



The Global Network of Internet and Society Centers: Science Diplomacy in an Era of Technological Disruption

Sofie Schönborn , Armando Guio Español , and Urs Gasser

I INTRODUCTION

Analyzing and addressing regional, national, and global societal challenges requires not only multilateral cooperation but also the integration of diverse actors, including those from scientific, diplomatic, and policy domains. Despite the increasing recognition of science diplomacy as a critical tool for international collaboration, there remains a limited understanding of the specific contributions and impacts of various initiatives within this field. This chapter aims to contribute bridging this gap by introducing the Global Network of Interdisciplinary Internet & Society Centers (also Network of Centers) (NoC) as a case study, an alliance of (mostly) academic institutions established in 2012 operating at the nexus of (digital) technology and society issues. While not explicitly conceived as a science diplomacy effort, we seek to explore the

S. Schönborn (✉)

Department of Governance, TUM School of Social Science and Technology,
Technical University of Munich, Munich, Germany
e-mail: sofie.schoenborn@tum.de

A. G. Español

Global Network of Internet & Society Centers, Lancy, Switzerland
e-mail: arg911@harvard.edu

U. Gasser

Department of Governance, TUM School of Social Science and Technology,
Technical University of Munich, Munich, Germany
Cambridge, MA, USA

role of NoC in facilitating international dialogue, informing policy development, and supporting capacity building across different governance levels. Broader lessons from the network's practices might enhance our understanding of the potential and challenges of science diplomacy initiatives among academic institutions in addressing global issues. It is important to note that this contribution is not offering a comprehensive discussion of the NoC and its evolution but rather examines it through the looking glass of science diplomacy.

2 FORMATION AND EVOLUTION OF THE NoC

The NoC was incubated in 2012 as a collaborative initiative among a group of ten academic institutions from the USA, Latin America, Europe, and Asia. Its launch was motivated by the need to gain a deeper interdisciplinary understanding of the complex societal challenges and opportunities brought by the Internet. Since its inception, the NoC has evolved significantly in scale and scope, for instance, by bringing together more than 100 organizations and expanding its purview to include AI in response to the rapidly shifting landscape of global technology and governance. This evolution also reflects the network's commitment to aligning its mission with emerging global needs and contributing to the ongoing debates on global technology governance.

Rationale for the Formation of the NoC

The Internet and the shifts in the information ecosystem—and in society more broadly—it facilitated became a topic of academic inquiry since its inception. However, in the mid- and late 1990s, academic institutions were struggling to “locate” research on Internet and society issues as a complex socio-technical amalgam within the traditional disciplinary and departmental structures. Around the same time, several new and decisively interdisciplinary—and at times anti-disciplinary—academic units began to emerge, often bringing together individual researchers with a shared interest in Internet and society issues who in their home departments did not find communities of interest and practice. During the early 2000s, individual researchers affiliated with the growing number of academic institutions intensified collaborations with other researchers across geographies and continents, recognizing the global dimension of the Internet and the research questions that emerged from it. The thickening web of individual researchers from different disciplines and origins facilitated important research output and, above all, set the stage for trusted communities of practice over the course of a decade. However, as the Internet gained strategic importance for both governments and businesses, a group of academic leaders involved in running centers, building international communities, and supporting network building realized that a more institutional approach was needed—building upon the individual connections—to enhance

public interest research capacity on Internet and society issues and ensure that academia could more effectively inform increasingly contested and consequential decisions by policy-makers in the public and private sectors, both in local and global arenas.

Formation and Initial Participating Centers

A “Symposium on Internet-Driven Developments: Structural Changes and Tipping Points,”¹ hosted by the (now) Berkman (Klein) Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University (BKC) in collaboration with seven other Centers, served as the crystallization point of the launch of the NoC (BKC 2012). The event, which took place on December 6–8, 2012,² on the Harvard Law School Campus, brought together representatives from academic institutions—and a few partner organizations—across 5 continents and 22 countries. The symposium facilitated interdisciplinary discussions on the impact of the internet on the global information ecosystem and laid the groundwork for future collaborations in research, teaching, and policy engagement (BKC 2012). The event also served as a platform for participants to discuss the structure, goals, and possible future activities of the network, culminating in the launch of the NoC.

Guiding Principles and Governance

The NoC did not only bring together academic organizations studying the Internet and shaping its development but also found inspiration in the design principles of the early Internet standardization organizations, including the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF) with its informal governance structure. Since its launch, the NoC has operated as an informal network with a light touch governance structure, consisting of a set of guiding principles, a steering committee (later re-named executive board), and an initially rotating, now permanent, Secretariat. The guiding principles of the NoC are openness, collaboration, and diversity, ensuring independence from governmental, political, and economic influences.³ The executive committee is composed of peer-academic colleagues and is a space for deliberation to reach strategic decisions such as the Networks roadmaps and new participating center admission. Administrative leadership within the NoC is now concentrated in a permanent Secretariat led by an Executive Director. The main activities of the NoC—with

¹ This event was funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the Ford Foundation.

² The co-hosting Centers included the Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Internet & Society, the Centre for Internet and Society Bangalore, the Center for Technology & Society at the Fundação Getulio Vargas Law School, KEIO University SFC, the MIT Media Lab, the MIT Center for Civic Media, the NEXA Center for Internet & Society at Politecnico di Torino, and the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University.

³ For details, see https://networkofcenters.net/guiding_principles

the support of the Secretariat—is driven by participating Centers, ensuring that the network remains dynamic and responsive to changing global contexts. This governance structure has been pivotal in supporting the network’s mission to foster collaborative research while maintaining the autonomy and diversity of its participating Centers. A new governance structure that seeks to invite broader engagement by the Centers in NoC-wide activities—such as community building and public engagement—and enable varying contributions to networked efforts was discussed at the NoC Annual Meeting 2024 and is currently entering the implementation phase.

Expansion and Current Participating Centers

Since its founding, the NoC has grown from a small group of centers to a global network that now includes 72 centers and 53 affiliated organizations as of 2025.⁴ Initially, the network expanded “by invitation” based on existing collaborations, ensuring trusted participation and substantive collaboration. Over time, an “open door” policy for new participating Centers facilitated exponential growth while also introducing variability in the levels of engagement. To be able to support the rapidly growing number of participating Centers, and ensure alignment with mission and principles, the NoC has since developed a set of admission criteria and an approval process to guide future expansions.

A variety of activities within the NoC contribute to the network’s broader impact in different ways. First, the Secretariat plays a key role as facilitator, collaborating closely with participating Centers to coordinate network-wide initiatives and provide strategic guidance. Second, collaborative projects undertaken by multiple centers within the NoC—often peer led by one of the centers—allow for diverse academic institutions to pool their expertise in addressing complex, interdisciplinary challenges. Third, regional hubs in Europe and in Asia have been incubated to foster localized engagement. Finally, individual centers within the NoC initiate their own projects, which can generate network effects by inspiring or informing related work across the broader NoC community.

The networked approach of the NoC, guided by its principles of openness, collaboration, and diversity, enables interdisciplinary collaboration and mobilization of diverse expertise in addressing global societal challenges. It provides a flexible and responsive platform for academic institutions and diverse international actors to collectively address complex issues in digital governance with potential global reach and localized impact.

⁴Participating Centers are academic research centers whose agenda is primarily focused on Internet and society topics, while Affiliated Participants encompass other types of institutions with Internet and society-related open threads, carried out, e.g., as non-academic research centers, policy-support entities, or think tanks. See also <https://networkofcenters.net/centers>

3 THE NoC AND SCIENCE DIPLOMACY: INSIGHTS AND IMPACT

As noted at the outset, the NoC is not explicitly conceived as a science diplomacy effort. Nonetheless, a closer examination of the NoC in facilitating international dialogue, informing policy development, and supporting capacity building across different governance levels reveals commonalities with science diplomacy initiatives. Science diplomacy (SD) is a multifaceted concept that bridges science, international relations, and public policy (Krasnyak and Ruffini 2020; Lüder 2024). It has often been defined as the use of “scientific collaborations among nations to address common challenges and build international partnerships” (Fedoroff 2009). Over time, SD has evolved from traditional state-centered diplomacy into a more inclusive concept that incorporates non-state actors and institutions, reflecting the growing importance of science, technology, and innovation in global governance (Copeland 2016; Berkman 2019; Legrand and Stone 2018). As global challenges become increasingly complex, the role of SD in fostering multilateral and international action has become more significant, for example, by informing national policymakers when engaging and participating in global governance (Turekian et al. 2015).

The Role of Academic Networks in Science Diplomacy

It is broadly acknowledged in literature and practice that academic networks can play a crucial role in SD by acting as knowledge producers and facilitators of international cooperation and collaboration. They have the potential to foster trust, enhance mutual understanding, and provide a platform for dialogue independent of political pressures. During the Cold War, for instance, science diplomacy was instrumental in advancing non-proliferation and arms control efforts, leveraging science as a neutral ground for engagement (Copeland 2016). In today’s global policy environment, SD remains a vital channel for sustaining international peace and prosperity, though it now involves a broader range of actors and more intricate governance networks (Legrand and Stone 2018). Organizations and institutions practice SD with and without specific reference to the concept, including intergovernmental research organizations (e.g., European Organization for Nuclear Research [CERN]), international organizations (e.g., UNESCO), foundations (e.g., Geneva Science Diplomacy Anticipator [GESDA]), and non-governmental organizations (e.g., Scientists without Borders).

Despite the progress of science diplomacy and related academic initiatives, challenges remain in ensuring equitable outcomes and navigating divergent state interests (Turekian et al. 2015). The evolving role of non-Western nations in science diplomacy, including initiatives in Latin America that leverage scientific collaboration for local policy (Da Silva et al. 2021; Soler 2021), illustrates the changing landscape of global governance. However, there is a significant

gap in empirical research regarding the impact of these initiatives (Flink 2022). Most current models are rooted in the Global North, indicating the need for capacity building in other regions to develop tailored science diplomacy structures that address specific local contexts (Soler 2021).

The three widely applied SD dimensions of science in diplomacy, diplomacy for science, and science for diplomacy—with recognized limitations—provide a helpful framework to assess the contributions to and the role of the NoC as a “network of networks” in science diplomacy (The Royal Society 2010).

Science in Diplomacy: Policy Advisory and Knowledge Sharing

“Science in diplomacy” emphasizes the role of scientific knowledge in informing and shaping foreign policy decisions (Turekian et al. 2015). This dimension typically involves the translation of scientific research into actionable policy recommendations that address global challenges. Effective policymaking requires timely, relevant scientific input, supported by strong linkages between academic experts and policymakers (Turekian et al. 2015). Researchers increasingly act as “new diplomats,” bridging the gap between science and policy at both domestic and international levels (Legrand and Stone 2018). Academic networks like the NoC can become key facilitators in this context, as they establish information flows and institutional mechanisms for knowledge exchange as well as actively advancing scientific perspectives for policy debates at the science-policy-society nexus (Lüdert 2024).

The NoC fosters knowledge exchange and informs policymaking through initiatives like the 2015 *Multistakeholder as Governance Groups* global research project (BKC 2015). Facilitated by BKC, this initiative of academic institutions from around the world conducted research in parallel to analyze and synthesize 12 case studies on multistakeholder governance frameworks in a highly compressed timeframe (Gasser et al. 2015). The project aimed to support efforts aimed at enhancing the effectiveness and inclusivity of these multistakeholder governance frameworks in the digital age, with a specific focus on informing internationalization efforts of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) at the time. The project aimed to distill lessons from diverse governance models across contexts, emphasizing global perspectives and collaborative research, to offer evidence-based, actionable insights to policymakers and stakeholders in a timely manner. The research was situated within a broader context of ongoing developments in the Internet governance ecosystem, including discussions at the Internet Governance Forum and the NETmundial Initiative. The case of NoC’s work on the contested concept of multistakeholder groups was not only indicative of an initiative to inform global policy discussions on multi stakeholder governance (science in diplomacy) but also one that aimed to enable international collaboration and create a public-interest oriented platform for dialogue among diverse stakeholders, contributing to international science collaboration bottom-up (diplomacy for science).

Since its launch, the NoC and its participating Centers have acted in various configurations and contexts and on a broad range of topics in an advisory function and as a sounding board to inform policy and policymakers, contributing to global best practice sharing, and enhancing interoperability across norms, organizations, and processes. A recent example includes the collaboration between the Secretariat of the NoC, with TUM Think Tank and the German International Cooperation Society (GIZ) to support the government of Mauritania in its efforts to develop a National AI Strategy (Government of Mauritania 2024). The NoC Secretariat also crafted a Summary Report on Costa Rica's Draft AI Bill (No. 23.919), titled "Insights and Recommendations for Policy Makers in Latin America and the Caribbean" and published in July 2024, leveraging scientific knowledge of the NoC to provide inclusive AI governance guidance (Guio and Müller-Daubermann 2024). A broad variety of NoC-facilitated outputs, including policy briefs (such as the Regulatory Sandboxes for Achieving SDGs for the G20, Halim et al. 2024) or consultations (for instance, by providing assistance to the German Digital Council when assessing a draft of the German AI Strategy), illustrate the NoC's active role in shaping international policy through targeted advisory efforts.

Diplomacy for Science: Facilitating International Collaboration

"Diplomacy for science" focuses on leveraging diplomatic efforts and channels to promote international scientific collaboration. These initiatives can emerge from national diplomatic actors or grassroots efforts within research institutions (Turekian et al. 2015). This dimension underscores the importance of national and international institutional actors, as well as individual scientists and scientific communities in enabling cross-border research collaborations in addressing global issues.

The NoC exemplifies a bottom-up, community-led initiative that can foster cross-border research and collaboration (Lacerda et al. 2023). Such networks can contribute to overcoming barriers to cooperation, especially in politically sensitive areas, by facilitating the global exchange of scientific knowledge and supporting regional capacity building initiatives (Van Langenhove 2017). As demonstrated in the path of the NoC over the past decade, "diplomacy for science" efforts have the potential to enable activities in the other two dimensions of science diplomacy, by bringing together the interdisciplinary network of academic institutions and partner organizations.

Throughout the years, the NoC has advanced a hub model—consisting of regional hubs in Europe and Asia, with a potential hub in North America currently under consideration—to foster collaboration at the local and regional level. In 2015, for instance, the Digital Asia Hub⁵ was launched, focusing on three main areas: research, knowledge sharing, and capacity building. Incubated by the NoC together with a diverse group of academic, civil society, and private

⁵ Digital Asia Hub: <https://www.digitalasiahub.org/>

sector partners, the Digital Asia Hub aims to provide a non-partisan, open, and collaborative platform for research, knowledge sharing, and capacity building related to Internet and Society issues with a focus on digital Asia. Its activities and research explore opportunities and challenges in digital technology and society in Asia, covering topics such as digital rights, governance and cyberlaw, innovation and digital trade, emerging technologies, the impact of mobile technology, and ICT for development. With both local and regional activities, the Hub aims to strengthen multistakeholder discourse and to contribute to the larger network of the NoC. Similarly, a European Hub was launched in 2017 by centers from the region, in an effort to support researchers and strengthen relationships between scholars in the region. These examples of regional efforts have created spaces for scientific and diplomatic interaction among different stakeholders and disciplines, contributing both to regional capacity building and exchange with the global network.

In addition, participating Centers of the NoC have pioneered clinical models that serve as collaborative protocols and frameworks for innovative methodologies that bridge the spheres of academic research and on-the-ground capacity building. A lead example is the formation of the AI Governance Clinic (AIGC) (now AI Governance Center) launched in 2022 in Thailand. Co-conceptualized and incubated by the NoC, under the lead of the Digital Asia Hub Thailand and TUM Think Tank and hosted by the Electronic Transactions Development Agency (ETDA) of Thailand, it fosters a diverse knowledge network of local and international experts to build AI governance capacity (Gasser and Albrecht 2024). AIGC builds knowledge networks by bringing together local experts across sectors through a fellowship program, supported by an International Policy Advisory Panel. Furthermore, it engages in the development of actionable guidelines and toolkits, like the “AI Governance Guidelines for Executives,” building upon Thailand’s national policies and principles, as well as engaging in educational initiatives, to encourage lifelong learning and provide practical frameworks for AI readiness and risk management.

These initiatives illustrate NoC’s capacity to transcend traditional roadblocks to cooperation by facilitating capacity building and supporting regional engagement in novel models of private-public and local-international partnerships. This approach does not come without challenges, as the decentralized nature of NoC makes it difficult to sustain consistent and equitable collaboration across regions with varying capacities. Addressing these challenges is a focus of NoC’s latest roadmap for 2024–2026, which aims to enhance internal cohesion and embrace collaborative potential across the full network (Network of Centers 2024).

Science for Diplomacy: A Trusted Ground for Collaboration and Impact

“Science for diplomacy” utilizes science as a mechanism to improve international relations, embodying values like evidence-based decision-making and

scientific freedom (Turekian et al. 2015). This dimension is particularly relevant in contexts where scientific cooperation can serve as a common ground for dialogue, or even conflict resolution. “Science for diplomacy” often leverages the soft power potential of scientific collaboration through agreements, joint research centers, or international conferences. Networks like the NoC can play a central role in such endeavors, for instance, by facilitating knowledge sharing, and best practices or the formation of interdisciplinary and international communities of practice, all of which might contribute to more effective and more interoperable global policies.

The *Ethics of Digitalization* project, led by the Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society within the NoC and under the patronage of the German President, is a case in point. The NoC initiative examined the ethical implications of digital technologies and AI (BKC 2024). This project built on a 2019 visit of the German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier to Harvard University, where he described efforts to promote a global dialogue about “our responsibility for the future and how digital transformation will (...) reshape industry, government, and society” (BKC 2019). Invited to accompany and facilitate these diplomatic efforts, the Ethics of Digitalization project drew on the NoC’s interdisciplinary, global, and diverse expertise, to collaborate on developing ethical frameworks and policy recommendations. The project illustrates how academic initiatives like the NoC can activate a broader network of institutions and partner organizations, resulting in a series of co-designed and co-hosted research sprints, interdisciplinary clinics, workshops, and other activities in Europe, the USA, and Asia to bolster a global diplomatic effort.

Shifting topic and geographic context, the NoC’s *Online Intermediaries Project*—which can be considered both a “science in diplomacy” and a “science for diplomacy” initiative—provides an example of NoC activities aiming to improve international relations, inform digital policies across geographies, and contribute to a level playing field for the global digital economy. Coordinated by the NoC and facilitated by the BKC, this research project examined the evolving landscape of online intermediary governance, particularly focusing on intermediary liability frameworks, at the intersection of law, technology, norms, and markets. Based on a series of case studies, the project resulted in a synthesis paper, summarizing the findings of in-depth explorations of online intermediary liability frameworks in Brazil, the European Union, India, South Korea, the USA, Thailand, Turkey, and Vietnam (Gasser and Schulz 2015). Committed to global perspectives and rigorous academic standards, the study provided lessons learned and actionable insights for policymakers while contributing to a broader academic strategy for understanding and addressing digital governance. The findings were presented to members of the Korean National Assembly in a hearing on online intermediary liability.

NoC fosters global understanding by centering its work on four pillars: diversity, openness, independence, and evidence-based research. This commitment allows the network to connect diverse disciplines and cultures effectively. In this context, the latest NoC Progress Report (2024) highlights key elements

for sustaining engagement and impactful global collaboration, marked by strengthened regional hubs in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, expanded collaborative work on AI governance and regulatory experimentation, and deeper engagement with United Nations institutions on AI governance, digital public infrastructure, and the ethical use of emerging technologies. The main objective has been to create greater opportunities for shared learning and interoperability (Network of Centers Secretariat 2025). This positions the NoC as a trusted actor in advancing technology and society discourse and capacity building amid geopolitical fragmentation.

Looking ahead, the Network will aim to consolidate regional hubs, advance comparative research on AI governance and regulatory experimentation, and develop new structured foresight initiatives, such as a Generative Futures Commission, which will assess emerging technological trajectories and their societal implications to inform evidence-based, public-interest-oriented governance. Collaborative reflection (Kamali and Javahery 2025) will be a central element of this next phase, reinforcing the NoC's role in sustaining dialogue, trust, and scientific diplomacy across regions.

4 CONCLUSION

The NoC illustrates the potential of academic networks to contribute to science diplomacy by addressing complex global challenges in the digital and now AI age. Its evolution and activities showcase how interdisciplinary collaboration can advance knowledge production, inform policy, and foster mutual understanding across traditional boundaries and diverse contexts. By aligning its mission with principles of openness, collaboration, and diversity, the NoC has established itself as a platform for academic and policy-driven dialogue. Its initiatives, such as the Ethics of Digitalization project and regional hubs like the Digital Asia Hub, demonstrate how academic networks can operate as facilitators of cross-border cooperation and policy harmonization, contributing to both regional and global capacity building.

The NoC case study also highlights the promise of exploring new avenues how academic networks can operate at scale and over time as well as experimentation with new forms of collaboration and engagement despite growing incentives toward fragmentation. The NoC's commitment to decentralized and networked governance has allowed it to adapt to emerging challenges while maintaining independence and embracing the diversity of its participants and partners. However, the NoC experience also highlights challenges inherent in such a model, particularly in enabling equitable participation and sustaining engagement across regions with varying capacities.

Addressing these challenges requires a careful balance between fostering localized efforts and maintaining a coherent global strategy. In this regard, regional hubs have proven helpful, and the existence of an independent Secretariat to coordinate efforts can be a significant asset. The network's roadmap for 2024–2026 and the Progress Reports (2024, 2025) illustrate a

commitment to enhancing internal cohesion and maximizing its impact on science diplomacy, positioning the NoC to lead the way in creating sustainable frameworks for interdisciplinary collaboration.

In conclusion, the NoC as a case study offers valuable insights when envisioning academic networks as mechanisms for science diplomacy in an era of technological disruption and geopolitical rivalry. It underscores the importance of integrating diverse perspectives and offering platforms with appropriate guardrails for dialogue to address global challenges. In addition to a variety of national and regional governance institutions and networks, international organizations such as the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and UNICEF have increasingly engaged with the NoC as a trusted platform for convening global discussions and identifying emerging issues in the governance of technology in a particularly challenging context for these organizations.

As digital and AI governance continue to evolve, the NoC provides inspiration when considering ways in which academic institutions can collaborate across boundaries to promote evidence-based decision-making, build trust, and contribute to more inclusive and equitable global governance. The lessons drawn from the NoC and its initiatives might inspire similar efforts in different domains and contexts, highlighting the transformative potential of interdisciplinary academic networks in shaping the future of science diplomacy and the innovative formation and operation of such networks.

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