing is inevitably artificial. Nonetheless, a well-executed division of labor between the two is essential to success for either. Real partnership and careful appreciation for what either brings – the intellectual and the policy advocate or policy maker – may help IGF realize its potential.

There will be more than one view on this topic of intellectuals and policy. If there is enough interest, I will set up a blog where the focus is on the exchanges, exchanges with and particularly among those who post comments to the blog.

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