Information Fragmentation and Global Governance in Hard Times

Julia C. Morse

In 2022, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued its sixth assessment detailing the scientific consensus on climate change. In addition to highlighting extreme risks from global warming and lack of action, the report was the first to describe the threat of misinformation related to climate change.[1] "Misinformation," defined as the unintentional spreading of false information, directly impedes the IPCC's mission: How can an organization send a clear signal about scientific consensus when many people believe lies and rumors over facts? How does the IPCC maintain influence in a world where truth is treated as subjective?

Information provision is a necessary ingredient for most functioning international organizations (IOs). International rules serve as focal points for state behavior. IO bureaucrats offer technocratic expertise that facilitates problem solving and policy implementation. Even as cooperation has expanded into new issue areas, the importance of information has remained a steadfast feature of most IOs.

Yet technological shifts over the last two decades have shifted the modern information environment. Gone are the days when elite actors could easily control a public narrative. Information has democratized, allowing any smartphone user to post her own account of events directly on social media. Meanwhile, artificial intelligence has fostered the creation of deepfakes that fracture truth. Today's informational landscape is one where intentional lies and sleights of hand can be as influential as facts.

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Such profound technological changes would test any institution, but global governance bodies also face a multitude of other challenges. Shifts in the balance of power mean that rising states are more likely to resist institutional action, even as IOs themselves are being asked to tackle more complex policy issues like climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, countries that formed the foundation of the postwar order are riding waves of anti-globalism and electing leaders who are distrustful of multilateralism.

In the introduction to this roundtable, Benjamin Faude and John Karlsrud suggest that hard times are associated with two institutional dynamics. First, formal IOs are drifting, stuck in significant gridlock and unable to fulfill core responsibilities. Second, alternative institutional arrangements are proliferating as states pursue cooperation through informal IOs,[2] ad hoc coalitions,[3] and other low-cost institutions.[4]

What do these trends portend for international politics? One way to answer this question is to return to a core attribute of most high-functioning IOs—providing information—and see how such changes affect IO efficacy. If we evaluate IOs as information providers in this complex era, we see decline in some arenas and adaptation in others.

Broad and expansive IOs like the United Nations are clearly struggling to maintain their centrality in world politics. Institutional gridlock on key policy issues like the recent conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine has undermined the signaling power of formal IOs. Dissatisfied states have also turned to alternative institutional venues that offer competing legal or policy interpretations. Formal IOs are thus saddled with weak policy responses, ambiguous rules, and competing signals—all factors that make it difficult for an IO's information to cut through the noise.

On the other hand, the proliferation of low-cost institutions may represent global governance evolution. Informal institutions and ad hoc coalitions bring together states looking to solve an ever-expanding range of policy issues, often through technical cooperation rather than high-level bargaining. These IOs are not designed to reshape international politics in broad ways but rather to set international standards and monitor implementation of agreed-upon solutions. Their narrow technical focus means that they are unlikely to become flashpoints for political struggles. This is a world of fragmented, but not necessarily competing, informational signals from differentiated institutions.[5]

Formal IO stagnation and informal governance proliferation raise normative questions for global governance. The legitimacy of IOs depends on them being

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perceived as both functional and following acceptable procedures.[6] Focusing exclusively on outcomes, global governance may retain legitimacy because informal bodies are often quite effective at promoting technical cooperation. From a process-oriented view of legitimacy, however, the decline of broad-membership formal IOs in favor of smaller, less transparent informal institutions is problematic. Not only do informal governance bodies tend to include fewer members but they are also set up in ways that remove direct oversight from citizens and legislators. As such, the informational gains of informal governance must be weighed against losses of political control and agency.

This essay continues with a discussion of IOs as information providers amid shifting global governance structures. It then considers how information fragmentation has affected IOs and exacerbated other global challenges. Finally, it assesses the normative implications of these trends. The shift toward informal IOs may be normatively desirable for some policy outcomes, but it also raises concerns about decreased democratic accountability. Ultimately, evaluating these trends requires making judgments about the legitimizing principles for global governance.

IO Information Provision and Global Governance Trends

Information provision is an important component of institutionalized cooperation. States work together through institutions in order to coordinate policies, organizing expectations around a clear focal point or standard of behavior. More difficult cooperation problems require negotiation and overcoming information asymmetries, which exist when some governments have higher-quality information on a policy issue and can exploit such advantages.[7] IOs draw authority from providing credible information,[8] with rules and decisions serving as focal points to guide state behavior and monitoring procedures allowing for external rule enforcement.[9] IO expertise enhances perceived legitimacy,[10] which in turn increases an IO's ability to develop new rules and secure compliance from states.[11]

IO information also supports cooperation through the establishment and reinforcement of norms. Institutionalizing rules, particularly through binding treaties and charters, helps diffuse core standards of behavior.[12] Information can also be used strategically to reinforce norms through naming and shaming transgressor states or highlighting cooperative behavior.[13]

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Gridlock in formal IOs has affected both their instrumental and normative value as information providers. When states obstruct voting, disrupt day-to-day operations, or stall IO policy decisions, these actions directly reduce an IO's ability to provide timely information. Gridlock born of dissatisfaction, either due to the failure to accommodate rising powers or a desire for a shifted agenda, is also likely to undermine the normative power of the organization: IOs acquire normative strength from perceived legitimacy,[14] and concerns about lack of representation or poor outcomes should affect this property.

The negative effect of gridlock on information provision can be seen in the recent history of the World Trade Organization (WTO). When countries created the WTO in 1994, it was a watershed moment for the international trade regime. For decades, WTO panels and the Appellate Body provided countries with crucial information about how to interpret trade obligations, and also helped reinforce the normative power of the trade regime. Yet due to U.S. dissatisfaction and its blocking of new appointments, the Appellate Body has been unable to function since 2019. With the IO at a standstill, countries have increasingly adopted targeted export restrictions and taken advantage of carve-outs in WTO rules.[15]

In contrast to gridlock, the expansion of informal governance may actually have positive implications for information. Informal IOs promote the building of epistemic communities that share common knowledge and norms.[16] Rules serve as focal points for responsible behavior,[17] and what starts out as a standard may become hardened law if core economies adopt implementing legislation.[18]

Informal IOs also have informational advantages related to rule specificity. Actors may agree to highly detailed and technical standards because agreements are not binding under international law. Such contrasts can be particularly notable when compared to action in formal IOs. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, for example, the UN Security Council passed an expansive resolution that required all countries to criminalize the financing of terrorism but specified few details for the content of such laws. Ultimately, it was the Financial Action Task Force, a nonbinding intergovernmental body, that formulated specific guidelines on the contours of relevant legislation.[19]

The proliferation of informal institutions may also have informational downsides. Expansion and fragmentation increase regime complexity, where governments may be confronted with a large number of competing rules and standards. Amid such complexity, individuals may be more prone to selective information processing and a reliance on heuristics rather than reasoned decision-making.[20]

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Regime complexity research has also highlighted concerns about institutional proliferation and competing standards,[21] which may promote forum shopping,[22] regime shifting,[23] and other types of contested multilateralism,[24] or even empower powerful countries at the expense of a rule-based order.[25] But such outcomes are not predetermined; IOs may adapt and divide labor among themselves[26] or engage in institutional deference.[27] The fragmentation of regime complexity could even enhance accountability if it furthers productive contestation of rules.[28] Such arguments suggest that the impact of informal governance on the broader information environment may vary across issue area and time.

How Information Fragmentation Exacerbates Hard Times

Recent social and technological changes have shifted how people process information. Public trust in the media has declined in many countries.[29] Countries with longitudinal data reveal massive drops across time; in the United States, for example, trust in media has dropped from 60 percent in 1990 to 34 percent in 2022.[30] Low trust leads people to seek out alternative news online,[31] which may increase exposure to misinformation and ultimately reinforce skepticism of mainstream media.[32]

Social media has reinforced such trends. For many, the source of a news story is less important than who shares it on a given platform.[33] Individuals often rely on platforms like YouTube and TikTok instead of online news services.[34] Recent advances in artificial intelligence, which allow for the creation of deepfakes, increase the possibility of detrimental information diffusion.

Declining trust, the rise of social media, and the growth of artificial intelligence create ripe conditions for information disorder. The term "information disorder" describes three types of informational challenges: misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. Misinformation can easily be transmitted through social networks, with pseudoscientists and self-declared experts touting blatantly false claims. Transmission patterns may promote conspiratorial thinking along both political and nonpolitical dimensions.[35] Nefarious actors may also disseminate "disinformation," defined as "intentional falsehoods spread as news stories … to advance political goals."[36] The spread of disinformation can undermine public trust in government institutions. Finally, strategic actors may also release information in a way that exaggerates the truth and is intended to mislead and cause potential harm—a practice known as "malinformation."[37]

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This fragmented information environment poses a distinct challenge for global governance. In a world where wrong information is sometimes shared more widely than the truth, an IO's informational power is easily countered. Even the strongest IOs may have difficulty cutting through the noise. Moreover, many IOs are already under attack and suffering legitimacy challenges, further weakening their ability to provide credible information. When the COVID-19 crisis occurred, for example, WHO struggled to respond in a timely fashion, declaring a public health emergency too late and delaying the imposition of travel restrictions.[38] Its delayed action undoubtedly damaged its credibility on global health, and made it more difficult for WHO to respond to misinformed social media posts that offered alternative, nonscience-based treatments or questioned the safety of vaccines. While the spread of disinformation during a pandemic is hardly a new phenomenon,[39] technological developments like the smartphone and social media have allowed for more rapid dissemination.

Information fragmentation also intensifies the impact of other global challenges. In previous eras where only a small number of narratives received news coverage, rising powers dissatisfied with an existing IO had informational incentives to work within the system to seek change. With the expansion of informational outlets, challenger states have more pathways to compete for public influence. Russia, for example, has offered its own historical and humanitarian justifications for its actions in Ukraine, and has spread false claims about Ukrainian forces using chemical weapons.[40] The Russian government has also tailored messages to different audiences, calling the West hypocritical and working to incite anti-Western sentiment to distract attention from the war.[41] Online censorship and Internet controls allow Russia and other authoritarian countries to shut off alternative accounts, cementing their narrative control. Such processes make it difficult for an IO to reinforce international law or provide the formative interpretation of a policy problem.[42] They may also increase the likelihood of institutional gridlock, as dueling coalitions compete to shape policy responses.

Information disorder and distrust also exacerbate anti-globalism. While economic dissatisfaction and the unequal distribution of gains from globalization may be core factors driving the increase in authoritarian populism, these factors also make clearly identifiable groups of people prone to disinformation and create general distrust in institutions.[43] Authoritarian populists often target IOs as being unfair or disadvantageous to their countries; for those influenced by such rhetoric, IO drift may be presented as evidence of wasted resources.

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Populist claims of institutional bias may also be laced with stereotypes, prejudices, and misinformation that exacerbate disputes.[44] Populist rhetoric draws on disinformation: leaders decry the mainstream media as elitist and define who is "pure" and who is "corrupt" with little supporting evidence.[45] Such patterns are visible also in how populist leaders engage with IOs, as they may withhold scientific information in order to undermine an IO's mission or employ xenophobic rhetoric to criticize an IO and damage its legitimacy.[46] Populist disinformation about global governance may amplify pessimism about compliance and even lead to rule defections.[47]

Interestingly, while information fragmentation creates challenges for formal IOs, it may have smaller impacts on informal governance bodies. The same technological processes that create information fragmentation also enable informal governance: cross-border communication has never been cheaper or easier.[48] Because informal IOs rely on bureaucratic networks exchanging technical information, cooperation is largely hidden from public view. This creates fewer incentives for governments to challenge such bodies for political gain; it may also make them less likely to be targets of disinformation. "Fake news" is typically provocative and sensational and is most effective when true and false information appear together.[49] Stories about informal IOs that are unfamiliar, opaque, and highly technical are unlikely to gain traction compared to more well-known political targets. For these reasons, informal IOs may be better equipped to handle the modern information environment.

Hard Times and Global Governance Legitimacy

Despite signs of resilience, global governance in hard times raises normative concerns. A post-truth world directly undermines the ability of IOs to send credible and persuasive public signals.[50] If IOs are increasingly competing for airspace with alternative sources, and informational power is only loosely connected to accuracy and truth, an IO's informational advantages are severely damaged. IOs derive legitimacy in part from being useful policy tools, and thus the weakening of IO informational power has direct normative consequences. Here, I consider two complementary approaches for evaluating such effects—one focused on outcome-oriented legitimacy and one focused on process-oriented legitimacy—and discuss the implications of both conceptualizations for formal and informal governance.

An outcome-oriented conceptualization of legitimacy suggests severe challenges for formal IOs.[51] Information fragmentation and drift undoubtedly reduce an IO's

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ability to solve problems. Since the WTO Appellate Body ceased to operate, for example, the WTO has no longer been able to provide a clear organizing signal about whether a country has violated trade law. Consequently, countries have submitted significantly fewer cases for dispute settlement, dropping from ninety-two in the period of 2015–2019 to twenty-eight from 2020–2023.[52] Whereas the UN Security Council of the 1990s was sometimes criticized for being too active in deploying peacekeepers around the world, the Council today is most recognized for gridlock over conflicts in Syria, Gaza, and Ukraine. Such policy inaction in response to numerous high-profile conflicts highlights the Council's difficulties in serving as a reliable source of information about the boundaries of international law.

In contrast to formal IOs, informal governance institutions fare fairly well in the modern information climate and thus, from an outcome-orientation standpoint, retain significant legitimacy. Informal IOs are typically structured around functional cooperation, and as such, they face less informational competition. They may bring together bureaucrats to coordinate regulations[53] or empower private sector actors to influence government policy,[54] but in general, such narrowly defined cooperation is well equipped to provide credible focal points and respond to threats in a timely manner.[55] The Financial Action Task Force (FATF), for example, has expanded to respond to changing threats: Although G7 countries created the organization to focus on anti-money laundering, its mandate now includes countering terrorist financing, combating proliferation financing, and regulating virtual currencies, and its membership now includes nearly all strategically important economies.[56] Throughout this expansion, the FATF has continued to provide a central organizing focal point for country risk related to illicit financing.[57]

Yet most treatments of legitimacy also highlight a second component, process, and on this dimension, the normative implications of stagnation and proliferation may be more troubling.[58] "Process legitimacy" focuses on how an IO arrives at decisions, with considerations like inclusiveness, transparency, and compatibility with democratic governance.[59] Along these dimensions, formal governance institutions have considerable legitimacy advantages over informal bodies. Most long-standing treaty-based IOs have broad memberships, whereas informal IOs typically have smaller, club memberships.[60] Informal IOs are thus less inclusive and may undermine a broad, rules-based approach to international politics. For smaller states in particular, this creates a significant dilemma: Should they continue to invest in gridlocked IOs that uphold the process-based principles of the liberal

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order, or should they invest in more flexible formats that may inadvertently undermine the very principles of the international system that recognize them as sovereign equals?

Process-based accounts of legitimacy also highlight differences in transparency between formal and informal IOs. Institutionalizing power through formal structures is core to the legitimation of the modern state.[61] While formal IOs maintain this separation, informal IOs concentrate power in individuals rather than processes, in ways that reduce accountability.[62] Indeed, transnational regulatory bodies are often criticized on this dimension.[63] Formal IOs may align better with the principles of democratic governance, as states must ratify or accede to underlying treaties or charters in order for the obligations to take effect.[64] All of this suggests that under a process-based conceptualization of legitimacy, the stagnation of formal IOs and the shift of cooperation to informal bodies is normatively problematic.

A comprehensive analysis of global governance legitimacy thus reveals an uneasy tension. Functionally, the decline of formal IOs does not indicate the deceleration of cooperation. IOs do more than ever before, regulating and monitoring state policy across numerous issue areas and creating a patchwork of cooperative arrangements unimaginable in previous eras. But the proliferation of low-cost institutions raises serious normative concerns about procedural legitimacy. Informal IOs tend to be club organizations with limited memberships, yet they may nevertheless make rules for the world. Rulemaking is rarely transparent, and democratic publics have few opportunities to sign off on agreements. Efficiency gains must thus be weighed against the loss of domestic control.

Conclusion

Global governance is adapting to the difficulties of the modern era. The shift toward informal governance represents an evolution from earlier forms of cooperation. States now work together on a variety of micro- and macro-issues, with bureaucrats sharing information and technical expertise across borders. Many technocratic bodies are well equipped to handle the modern climate of information fragmentation because they are perceived as less political and more independent than formal IOs; they are also less likely to encounter competing information because of their narrow mandates. Such institutions are also capable of responding quickly to emerging threats, even on high-stakes issues like transnational terrorism

or the global financial crisis. From an outcome orientation, the breadth, scope, and variety of informal cooperation today may compensate for the stagnation and gridlock in formal IOs.

Yet a normative assessment of modern global governance requires thinking beyond outcomes and considering the broader legitimacy of these trends. From this standpoint, cooperation indeed faces hard times. Formal IOs are typically more inclusive, transparent, and integrated with democratic principles than informal institutions. While voting rules and pathways of informal influence may allow powerful countries disproportionate influence,[65] weaker states benefit as well because agreements establish formal restraints on power.[66] Treaty-based cooperation also acquires democratic legitimacy when states formally ratify or accede to agreements. Informal IOs, in contrast, are clubs of like-minded states working together through a process that is largely hidden from public view. From a domestic standpoint, informal IO rulemaking lacks transparency and is rarely subject to direct electoral oversight. From an international standpoint, these small clubs may end up setting focal points for the entire world. Ultimately, global governance in hard times appears to be innovating in a way that emphasizes outcomes at the expense of process, with crucial implications for the overall legitimacy of international regimes.

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[46] On the withholding of scientific information, see Allison Carnegie, Richard Clark, and Noah Zucker, "Global Governance under Populism: The Challenge of Information Suppression," *World Politics* 76, no. 4 (October 2024), pp. 639–66. Notably, not all populist leaders engage identically with IOs. Mark Copelovitch and Jon Pevehouse suggest that populism actually varies with respect to whether leaders are also nationalistic. This implies that while some populist leaders might be prone toward relying on disinformation, not all populist leaders will engage publicly with IOs in this manner. See Mark Copelovitch and Jon C. W. Pevehouse, "International Organizations in a New Era of Populist Nationalism," *Review of International Organizations* 14, no. 2 (June 2019), pp. 169–86.

[47] Allison Carnegie and Austin Carson, "Reckless Rhetoric? Compliance Pessimism and International Order in the Age of Trump," *Journal of Politics* 81, no. 2 (April 2019), pp. 739–46.

[48] Michael W. Manulak and Duncan Snidal, "The Supply of Informal International Governance: Hierarchy Plus Networks in Global Governance," in Michael N. Barnett, Jon C. W. Pevehouse, and Kal Raustialia, eds., *Global Governance in a World of Change* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 182–213.

[49] Louisa Ha, Loarre Andreu Perez, and Rik Ray, "Mapping Recent Development in Scholarship on Fake News and Misinformation, 2008 to 2017: Disciplinary Contribution, Topics, and Impact," in "Pseudo-Information, Media, Publics, and the Failing Marketplace of Ideas—Theory," special issue, *American Behavioral Scientist* 65, no. 2 (February 2021), pp. 290–315.

[50] See, for example, Matthew D'Ancona, *Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back* (London: Ebury, 2017); James Ball, *Post-Truth: How Bullshit Conquered the World* (London: Biteback, 2017); and Evan Davis, *Post-Truth: Why We Have Reached Peak Bullshit and What We Can Do about It* (London: Little, Brown, 2017).

[51] An alternative way to assess outcome legitimacy might be to consider what Robert Keohane calls "the test of comparative benefit"; that is, whether an IO produces "results that are better than those that alternative feasible institutional arrangements, or their absence, could create." By this measure, assessing the impact of gridlock becomes trickier, as even dysfunctional IOs may have cooperative benefits. See Robert O. Keohane, "Global Governance and Legitimacy," *Review of International Political Economy* 18, no. 1 (February 2011), pp. 99–109, at p. 103. David Bosco, for example, argues that the UN Security Council fosters comity between major powers. Such arguments suggest that while gridlock in formal IOs most likely undermines output legitimacy, its impact may be constrained to certain policy issues. For more, see David Bosco, "Assessing the UN Security Council: A Concert Perspective," *Global Governance* 20, no. 4 (October–December 2014), pp. 545–61.

[52] For more details, see "Dispute Settlement," World Trade Organization, www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/dispu_e/dispu_e.htm. Notably, in response to gridlock, some countries have turned to informal cooperation, creating a separate appeal system (the Multi-Party Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement) that exists outside the formal WTO treaty.

[53] Slaughter, *New World Order*.

[54] Abbott and Faude, "Choosing Low-Cost Institutions in Global Governance."

[55] See, for example, Slaughter, *New World Order*; Christopher Brummer, "Why Soft Law Dominates International Finance – and not Trade," *Journal of International Economic Law* 13, no. 3 (September 2010), pp. 623–643; and David Zaring, "International Law by Other Means: The Twilight Existence of International Financial Regulatory Organizations," *Texas International Law Journal* 33, no. 2 (Spring 1998), pp. 281–330.

[56] "What We Do," Financial Action Task Force, www.fatf-gafi.org/en/the-fatf/what-we-do.html.

[57] Morse, "Blacklists, Market Enforcement, and the Global Regime to Combat Terrorist Financing"; and Morse, *Bankers' Blacklist*.

[58] On outcome vs. process legitimacy, see Jonas Tallberg, Karin Backstrand, and Jan Aart Scholte, eds., *Legitimacy in Global Governance: Sources, Processes, and Consequences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[59] I borrow these specifications from Keohane, "Global Governance and Legitimacy," which lays out six criteria for assessing the legitimacy of global governance. Keohane does not use the outcome vs. process distinction in his article; this categorization is my own.

[60] The UN Security Council is a notable exception to this trend. However, while the UNSC maintains a small membership, all UN member states are eligible to be elected as nonpermanent Council members, whereas informal IOs with small memberships are typically closed to most countries.

[61] Jonathan White, "The De-Institutionalisation of Power beyond the State," *European Journal of International Relations* 28, no. 1 (March 2022), pp. 187–208.

[62] Ibid.

[63] On this point, see Slaughter, *New World Order*. It is worth noting that in some cases, transparency may actually undermine an IO's ability to promote cooperation. For more on this, see Carnegie and Carson,"Reckless Rhetoric?"

[64] Of course, given the prevalence of anti-globalist sentiment, citizens may view even treaty-based organizations as disconnected from their preferences and best interests. Nevertheless, such organizations may be more legitimate from a process standpoint, as there is a chain of delegated authority from voters to parliaments to institutions, which is missing in informal IOs.

[65] Randall W. Stone, *Controlling Institutions: International Organizations and the Global Economy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[66] G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).

Abstract: With formal international organizations (IOs) facing gridlock and informal IOs proliferating, cooperation in the twenty-first century looks different than it did in previous eras. Global governance institutions today also face additional challenges, including a fragmented information environment where publics are increasingly vulnerable to misinformation and disinformation. What do these trends portend for international politics? One way to answer this question is to return to a core ingredient of a well-functioning IO—information provision—and ask how such changes affect efficiency. Viewed through this lens, we see decline in some arenas and adaptation in others. Formal IOs are struggling to retain relevance as their weak policy responses and ambiguous rules create space for competing signals. The proliferation of informal institutions, on the other hand, may represent global governance evolution, as these technocratic bodies are often well-insulated from many political challenges. Yet even if global governance retains functionality, the legitimacy implications of such trends are troubling. IO legitimacy depends in part on process, and from this standpoint, the informational gains of informal governance must be weighed against losses of accountability and transparency. Ultimately, evaluating the normative implications of these trends requires making judgments about the preferred legitimizing principles for global governance.

Keywords: Global governance, international institutions, international organizations, misinformation, disinformation, regime complexity, legitimacy

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