Input without influence: Multistakeholder legitimacy and corporate power in global AI governance

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Introduction

The WSIS+20 review reaffirmed the principle that effective cooperation by governments, the private sector, civil society, the technical community, and other relevant stakeholders is critical to the development of the Information Society.[1] Despite this, the legitimacy of multistakeholder governance is often perceived to be in tension with inherent power asymmetries between stakeholder groups. Practical governance processes increasingly rely on a small number of corporate actors for technical expertise and implementation. Firms such as Microsoft, Google, Amazon and Meta ('Big Tech') have emerged as key decision-makers through their exercise of infrastructural control and normative influence.[2] This raises concerns about the accountability of Big Tech and questions whether a multistakeholder approach can effectively balance corporate influence with state sovereignty and the public interest in the context of AI. Through exploring the dynamics between stakeholder groups and how AI has intensified disparities in international governance processes, this paper argues that Big Tech has created significant structural barriers for the legitimacy of a multistakeholder approach. While multistakeholderism can still offer a path forward for both state and non-state actors to influence AI governance, it is critical that mechanisms are deliberately designed for inclusion rather than adaption to an order produced by corporate concentration.[3]

Dynamics in multistakeholder governance

The multistakeholder approach in internet governance emerged from a need to accommodate a wide range of global interests and to enable distributed technical expertise.[4] The premise of the model is that each stakeholder group contributes something that the others cannot – governments carry public policy authority, the private sector is responsible for technical implementation, civil society provides oversight and accountability, and the technical community maintains the interoperable architecture on which the former processes depend.[5] In this arrangement, civil society is comparatively disempowered due to a lack of resources and the difficulty in coordinating fundamentally diverse views. This enables governments and private sector actors to allude to civil society engagement without negotiating as equal parties.[6] The dynamic highlights a longstanding critique that internet governance looks more like industry self-regulation in practice, especially as the private sector voice in these processes are

[1] *Outcome document of the high-level meeting of the General Assembly on the overall review of the implementation of the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society*, GA Res 80/173. UN Doc A/RES/80/173 (adopted on 17 December 2025).
[2] Shaleen Khanal, Hongzhou Zhang and Araz Taeihagh, 'Why and how is the power of Big Tech increasing in the policy process? The case of generative AI' (2025) 44(1) *Policy and Society* 52.
[3] Sabhanaz Rashid Diya, 'Advancing Multi-stakeholderism for Global Governance of the Internet and AI' (Policy Brief No 201, Centre for International Governance Innovation, 2025).
[4] Madeline Carr, 'Power Plays in Global Internet Governance' (2015) 43(2) *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 640.
[5] Richard Hill, 'Internet governance, multi-stakeholder models, and the IANA transition: shining example or dark side?' (2016) 1(2) *Journal of Cyber Policy* 176.
[6] Carr (n 4).

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dominated by firms whose interests are closely aligned with a single dominant state.[7] AI governance inherits this vulnerability at a moment when the underlying power asymmetries have deepened.

Why AI governance intensifies the problem

What distinguishes the present moment is not a new pattern of contestation, but rather, its intensification into forms of structural dependency. AI compresses the deliberative timelines that once allowed internet governance to self-correct, while making governance processes materially reliant on a small number of corporate actors for the infrastructure needed to develop, evaluate and understand the systems under discussion. This is driven by two key factors:

- ***Institutional fragmentation*** – The divergence in governance approaches across jurisdictions has produced a fragmented landscape that undermines international cooperation.[8] The proliferation of overlapping global initiatives (such as the Bletchley Declaration, OECD AI Principles and the UN Global Digital Compact) diffuses accountability and creates room for forum-shopping, enabling countries and firms to pursue different standards.[9] These initiatives are also largely voluntary and concentrated among well-resourced jurisdictions. The UN AI Advisory Body reports that 118 countries do not participate in influential AI governance initiatives, meaning that global conversations are skewed towards the interests of a small number of geopolitical and private sector actors.[10]

- ***Geopolitical and infrastructural concentration*** – Most countries rely on AI infrastructure, models and governance paradigms developed somewhere else.[11] Underpinning this is a small number of Big Tech firms that control the cloud and compute infrastructure upon which AI increasingly depends, setting up the conditions for corporate capture.[12] Additionally, countries embedded deeper in the value chain tend to have more developed regulatory discourse. This means that the debate about how to govern AI is shaped disproportionately by the jurisdictions with the most to gain from a light regulatory touch, thus extending the digital divide beyond infrastructure to normative influence over global standard setting.[13]

These factors are indicative of a greater alignment problem. Unlike internet governance, which organised itself around interoperability as a common goal that transcended geopolitical rivalry, AI governance has no equivalent North Star.[14] At the 2026 UN Global Dialogue on AI Governance, delegates agreed that AI needs robust governance yet could not agree on what that is meant to

[7] Ibid.
[8] Andrés Domínguez Hernández et al., 'Towards a sociotechnical ecology of artificial intelligence: power, accountability, and governance in a global context' (2025) 6(1) *AI and Ethics* 43.
[9] Huw Roberts et al., 'Global AI governance: barriers and pathways forward' (2024) 100(3) *International Affairs* 1275.
[10] UN AI Advisory Body, *Governing AI for Humanity* (Final Report, September 2024).
[11] Artur Ishkhanyan, 'Governing AI across borders: corporate power, state sovereignty and global regulation' (2025) 28(3) *Digital Policy, Regulation and Governance* 280.
[12] Fernando van der Vlist, Anne Helmond and Fabian Ferrari, 'Big AI: Cloud infrastructure dependence and the industrialisation of artificial intelligence' (2024) 11(1) *Big Data & Society* 1.
[13] Shuo Yang, 'Innovation without representation: epistemic, infrastructural and symbolic power in frontier AI governance' (2026) *Science as Culture* 1.
[14] Konstantinos Komaitis, 'The Internet Had a North Star. The UN's Global Dialogue Made Clear AI Doesn't.', *Tech Policy Press* (Article, 16 July 2026) <https://www.techpolicy.press/the-internet-had-a-north-star-the-uns-global-dialogue-made-clear-ai-doesnt/>.

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achieve: “we are left asking whether AI is primarily an engine of economic growth, a tool for scientific discovery, a weapon for strategic dominance, or a commercial platform.”[15] Without clear shared objectives, AI governance becomes reduced to an exercise in balancing competing national and commercial interests rather than steering a common future.[16]

Big Tech influence in practice

Within governance processes, Big Tech increasingly assumes the role of a regulatory actor by exploiting institutional gaps. This makes it challenging for states to have coherent oversight or accountability over these firms.[17] Big Tech positions themselves as indispensable providers of essential services by blending the roles of host, publisher, infrastructure and marketplace.[18] For states – constrained by their interests as facilitators of markets, buyers of resources and producers of capabilities – stringent regulation appears too costly to impose.[19] Big Tech further exercises normative influence by presenting themselves as neutral intermediaries. By acting as responsible experts and proposing techno-solutionist ideas, firms are empowered to shape reform agendas to their desires.[20] These strategies are given effect through direct government consultation, lobbying, revolving-door hiring of former regulatory experts, and funding influential think tanks and expert networks.[21] The EU AI Act is a notable example where sustained lobbying, discursive framing and consultative influence softened proposed requirements.[22] The susceptibility of AI governance to regulatory capture, where powerful industry actors undermine the agencies meant to oversee them for commercially favourable outcomes, raises questions about the legitimacy of the multistakeholder model in this context.

Implications for multistakeholder legitimacy

Legitimacy in governance is conventionally assessed across input, throughput and output dimensions. Input legitimacy assesses who participates and on what terms. A multistakeholder model does not require that every stakeholder occupy the same role, but stakeholders should hold equivalent status and equal access to deliberation and decision-making.[23] Stakeholders include both those affected by an issue and those with the knowledge, resources or cooperative mechanisms needed to resolve the issue.[24] In this context, under-resourced states and civil society organisations often face barriers to participation due to lack of technical expertise, linguistic challenges, inadequate funding, or absence of proactive outreach.[25] Where participation is nominally open but practically reliant on capacity that only well-resourced actors have, input legitimacy is compromised before any decision is made.

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[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Sabhanaz Rashid Diya, ‘Platform Governance and the Political Economy of Global AI Regulation’ (CIGI Paper No 345, Centre for International Governance Innovation, 2025).
[18] Ibid.
[19] Fabian Ferrari, ‘State roles in platform governance: AI’s regulatory geographies’ (2024) 28(2) *Competition & Change* 340.
[20] Katharina Kausche and Moritz Weiss, ‘Platform power and regulatory capture in digital governance’ (2025) 27(2) *Business and Politics* 284.
[21] Khanal, Zhang and Taeihagh (n 2).
[22] Ibid.
[23] Avri Doria, ‘Use and abuse of multistakeholderism in the Internet’ in Roxana Radu, Jean-Marie Chenou and Rolf H. Weber (eds), *The Evolution of Global Internet Governance: Principles and Policies in the Making* (Springer, 2014) 115.
[24] Jeremy Malcolm, ‘Criteria of meaningful stakeholder inclusion in internet governance’ (2015) 4(4) *Internet Policy Review* 1.
[25] Ibid.

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Throughput legitimacy assesses the procedural and discursive quality of the process through which competing views are transformed into rules, guidelines and statements.[26] Evidence used for deliberation, such as benchmarks and safety evaluations, is often produced by the same firms that are advantaged in the input stage. Stakeholders therefore operate in an epistemic environment shaped by the group with the greatest interest in how harms are characterised.[27] Processes premised on full consensus based on that evidence risks homogenising discourse and marginalising the voices least able to contest it.[28] Throughput legitimacy thus requires mutual accountability between stakeholder groups through meta-consensus on the ground rules for ongoing deliberation, such as the right to be heard and the exclusion of coercion.[29] Though contestation is a necessary feature for deliberation, a shared and enforced procedure can help ensure that the actors with the least infrastructural power are not the ones who absorb the cost of not being heard.

Output legitimacy assesses whether the process resulted in meaningful decision-making that can be implemented in practice.[30] Meaningfulness requires participation to be linked to empowered spaces where authoritative and mutually recognised decisions are made.[31] 'AI for Good' initiatives often tend to fall within the paradox of participation in which the surface-level inclusion of stakeholders presupposes the resourcing or structural reform required to translate inclusion into influence.[32] There is limited evidence that participation alone improves outcomes for the communities least able to shape the terms of their inclusion.[33] Inclusion requires the redistribution of resource allocation, agenda-setting, and decision-making power in material ways. Beyond this, output legitimacy remains compromised where implementing decisions continues to depend on the concentrated infrastructure being governed in the first place.

The path forward

Powerful states with a competitive stake in AI development have shown limited appetite for binding global regulation, and a centralised global governance regime risks displacing participation.[34] The path forward should treat the current landscape of overlapping initiatives as a regime complex that requires better coordination. The IGF Policy Network on AI ('PNAI') called for governance to "build on existing structures, adopt an inclusive approach, [and] avoid process proliferation".[35] This enables AI governance capacity to build upon multistakeholder processes already in operation.

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[26] Nicola Palladino and Mauro Santaniello, 'Foundations, pitfalls and assessment of multistakeholder governance' in *Legitimacy, Power, and Inequalities in the Multistakeholder Internet Governance: Analyzing IANA Transition* (Springer, 2021) 21.
[27] Yang (n 13).
[28] Daniel Arenas, Laura Albareda and Jennifer Goodman, 'Contestation in Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives: Enhancing the Democratic Quality of Transnational Governance' (2020) 30(2) *Business Ethics Quarterly* 169.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Palladino and Santaniello (n 26).
[31] Malcolm (n 24).
[32] Marie-Therese Png, 'At the Tensions of South and North: Critical Roles of Global South Stakeholders in AI Governance' (Conference Paper, ACM Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency, June 2022).
[33] Ibid.
[34] Peter Cihon, Matthijs M. Maas and Luke Kemp, 'Fragmentation and the Future: Investigating Architectures for International AI Governance' (2020) 11(5) *Global Policy* 545.
[35] IGF Policy Network on AI, Submission to the consultation on United Nations Independent International Scientific Panel on Artificial Intelligence and Global Dialogue on Artificial Intelligence Governance (January 2025).

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Middle powers occupy a distinct position to facilitate these coordination efforts. Australia benefits from rules-based institutions, a record of world-leading research and proximity to key markets in the Indo-Pacific – but also faces geopolitical pressure to align with a US- or China-led AI future.[36] Rather than a constraint, this position provides leverage to advocate for structural reform that neither superpower has an incentive to propose and that less-resourced states lack the credibility to advance alone. Australia has a critical opportunity to navigate alignment pressures by collaborating with other middle powers and prioritising responsible AI development, including through the following areas:

1. Advocating for power-balancing as a design feature of AI governance bodies, including mandatory lobbying and funding transparency, and metrics on participation and influence.
2. Funding independent technical and evaluation capacity, including investment in Digital Public Infrastructure to decouple governance capacity from any single firm's infrastructure.
3. Resourcing underrepresented stakeholders directly, including translation, technical capacity-building and direct participation support.
4. Following the São Paulo Multistakeholder Guidelines as a practical benchmark for accessible, transparent and accountable policy processes, applied specifically to AI governance fora.[37]
5. Advocating for the PNAI to be institutionalised as a permanent track within the IGF, and for formal liaison or observer arrangements with other high-level AI dialogues. This includes using Australia's national and regional IGF engagement to pilot PNAI's proposed Regional Leads model for the Indo-Pacific.[38]
6. Strengthening coordination and capacity among existing institutions, building on emerging AI Safety Institute partnerships, Track 2 dialogues and regional instruments.[39]
7. Pursuing regional convergence rather than global consensus upfront, such as leading an Indo-Pacific regional AI governance forum to share best practice and pool capacity-building resources. Existing regional efforts provide precedent for this work, such as the APEC AI Initiative (2026-2030) and Digital and AI Ministerial meetings, and the Pacific Islands Forum endorsement of the Digital and AI Technology Principles.[40]

Conclusion

WSIS+20's reaffirmation of a multistakeholder approach cannot be taken at face value in the AI era without confronting the fact that governance is structurally dependent on corporate infrastructure. As Big Tech accumulates resources and cross-border influence at scale, they are no longer merely participants in political spaces. Rather, they are key actors in shaping governance.[41] This dominance raises concerns about accountability of these firms where profit-driven motives conflict with public welfare.[42] The growing reliance on AI infrastructure controlled by Big Tech intensifies these

[36] Cassandra Switaj and Jonathan Ping, 'Artificial Intelligence and Geopolitics: Middle Powers in the Age of Algorithmic Power' (2025) 1(3) *Journal of East Asia Security* 76.
[37] *NETmundial+10 Multistakeholder Statement* (April 2024).
[38] IGF Policy Network on AI, *PNAI Policy Brief 2025* (Report, November 2025).
[39] International Telecommunication Union, *The Annual AI Governance Report 2025: Steering the Future of AI* (Report, September 2025).
[40] APEC, *AI Initiative (2026-2030)* (Declaration, 2025); 'Pacific Islands Forum approves regional AI governance framework, safer-digital spaces plan, and full undersea-cable connectivity', *Fiji Global News* (online, 13 August 2026) <https://fijiglobalnews.com/pacific-islands-forum-approves-regional-ai-governance-framework-safer-digital-spaces-plan-and-full-undersea-cable-connectivity/>.
[41] Ferrari (n 19).
[42] Ishkhanyan (n 11).

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challenges. Addressing this asymmetry demands both technical safeguards and a redistribution of institutional power at a global level. While internet governance coalesced around interoperability as a North Star, AI governance lacks fundamental agreement on what it is meant to achieve. The absence of a unified purpose underscores the need for a multistakeholder approach to AI governance. With governments no longer able to rely on their regulatory power as an effective counterweight to the scale of Big Tech influence, multistakeholder governance becomes a pragmatic mechanism for balancing commercial interests against the public good. The multistakeholder approach provides a valuable framework to bring state and non-state actors together on global digital issues, but it requires treating corporate infrastructural control as a central design problem. Middle powers, including Australia, have an important role in leading this work by advocating for deliberate institutional design and leveraging models of regional consensus.

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