Future of **Institutions**

Dialogue topic:
Institutions for assessing digital harms

Organizers:
New America

Key takeaways:
The digital revolution is associated with negative impacts; yet there is little global agreement on what exactly they are, much less what to do about them. This Dialogue sought to imagine a new global institution that could regularly communicate the nature and impact of digital harms.

Rather than espouse solutions, this Dialogue presented questions. This Dialogue first focused on assessing the harm caused by the digital ecosystem. Then, the Dialogue discussed the potential focus, structure/governance, and participants of such an institution that could address these harms. Potential solutions emerged. The Dialogue identified analogues with relevant attributes, though we note that the digital domain defies templates from the analog world.

The challenge(s):
The digital revolution has ushered in a host of harms, including but not limited to human rights violations, the escalation of violent conflict, loss of human agency, mental health issues, and the erosion of democracy worldwide. To date, our institutions have failed to grapple with these phenomena. We lack a normative global architecture for the digital domain.

This Dialogue wrestled with the challenge of developing a comprehensive definition of digital harm, due to the differing harms experienced by states, individuals, communities, and corporations. A more expansive conception emerged, to include "positive harm" (damages) and "negative harm" (inequalities like lack of or unequal internet access, lack of data privacy, lack of fair redistribution, all of which negatively affect livelihoods and human agency).

Left unresolved are questions related to the scope of the challenge: is the focus just on solving physical and mental harms caused by the digital ecosystem, or does it also include solving societal harms? How is a digital harm different from non-digital harms, and how do we concretely separate these categories when considering solutions?

Insights for the Future of Institutions:
Trust. Potential analogues such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) or Pugwash were founded on science and facts. For institutions related to information [and institutions in general] in the digital age, trust in science and facts has diminished. Many governments have a compelling interest in perpetuating distrust and sowing doubt about the existence of facts. That makes building trust in such an institution hard; thus, trust and legitimacy must be core priorities of such an institution. Possible strategies for building this trust include being transparent, choosing the right participants, and building credibility even before scaling up.

Participation and representation. There is a need to consider how to foster inclusive participation. Where are multiple and diverse voices essential? We must evaluate organization types (*e.g.,* government, corporation, civil society), education/discipline (*e.g.,* STEM, humanities, social sciences), power (*e.g.,* those who have it, those who don't), geography, generation, etc. What processes are in place to ensure meaningful representation? How are language differences mitigated? On what grounds would a group/state be excluded? All these considerations are equally important to the design of such an institution tasked with assessing and addressing digital harms.

Power. Essential questions emerged pertaining to the powers and power dynamics such an institution might have. Who sets the agenda and how? How does the decision-making process work? How can we prevent capture? A key question for the institution, which gets to the heart of legitimacy and representation, is how it would treat and represent the powerless and voiceless (*e.g.,* children).

Solutions:
Many promising ideas emerged regarding how one would start to develop such an institution. Some of these ideas apply not just to the case of digital harms, but also to the development of any new global public problem-solving institution:

- Focus less on definitions and standards and more on methods and processes (*i.e.,* how to coordinate across states; how to move across intellectual silos; how to ensure all stakeholders and viewpoints are represented; and how to determine whether something is a harm given the local context.)
- Leverage civil society and industry, rather than governmental representation, to establish a knowledge institution [rather than an implementation or enforcement institution]. This strategy may be faster, less political, and present less opportunity for conflict and exploitation and capture.
- Articulate a theory of change to inform the development of such an institution.
- Examine existing institutions to identify transferable features and lessons. These include the IPCC, Pugwash, Wikipedia, the Intergovernmental Panel on Biodiversity, the Court of Arbitration for Sport, the International Labour Organization, the Facebook Oversight Board (and the Real Facebook Oversight Board), Center on Sport and Human Rights, Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Internet Society, ISO, and potentially other bodies from the medical field. Additionally, two efforts are underway to develop global institutions for assessing aspects of digital harm in the digital information environment -- the Forum on Information and Democracy's International Observatory on Information and Democracy, and PeaceTech Labs' and Oxford University's Intergovernmental Panel on the Information Environment.
- Rethink the very nature of an international institution (*i.e.,* as a lasting conversation instead of a fixed hierarchical bureaucracy).

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