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Reflections from the 11th IGF

Introduction:

The 11th Internet Governance Forum gained significance since it is the first one post the renewal of the ten-year mandate by the UN general assembly. Personally, I felt there were more diverse topics being discussed at this IGF. The sessions that I found genuinely interesting were the sessions on trade and the Internet.

Trade and the Internet:

I view trade and Internet governance as two different institutions. They both have their own characters, with trade being the well experienced, path dependent elder trying to advise the Internet on the value systems that it has made use of. The Internet, on the other hand, is the new kid on the block, rebellious and dynamic, trying to justify its own value system. This difference in the viewpoints became evident to me while participating in the sessions on Multistakeholder norms and Digital trade. The civil society made it clear that they are pro-trade. However, that doesn't mean trade negotiators will have it easy when negotiating trade rules that infringe on digital rights and privacy, behind closed doors. On the other hand, the trade negotiators are willing to include civil society voices in the debate, however, only if they agree on staying silent. i.e Agreeing to not disclose information from the meeting to the general public. This doesn't suit the civil society organizations, especially the ones that stand for openness and transparency. The discussion made me feel that the conflict is not going to be resolved anytime soon.

Common Ground:

The other session on Trans-Pacific Partnership and trade tried to find a common ground where trade and the Internet could work together. Turns out, they do agree on issues like filtering, blocking, encryption, and unbalanced copyright laws. However, the question is, do trade negotiators engage in forums like the IGF? And to what extend do they implement these suggestions? The answer doesn't look promising.

Conclusion:

Trade and the Internet as noted earlier, carry their own value systems and function in silos. The need of the hour is to engage each other and work out a solution. This can't be done only through the IGF. I believe there needs to be a greater understanding and appreciation of both the systems. This needs to be fostered through interdisciplinary research, enhanced dialogues and trust building measures. The world needs to recognize that trade needs the Internet and The Internet needs the trade.

Overall, I greatly enjoyed the formal discussions during the day and the informal discussions in the evening. They provided me with a newer perspective on the challenges that lie ahead. The fellowship is an opportunity the community should make use of to continue learning.