Mikkel Flyverbom**, The Power of Networks: Organizing the Global Politics of the Internet,** Edward Elgar Publishing, Inc., 2011, 193 pp., $101.30 (hardcover).

Reviewed by
Yang Bai
University of Southern California

Whenever a new valuable object is discovered or created, questions about politics always arise. The digital revolution, spurred by the rise of the Internet, is more than a technological and business issue; it is also a political domain. Mikkel Flyverbom's ***The Power of Networks: Organizing the Global Politics of the Internet*** provides a fascinating ethnographic study of how a UN-based, multistakeholder mode evolved and attempted to shape the global politics of the digital revolution.
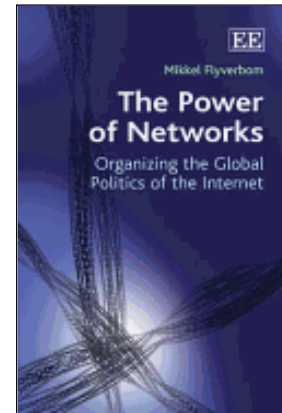
Ordering, defined as "attempts at managing and controlling things" (p. 2), is a key concept in his study. Flyverbom emphasizes that the evolution of the multi-stakeholder arrangement is a process through which various entities are identified as stakeholders, stabilized, and enabled to act. In this arrangement, no entities are inherent participants, and the outcomes of the practices are not always tangible. Thus, rather than using a better-known term, governance, which implies concrete effects of practices and a link with states and governments, Flyverbom depicts the formation and development of the multi-stakeholder mode as an ordering process. He explores five critical ordering moments of two multi-stakeholder bodies: the UN ICT Task Force (ICTTF), which focuses on ICT-for-development (ICT4D) issues, and the Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG) which aims to break the deadlock of Internet governance issues.

Problematizing the Digital Revolution

The problematization of the digital revolution turned the emerging details about the digital revolution from "matters of fact" to "matters of concerns." Two UN-based bodies were established to address two highlighted concerns: the global digital divide and the Internet governance issues.

The World Bank and the UNDP have long been concerned with ICT4D issues. However, the emerging characteristics of the digital revolution require that the UN cooperate closely with a wider range of social worlds. This belief led to the creation of the UN's ICT Task Force (UNICTTF). The task force, under the leadership of the UN's Secretary-General, was aimed to bridge the public and private ICT4D initiatives, and to establish and manage a trust fund for ICT4D projects. The UN's attempts to address Internet governance issues met with considerable resistance. After unsuccessful attempts by the International Telecommunication Union to pull Internet governance under its wing, the discussion deadlocked at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). As a result, WGIG, initially an affiliate of WSIS, was set up as a platform for further discussions.

In this moment of ordering, the UN recognized that the digital revolution was an issue that should and could be ordered, and attempted to identify its central concerns. The UN also began to notice the important role non-state sectors could play in ICT4D and Internet governance issues. The belief in the potential of ICTs for economic growth and social progress underpinned the practices at this stage. Flyverbom points out that, although the organizational techniques used at this phase were mainly UN procedures, and although discussions on shaping the objects of ordering had not yet begun, this stage was crucial since it set the basis of the multi-stakeholder mode.

Engaging Social Worlds as Stakeholders

This moment of ordering focused on the incorporation of various social worlds as stakeholders. What makes Flyverbom's study distinctive is that, rather than taking the participation of government, business, and civil societies as predefined, it adopts an agnostic approach that makes it possible to interpret the incorporation of different players as "a process of being categorized as stakeholders" (p. 38). He emphasizes the significant role that techniques to engage social worlds played in shaping both the portfolio of participants and the positioning of the hybrid forums.

The UNICTTF began with a series of global consultations meant to identify potential allies interested in contributing to a trust fund for ICT4D projects. Existing UN agencies initially regarded the new entity as competition and thus showed little interest in its initiatives. This forced the UNICTTF to find different partners. However, as businesses became important stakeholders, the focus of the UNICTTF shifted to providing a conversation platform to stimulate ICT policy liberalization. The WGIG used an engagement technique—self-nomination—that allowed different groups to nominate stakeholder candidates. The result was groundbreaking. One third of the seats in WGIG were taken by representatives of civil society. For the first time in UN history, civil societies were granted the same rights and responsibilities as governments and the business community. The emergence of civil societies as equal participants in a UN-based forum was a significant step toward the establishment of the multi-stakeholder mode.

Using different techniques, the UNICTTF and WGIG identified the stakeholders. Preliminary discussions on how to shape the objects of ordering also began at this stage. The shift of the UNICTTF from a trust fund raiser and manager to a platform for policy discussions reflected the awareness that direct aid is not the most effective way to address the ICT4D issues. The incorporation of civil society in the WGIG revealed a tendency to shape Internet governance as a cross-sectional issue.

Organizing Hybrid Forums

After stakeholders were engaged, the next task of the hybrid forums was to create an enabling environment for groups with various interests to work together. At this stage of ordering, a series of organizational techniques were used to consolidate the newly formed multi-stakeholder mode and facilitate the discussions.

Both forums chose to position themselves as conversation platforms with a visible relationship with the UN, while the participants had "equal decision-making power" (p. 71). Flyverbom comments that this positioning has allowed the bodies to "benefit from the UN without being dragged down by its rigid rules and procedures" (p. 70).

Another noticeable feature of the organizational techniques is the deviation from some principles to which the two forums claimed to adhere. At the outset, a wide representation was highlighted as a way to engage stakeholders. However, in practice, this principle has been downplayed. In most cases, the members are categorized as individuals rather than representatives. This change allows for more freedom and thus can facilitate discussions of controversial issues. The forums also deviate from their initial goal of creating consensus. Working on consensus is viewed as a significant feature of the multi-stakeholder mode. In practice, however, the hybrid forums embrace a weak version of consensus. Moreover, Flyverbom notices that attempts to reach even a loose consensus often result in circumventing contentious issues and avoidance of decision making. Although this arrangement enables continuous dialogues and is in line with the forums' positioning as spaces for interaction, it simultaneously limits the range of topics covered and the productivity of the efforts.

The recognition of the critical value of continuous discussions facilitated by "equal decision-making power" underlined the ordering activities of this moment. This awareness and the organizational techniques used at this stage have a deep influence on how the hybrid forums shape their ordering objects.

Shaping the Global Politics of the Digital Revolution

In the problematization moment of ordering, ICT4D and Internet governance issues were transformed from matters of fact to matters of concerns. Further discussions continued regarding how to shape the two objects of ordering.

The discussions on the shape and direction of ICT4D issues in the three Global Forums held by the UNICTTF revolved around four topics: marketing-based financing mechanisms, an enabling policy environment, education and capacity building, and seeking synergy through partnering. The efforts of WGIG to shape its ordering objects placed more emphasis on defining the scope of Internet governance issues. The definition of Internet governance as a sociopolitical, integrated, global, cross-sectional, and visible issue was discussed considerably in a series of open consultations initiated by WGIG. Both the policy recommendations for ICT4D issues and the discussions on the scope of Internet governance issues show the possible shape of the ordering objects.

The techniques of circumventing contentious issues and categorizing participants as individuals make it less likely for the forums to produce outcomes with concrete regulatory effects. However, Flyverbom stresses that the significance of such an arrangement is that it sets up an unprecedented mode where different social worlds can collaborate "without being asked to agree" (p. 134). During the ordering process, the forums realized that a wider range of participants and discussion topics should be included.

This awareness served as the rationale leading to another moment of ordering—the displacement of the forums.

Displacement of Ordering

At this moment of ordering, the two hybrid forums were displaced and reconstructed. In 2006, the UNICTTF was replaced by the UN Global Alliance for ICT and Development (UN-GAID). The incorporation of the civil society, which once was under-represented in the UNICTTF, made the UN-GAID a more inclusive platform. The WGIG was replaced by the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) in 2006. Few restrictions regarding the participation and discussions were set, a change which has facilitated the interaction. New concerns, such as social media and cloud computing, were discussed. "Internet governance for development" became an emerging topic. Flyverbom does not regard the displacement of the forums as the failure of the ordering activities. The dynamic process in which the subjects, the organizational techniques, and even the organizational forms are constantly changing gradually perfects the multi-stakeholder arrangement. Significant progress can be seen in both of the new forums. The UN-GAID shows a growing concern with its productivity and has begun to generate more concrete results. The IGF members have gradually reached consensus on issues that were once contentious (and thus circumvented).

As an ethnography of the UN-based multi-stakeholder arrangement, Flyverbom's study does not address the considerable debate regarding whether the UN should be intervening at all in the ordering of the digital revolution and he claims that it is not his aim to examine the effectiveness of the UN-based hybrid forums in shaping the objects of ordering. Therefore, his study is more a thorough introduction than an evaluation of the UN-based multi-stakeholder arrangement. Specifically, he discusses the subjects involved, the organizational techniques used, the efforts to shape the objects of ordering, and the rationales underlining the practices in the arrangement. His study is packed with insights and vivid first-hand observations from insiders at the forums. For readers who are curious about how the UN-based multi-stakeholder mode was formed, how it operates, and how it attempts to shape the digital revolution, *The Power of Networks* is an enlightening read which provides an abundance of related information.