

# Seeding the cloud: Consultancy services in the nascent field of cyber capacity building

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## Abstract

Transnational issues in public administration are charged with coordination problems between public and private actors. This is especially true for nascent issue fields. The mitigation of global cyber risks represents one such emerging issue. International organizations have encouraged the development of cybersecurity strategies as an integral part of national security regimes and to strengthen the global security environment. Cyber capacity building (CCB) efforts respond to these calls and disseminate digital risk management to recipient states. At a time where public administrations have not determined a position on CCB, global professional service firms have affirmed the importance of external third-party knowledge on cybersecurity issues. They are “seeding the cloud” to benefit from the field as it matures. Through the application of the Strategic Action Field framework, I highlight how field dynamics are shaped through framing contests and reflected in the practices of policy production.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The notion of emerging issues in transnational public administration has recently begun to attract interest in public administration scholarship (Stone & Ladi, 2015). Coordination on these issues often occurs in multiactor and multilevel policy fields with overlapping or ambiguous mandates (Bryson et al., 2015). For nascent issues, it has been suggested that the institutional environment resembles a marketplace for ideas inhibited by a transnational policy community

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(Brütsch & Lehmkuhl, 2007; Stone, 2008). Public sector officials, international civil servants, and transnational policy professionals occupy this “global agora” (Stone, 2013). Consultancies are an important part of this policy community (Bouteligier, 2011; Linovski, 2019; Stone & Ladi, 2015), but their role remains underspecified. This article highlights framing and positioning as crucial strategies of global consultancies when engaging in emerging policy issues.

Research on the role of consultants in public administration has typically focused on the role of consultancies in domestic public administration and often in the context of new public management reforms, highlighting a power shift from public administrations to private professional service firms (Arnaboldi, 2013; Gunter et al., 2015; Martin, 1998; Saint-Martin, 1998; Ylönen & Kuusela, 2019). More recently, research has highlighted the “market-making” role of global professional service firms (GPSFs), combining management consultancy with other professional services. These firms construct nascent policy fields by advancing established practices into new jurisdiction or creating demand for solutions to previously not treated problems (Beaverstock et al., 2010; Brès & Gond, 2014; Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2017; O'Mahoney & Sturdy, 2016).

Adding to these accounts, this article advances a strategic action field understanding of how GPSFs engage in the framing and shaping of nascent transnational issues (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). The strategic action field approach has recently attracted interest among scholars of public administration (Ingold, 2018; Moulton & Sandfort, 2017; Sandfort, 2018). It advances a view of embedded action in which strategic actors compete and cooperate for control over shared meanings (Fligstein, 1996). The ability of actors to successfully engage in such meaning-making projects is conditioned by political opportunity structures at the field level and the social skill to enlist others into coalitions (Fligstein, 2001).

In nascent fields, definitional struggles over rules, resources, and actor roles are “front and center” (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012, p. 27). Skillful actors engage in these struggles by translating rules and resources from proximate fields and build coalitions around these frames (Fligstein & Dauter, 2007). Framing has been a prominent concept within public administration scholarship (Baekkeskov, 2011; Boin et al., 2009; McCann, 2013; Vogel, 2012; Wilkinson et al., 2010) and refers to discursive acts that “lay the ground for proposing and justifying change measures” (McCann, 2013, p. 5, see also Boin et al., 2009). Timing is important and framing during the early stages of field formation weighs heavily on the future development of the field, defining legitimate means, and desirable ends (Benford & Snow, 2000; Bryson et al., 2015).

Within public administration scholarship, framing contests are typically initiated by public officials during periods of crisis (t Hart & Tindall, 2009; t Hart, 2013; Boin et al., 2009). In this article, I show how GPSFs engage in the strategic construction of a nascent transnational policy field by exploiting opportunity structures, skillfully offering their resources while maintaining a notion of neutrality and building alliances. This strategic action is not one of domination, as a conventional “market makers” narrative would suggest (c.f. Beaverstock et al., 2010; Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2017). Rather, they “seed the cloud” and intervene strategically to shape a consensus on norms about routine practices and appropriate behavior.

To illustrate this process, the case of cyber capacity building (CCB) is presented. Located at the nexus between cybersecurity and development aid, CCB refers to efforts aimed at improving the ability of recipient constituencies to reduce digital risks in the global South (Pawlak, 2014, 2018). Officially recognized by the United Nations in 2010, the field remains in the early stages of coordinating actors for an open, safe and secure cyber space. CCB is a central component to allow developing nations to reap the “digital dividends” from rapidly spreading digital technologies around the globe (DfID, 2018; OECD, 2012; Principles for Digital Development, 2019; United Nations, 2013; World Bank, 2016). Meanwhile, GPSFs have identified CCB as an opportunity to invest in the formation of a future market opportunity.

Empirically, the article employs an abductive approach and draws on participant observations during conferences and workshops of the global forum of cyber expertise (GFCE), a close reading of the literature, and semistructured interviews with key actors. Grounded in an exploratory design, the activities of Deloitte emerged as a crucial case (Gerring, 2007). This article is structured as follows: In the first two sections, I provide an overview of the literature on consultancies within nascent fields and introduce the strategic action field approach. Third, methods and data collection are discussed. Fourth, the case is presented. In the subsequent sections, I provide an analysis of

the strategic engagement of Deloitte in the field of CCB. In the final section, the link between framing strategies and field development is discussed.

## 2 | GLOBAL PROFESSIONAL SERVICE FIRMS IN NASCENT FIELDS

Diane Stone introduced the *global agora* as a metaphor for the market of ideas found in transnational administration, which is populated by a transnational policy community that spans international civil servants, public officials, and transnational policy professionals (Stone, 2013, p. 28). In the global agora, actor roles are highly dynamic. Private actors can engage in public policy design negotiations, drawing on soft forms of authority to steer the governance process—sometimes against the will of public sector officials (Meier & García, 2015).

Previous research on consultancies within transnational administration provides evidence that global consultancies have taken on key tasks within these processes (Boussebaa & Faulconbridge, 2018; Momani, 2017; Seabrooke & Sending, 2020). Similarly, it has been recognized that GPSFs are expanding activities into new markets as the profitability of core services are decreasing (Greenwood et al., 2002; Kipping et al., 2019; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2001). With recognized expertise across policy, management, and technical fields, these firms are uniquely positioned to participate in the global agora and engage in agenda-setting exercises for complex policy problems at the transnational level. The ability to draw upon multifaceted expertise places GPSFs as the “obligatory passage points” for public administrations to inform decision-making processes when uncertainty over appropriate courses of action prevails (Editor’s introduction to this symposium).

Complementing economies of knowledge, GPSFs control global networks spanning business, political, and civil society communities. These networks provide access to situated knowledge that links global expertise and local networks (Momani, 2017), affording GPSFs to exercise “design power” over institutional arrangements (Boussebaa & Faulconbridge, 2018) and to act as “staging posts” for political and economic transformations (Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2017, p. 222). Prince (2012) highlights the horizontal diffusion of policies through networks that are maintained by consultancies, which he depicts as “the often unheralded foot soldiers of changing governance structures” (p. 200).

The ability to leverage expertise across geographies and issue areas allows GPSFs to act as knowledge brokers (Brès & Gond, 2014). The global operations of GPSFs provide unique opportunities to identify the “big picture,” acting as early-movers on emerging issue fields (Momani, 2017, p. 248). Dense networks to political, business, and civil society actors can be leveraged to shape perceptions and set the agenda for future courses of action (David et al., 2013; O’Mahoney & Sturdy, 2016).

While this literature has greatly added to our understanding about the resources employed by GPSFs, there has been a tendency to focus on outcomes of “consultocracy” (Ylönen & Kuusela, 2019) with little attention to the underlying processes that allowed GPSFs to arrive in central positions. However, GPSFs cannot drive issues alone. Research on the effect of consultants on urban policy developments suggests that transnational consultancies aim to foster a position as neutral observers to the political process, operating at “modest witnesses” (Hurl, 2018). From this position, consultancies broker alliances and organize consensus positions through active framing of contentious issues, oftentimes relying on pro-bono work to create future contracting opportunities (Canato & Giangreco, 2011; Linovski, 2017; Vogelpohl & Klemp, 2018).

In the transnational arena, this implies a focus on the strategies employed to enroll state, IO and nonstate actors into alliances, and a deeper appreciation of the institutional context in which such actions take place. The agora metaphor suggests that such processes operate both in the transnational context as well as along “imperial” lines, in which knowledge creation and policy options are shaped in imperial centers and transferred to former colonies (Stone et al., 2020, p. 3). Shared conceptual frames and language facilitate this process, especially in the Anglosphere, as has been noted in public administration (Broome & Seabrooke, 2015; Legrand, 2015). Similarly, the ability of global consultancies to operate across transnational and imperial networks has been extensively documented

(Boussebaa et al., 2012; Poullaos & Sian, 2010; Sian, 2011). Accounting for organizing processes in such multiactor and multilevel environments, recent scholarship has turned to the strategic action field framework (Canzler et al., 2017; David et al., 2013; Kauppinen et al., 2017).

### 3 | FIELD EMERGENCE AND FRAMING CONTESTS

Within the strategic action field framework, fields are embedded social spaces of interdependent relationships, from which actors use social skill to access resources and influence how the field operates (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012, p. 59). In the context of global public policy, this perspective directs analytical focus away from the unitary action of policy entrepreneurs and emphasizes instead the interplay of resources, networks and interdependent action to shape the rules of the field (Fligstein, 1996; Santos & Eisenhardt, 2009).

The process of field emergence is a period of contention and uncertainty (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). In the absence of institutional settlements, proximate fields can serve as yard sticks for importing rules and norms governing behavior (Fligstein & Dauter, 2007; Fligstein & McAdam, 2012, p. 86). Actors with the ability to bridge fields can exert a lasting influence on the development of shared meanings and rules (Bryson et al., 2015; Fligstein, 2001).

Skilled social actors exploit openings at the field-level to “motivate cooperation in other actors by providing those actors with common meanings and identities in which actions can be undertaken and justified” (Fligstein, 1997, p. 398). Fundamentally, the challenge for strategic actors is to frame their preferred line of action to induce the cooperation of others (Fligstein, 2001, p. 113). For emerging fields, frames are used to create alliances and confer legitimacy to a preferred course of action (Freeman & Peck, 2007; Heimstädt & Dobusch, 2018; Vogel, 2012).

Because nascent fields lack a shared understanding over rules, framing contests are significant for the definition of what types of resources are important, how best practices are established, and what actions are good and legitimate (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014, pp. 197–198; Kaplan, 2008). In doing so, strategic actors charge narratives with persuasiveness and can draw upon positive messaging, turning problems into opportunities and opening new courses of action (Crosby et al., 2017; Kennedy & Fiss, 2009; Vogel, 2012, p. 373).

As the field settles, previously contested processes become normalized. Framing can thus become an effective strategy to define solutions and working processes, placing oneself at the center of institutional settlements. Hence, an investigation of framing processes in nascent fields provides for an explanation of how the foundations for institutional outcomes such as “consultocracy” are being laid.

### 4 | DATA AND APPROACH

Empirically, this article relies on an exploratory design of *polymorphous engagement* (Gusterson, 1997) informed by a close reading of documents, participant observations at key sites and semistructured interviews with key informants. Nascent fields in transnational policy processes can be challenging to study as actors, sites, and issues are dispersed globally and oftentimes only loosely connected. Exploratory research is a useful approach to identify emerging structures of the field and avenues for further data gathering (Stebbins, 2001, p. 6). An overview over the full data is provided in Table 1.

As an initial step, documents on cyber capacity building were sourced. Specialized academic writings were identified through “Web of Science” based on the key words “Cybersecurity Capacity Building,” “Cyber Security Capacity Building,” and “Cyber Capacity Building.” Organizational reports from public and private organizations were identified based on references in the academic literature. Due to the novelty of the issue and the limited specialized academic literature available, additional material was sourced by conducting a Google News Search on the same key words as for the initial specialized literature in the Web of Science, yielding another five relevant articles. In total, this resulted in 51 documents. A close reading of this literature was conducted to gain an initial understanding of central

**TABLE 1** Empirical material and data sources

Data	Sub-types	Count
Documents	Specialist articles on cyber-capacity building	11
	Think-tank/research institute reports	8
	National Strategies	9
	IO Reports/Guidance	18
	Newspaper/other media	5
	Total	51
Participant observation	2019 GFCE Working Group Meetings, the Hague	3 days
	2019 Annual Meeting, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia	3 days
	2020 Virtual Working Group Meetings	12 h
Interviews	A1: Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), <i>Senior Official</i>	November 26, 2018
	A2: Independent Development Consultant	September 23, 2019
	A3: European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), <i>Senior Researcher</i>	February 24, 2020
	A4: World Bank, <i>Senior Official</i>	February 27, 2020
	A5: Deloitte, <i>Partner</i>	February 6, 2020; December 4, 2020
	A6: Deloitte, <i>Consultant</i>	September 9, 2020
	A7: Small Consultancy, <i>CEO</i>	August 26, 2020

concepts and concerns. Coordinative challenges, a shortage of funding, a lack of integration with traditional development actors, and a scarcity of qualified personnel emerged as central concerns (e.g., Hohmann et al., 2017; Klimburg & Zylberberg, 2015; Morgus, 2018; Pawlak, 2018).

The Global Forum for Cyber Expertise (GFCE) was quickly identified as the central coordinating body of the field, being referenced in 8 of the 11 specialized articles and in the official strategies on cybersecurity and digitalization of the Netherlands, Norway, and the United Kingdom. In-person participant observations were conducted at the 2019 Working Group Meetings in the Hague and the 2019 Annual Conference in Addis Ababa in Ethiopia over a total of six days. Furthermore, 12 h of observations were made during virtual meetings in April–June 2020. At the physical gatherings, I attended all meetings and took extensive notes, which were transformed into memos. The in-person meetings were also used for informal background conversations with practitioners. These data were used to critically assess the results from the initial analysis, and to gain insights on dominant discourses and actors within the community (Mintrom & Luetjens, 2016).

This abductive approach proved valuable to uncover emerging patterns and dynamics of the field, which were not visible from a reading of the literature alone (Davies, 2001, p. 75). During the first round of participant observations at the working group meetings in 2019, Deloitte was identified as a *crucial case* (Gerring, 2007) due to its centrality in discussions. While single-case studies only allow for limited insights into market effects more generally (Leander, 2005), they are a viable approach for understanding nascent fields and open up for subsequent comparative approaches (Heimstädt & Dobusch, 2018).

Finally, eight formal interviews with key informants have been conducted. All interviews were conducted in a semistructured manner with the aim to identify and confirm framing strategies and actor roles. Interview partners were sampled in a purposive manner based on a close reading of the literature and observations at key events. All interviewees were granted full anonymity. Due to the small-N character of interviews, no coding strategy was applied. In this way, the interviews were used to triangulate between data sources and increase the credibility of findings (Tansey, 2007).

## 5 | CYBER CAPACITY BUILDING AS A NASCENT FIELD

CCB refers to a range of activities collectively aimed at improving the ability of individuals, communities, and governments to reduce digital risks through the development of appropriate institutional, legal, and human capacities (Pawlak, 2018). Notwithstanding the importance of capacity building across the globe, the concept of CCB refers explicitly to a donor-recipient relationship in the context of development aid (Hohmann et al., 2017; Schia, 2018). Although the earliest CCB projects can be traced back to the mid-2000s (Collett, 2019), the concept became formally constituted by the group of governmental experts within the United Nations (UN GGE) in the 2010 report and reiterated through the 2013 and 2015 reports (United Nations, 2010, 2013, 2015).

Digital technologies are a key driver of economic growth in the global South (World Bank, 2008, p. 2) and development institutions across the board have incorporated digital solutions into their strategies (DfID, 2018; Sida, 2003, 2005; Utenriksdepartementet, 2018). The World Bank estimates that at least 80% of its projects have digital components (Sargent, 2017). Without adequate safeguards to address digital risks, the positive impact of digital technologies on development might be offset or even reversed (World Bank, 2016, pp. 3–4). Against this rise of “the dark side of ICT” (Deibert, 2013; Tarafdar et al., 2015), the OECD (2012, p. 13) emphasized “a need for better alliances and partnerships with like-minded countries or allies, including facilitating capacity building of less developed countries,” and the Principles for Digital Development recognize privacy and security as fundamental building blocks of digital development projects (Principles for Digital Development, 2019).

CCB is, however, more than a new feature of development policy (Schia & Willers, 2020). It pursues a threefold aim of economic and societal growth, global risk mitigation, and geopolitical ambition: First, to provide a foundation for developing countries to reap digital dividends. Second, to strengthen the global security landscape as exposure in one country easily spills-over into other—including developed—countries. And third, to advance and promote a model of digital governance rooted in the notions of openness, freedom, and security (Klimburg & Zylberberg, 2015; see also Pawlak & Bampaliou, 2017).

Whereas renowned experts imagined CCB growing into “one of the most important activities within the security/development nexus” (Klimburg & Zylberberg, 2015, p. 5; see also Pawlak, 2016, p. 85), annual funding remains on the margins of the US\$ 153 billion market for official development aid (OECD, 2019). Estimations fluctuate between US\$ 50 million and 1 billion annually, with a mean between 100 and 300 million US-dollars (Morgus, 2018, pp. 29, 70). If the market for CCB has not yet lived up to early expectations, it is due to three major challenges: a lack of expertise, a lack of funding, and organizational complexity. First, the digital skills gap puts pressure on traditional recruitment channels (Berger & Frey, 2015, p. 77), as public and private organizations compete for a limited pool of talents, and private actors typically outspend public institutions (Andrews, 2018, p. 7). With a global shortage of two million cybersecurity experts (ISACA, 2019), practitioners with deep technical knowledge are rare and expensive (Shires, 2018). Second, the hybrid character of CCB projects—being both development and security projects—creates uncertainty as to its qualification as official development assistance in conjunction with the ODA guidelines (Klimburg & Zylberberg, 2015; Pawlak, 2018, p. 49). If development projects cannot be classified as ODA, donor countries are less likely to allocate funding.

Finally, the coordinative challenge to navigate organizational complexity has led to duplications of efforts, constrained the efficient delivery of projects and spurred uncertainty as to the impact of initiatives (Dutton et al., 2019). Building capacity in developing countries requires the participation of actors from the technical, development, security and diplomatic communities to produce coherent programs and frameworks (c.f. Pawlak & Bampaliou, 2017). Working across these communities requires boundary-spanning skills and the development of brokerage knowledge (Pollitt, 2010). Silo-structured bureaucratic organizations are especially constrained by this condition (Klimburg, 2017). Critically, mediating between security and development communities has proven difficult (Hohmann et al., 2017; Klimburg & Zylberberg, 2015; Morgus, 2018). Without the enrolment of the development community, CCB projects often lack access to local networks in recipient states (Pawlak, 2014; Pijenburg

Muller, 2015, p. 14) and suffer from supply-driven rather than demand-driven project designs (Pawlak, 2018, p. 100). CCB therefore risks to repeat the mistakes of early digital development projects (Heeks, 2008).

In 2015, acknowledgement of this coordinative challenge induced the United Kingdom and the Netherlands to launch the GFCE. This multi-stakeholder platform brings together public officials, international organizations, development actors, research institutes, and private companies to advance a global agenda for CCB and avoid duplications of efforts (GFCE, 2015). Within the few years of its existence, it has developed into the key global coordinative body for CCB issues.

In sum, CCB has developed from a loosely articulated recommendation at the level of the United Nations into a nascent global policy field. Coordination among the relevant communities remains the biggest challenge for effective policy implementation. Coordinative platforms, such as the GFCE, tend to be dominated by actors from the security and foreign policy community. Without access to the local networks and capacity building expertise of the development community, CCB projects risk to be short-lived as local ownership is lacking (c.f. Eade, 1997).

## 6 | THE STRATEGIC ACTION FIELD IN CYBER CAPACITY BUILDING

The GFCE functions as the main coordinating platform in the nascent field (c.f. Netherlands Ministry of Justice, 2018; UK Cabinet Office, 2016; Utenriksdepartementet, 2018). As of early 2020, its members include 54 countries, 14 international organizations, 12 research institutes/think tanks, 17 for-profit companies, 4 nonprofits, and 8 other organizations from around the world. These can be roughly clustered around donors, recipients, and implementing actors. Within each of these categories, we see both private and public actors, mirroring Diane Stone's observation of the transnational sphere as penetrating dichotomies, where "policy activity does not conform to the standard distinction of simply public or private, but occurs across them" (Stone & Ladi, 2015, p. 843). For example, Microsoft is a key investor into CCB activities (GFCE, 2020b; see also Pijnenburg Muller, 2015) and academic organizations like the Oxford University's Global Cyber Security Capacity Centre are active in project implementation and assessments (GCSCC, 2016).

Consultancies are, however, the main implementing agents (Interview, A4 & A7; see also Morgus, 2018, p. 53; Pawlak & Barmaliou, 2017). The GFCE member consultancies are of three types: smaller and specialized consultancies; medium-sized thematic consultancies with a regional focus; and GPSFs. The difference in size and function corresponds to public administration scholarship on smaller consultancies providing technical fixes, mid-size consultancies policy changes for a community, and large consultancies a shift in frames (van den Berg et al., 2019). Smaller and specialized technical companies are typically contracted for the implementation of specialized aspects of larger projects, such as the development of national computer emergency response teams (Interview, A7). Mid-sized consultancy firms like the consultancy arm of the Commonwealth Telecommunication Organisation (CTO) tend to have a broader portfolio and a regional focus area. Created in 1901, the CTO draws on a centuries-long legacy serving the Commonwealth region in fostering the use and application of telecommunications technologies. Access to long-standing local networks and a deep understanding of the local political and societal context are a crucial resource and success factor for project implementations (Interviews A3, A4, A5).

Lastly, recent years have seen a strong increase in the activities of especially one GPSF in delivering CCB projects. In the autumn of 2016, Deloitte acquired the small consultancy firm Intellium, which was specialized on cyber security strategy consulting for public and private clients (Deloitte, 2017). Prior to the acquisition, Intellium supported Italy in developing the 2016 National Framework for Cyber Security, worked with the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) on cyberdrills in the African, American, European, and Arab regions (ITU, 2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2016), and supported NATO in critical infrastructure protection exercises (NATO, 2015). Leveraging Intellium's issue-specific expertise and existing networks with Deloitte's organizational capacity followed thus a well-known model of niche firm acquisitions for expanded service offerings (Accountancy Daily, 2015).

## 7 | FRAMING THE STRATEGIC ACTION FIELD

Access to greater organizational capacity allowed the new Deloitte/Intellium consortium to work with longer time horizons without a need for immediate profit. Consequently, the GPSF used the newly acquired technical expertise to move from being a specialized agent with limited capacity toward viewing cyber capacity building as a strategic investment for future profit opportunities.

Cyber capacity building has over time become a priority for Deloitte and is part of a long-term strategy. Other companies need to focus more closely on the immediate profitability when approaching new markets. Deloitte – as a partner-led organization – is much better positioned to invest in these areas with a long-term strategy. (Interview A5)

Most significantly, this reorientation was manifest in the development of a second strategic layer, leveraging the combination of top management consultancy and technical expertise to engage in “thought-leadership” and framing of the field (O’Mahoney & Sturdy, 2016; Sturdy et al., 2015a). These strategies are exemplary of the move toward CCB activity as an investment strategy.

With less focus on short-term performance, *pro-bono* work was a viable strategy to increase its presence in the emerging market. It has been documented elsewhere, how *pro bono* activities can be used to build reputation and demonstrate capabilities, and how unpaid work can create opportunities for future contracts (Linovski, 2017). Through the provision of in-kind contributions to cyberdrills, the company has become an official “key partner” of the ITU (ITU, 2019). Further, Deloitte is similarly engaged in training national computer emergency response teams through the ITU, using this activity as a hub for network expansion. Beyond network expansion, *pro bono* work for governments through the ITU was used to stay ahead of the field and maintain thought leadership (Interview A5).

Testament to such thought leadership is the development of the 2018 “Guide to Developing a National Cyber Security Strategy” on a *pro bono* basis (ITU, World Bank, COMSEC, CTO, & NATO CCD COE, 2018). Published by a multi-stakeholder effort including the ITU, the World Bank, NATO, and the European Cybersecurity Agency, Deloitte was able to assert its status as a leading source of expertise. Relatedly, Deloitte has published a “Digital Identity Road Map Guide” in cooperation with the ITU (ITU, 2018). Digital identity systems are closely linked to cybersecurity concerns and a key pillar of the World Bank’s digital development program (World Bank, 2018). Another example is the publication of the edited volume “Next Generation CERTs” through the “NATO Science for Peace and Security Programme” (Armando et al., 2019). This collaboration draws together the GPSF, NATO, and a prominent computer scientist, reaffirming the technical expertise of Deloitte and fostering ties to complementary sources of authority. These three examples underpin, how Intellium’s existing networks within the ITU and NATO could be leveraged to engage in strategic positioning within a long-term investment strategy.

The publication of best-practice guides are important tools to set standards of appropriate behavior and provide an opportunity to formalize social standing and strengthen relationships to relevant other stakeholders (c.f. Qu & Cooper, 2011). Entering into strategic cooperation with partner organizations, the cooperative approach allowed Deloitte to advance diagnostic and prognostic frames (Benford & Snow, 2000). Relying on a narrow representation of technical expertise, Deloitte was able to exercise a high degree of control without the need to mobilize its full arsenal of organizational resources, reflecting Hurl’s notion of global consultancies as “modest witnesses” (Hurl, 2018).

Thought leadership and framing strategies went, however, beyond representations of technical expertise. The GFCE, as the central coordinating body of the nascent field, was identified as an arena of eminent importance to engage directly in conversations with donor and recipient state governments (Interviews 5, 6, and 7). As one interviewee put it, “these conversations are important to understand the priorities of governments *and to help them understand their needs*” (Interview 5, emphasis added).



Deloitte's engagement at the GFCE relied much more heavily on brokering and framing strategies based on its organizational resources and access to global networks. Interventions during working group sessions in April 2019 revolved around a reframing of local project ownerships, emphasizing the need to bring together local project partners and establishing multi-stakeholder initiatives that allow for demand-driven project design and sustainable project success.

This reframing directly addresses a shared concern as lined out in the case description: the absence of the development community has cut CCB projects effectively out of local networks that development agencies maintain across the globe. The importance of project ownership for achieving sustainable development outcomes is well-established (Eade, 1997) and similarly a concern that is widely shared in the CCB community (Pawlak, 2014; Pijnenburg Muller, 2015; Schia, 2018). Yet, as local ownership requires the presence of implementing actors with the social capital to orchestrate local networks, alternative pathways are in high demand and consultancies with a global presence are in a unique position to act on such tasks.

Indeed, the ability of turning global presence into a strategic advantage in future CCB projects was highlighted decisively:

Deloitte has extensive experience in dealing with private companies and can help to bring them in and make them an active part of the discussion. The latter is an area where most CCB projects are failing in design and execution. But national private players and large international companies are essential for successful projects, especially for national strategies. (Interview A5)

Deloitte only became a formal member of the GFCE in 2019. Yet, within a short period of time, it managed to take on central positions within the working groups on national strategies and cybersecurity cultures and skills.<sup>1</sup> Further, Deloitte senior partner Inge Bryan was appointed to the three-person board of the newly established GFCE foundation. At the presentation of the board during the 2020 working group meetings, the main task of the board was described as to provide strategic direction to the GFCE and move CCB closer to the digital development agenda (GFCE, 2020a). According to Deloitte's Inge Bryan, two key considerations for such development must be a "better involvement of the private sector and a new and more active role of the GFCE" (speech at GFCE Virtual Meeting, 2020). The latter should be contrasted with the expressly passive role of the GFCE in earlier years, limiting itself to a coordinative function (Interview A4). This was reiterated in a later interview:

In the future, the GFCE should become more like a market place in which recipients, donors and other relevant organizations can interact and coordinate. Ideally, the GFCE should facilitate the organization, strategy development and orchestration of CCB projects. (Interview A5)

As CCB remains on the margins of the digital development field and both the market itself and market players only just are emerging, Deloitte ensured through its work at the GFCE that it is a player that cannot be ignored. Taking on key positions within the forum allows for the exercise of design power over the future organization of the field. Strategic reframing of shared concerns over a lack of local project ownership opened new business opportunities to capitalize on the GPSF's global presence and ability to orchestrate public-private partnerships.

This framing soon appeared in the World Bank Report on the lessons learned from the Global Cybersecurity Capacity Program. Deloitte was the main implementing agency in this program, advising on risk assessment and management processes, the development of national cyber strategies, and the identification of critical information infrastructure (World Bank, 2019, pp. 22–25, 46).

Consultancy firms with presence on the local market have more comprehensive and deeper knowledge about the needs and current circumstances of the given country. Global expertise combined with local knowledge is key to providing professional high-quality services to governmental

institutions. This outlined advantage can result in a more successful and efficient achievement of Program goals. Programs similar to the Global Cybersecurity Capacity Building Program might benefit from the identification of such consultancy firms by already implementing partners at early stages of the Program planning. Timely and regular involvement of consultancy firms from the very first steps of the Program activities can lead to a higher utilization of the local knowledge and expertise of the parties involved. (World Bank, 2019, p. 66)

The wording of “global expertise combined with local knowledge” is a clear reference to GPSFs who can leverage global networks and multifaceted expertise. The involvement of GPSFs is argued to improve the chances of success and they should be involved “from the very first steps of the Program activities” to bring local knowledge to project planning, allowing for a demand-driven project design.

In sum, the case of Deloitte is a crucial illustration of how GPSFs possess unique resources to exert a lasting impact on the formation of nascent field within transnational policy issues. Access to global networks and organizational resources allows for the investment into nascent fields that do not yet represent a market large enough to provide short-term profits. Skillful positioning placed the GPSF in a structurally advantageous position to identify opportunity structures that can be exploited through targeted framing strategies. It has been documented how such framing was rewarded, enlisting central donor agencies into the prognostic frame. Such strategies are not very costly for a globally operating consultancy although the immediate pay-off might be low. Taking a back-seat and intervening strategically allows them to “seed the cloud” and shape future market profiles.

## 8 | DISCUSSION

Global consultancy firms possess unique resources to play an important part in the administration of transnational policy issues and especially so during the formative stages of field emergence. As documented in the case study, Deloitte was able to strategically invest into the nascent field of CCB before significant market opportunities developed, shaping the organization of CCB activities and normalizing its own position as an obligatory passage point for the implementation of CCB projects.

While previous scholarship on consultancy in domestic public administrations has emphasized how GPSFs engage in thought leadership to establish new issues (Momani, 2017; Sturdy et al., 2015b), the presented case highlights how such activities are embedded within wider social processes in which the inscription of thought-leadership activities into best practice guides is as much a reflection of claims to epistemic authority as it is a positioning exercise to foster and cement organizational alliances with key actors (see also Hurl, 2018). Organizational financial resources are the foundation to engage in such longer-term strategies, while the organizational structure of the partnership model provides the necessary discretion for senior partners to take a longer outlook on investments and rely less on immediate returns than traditionally organized private actors.

Conceptualizing these processes as strategic action fields provides an integrated reading of what otherwise oftentimes is treated as individual aspects of consultancy resources. It also provides an important processual element in which social skill is developed and nurtured over time, underlining the significance of early-stage investments into nascent issue fields. Understood in this way, the successful reframing of contentious issues around local ownership and demand-driven project designs, with an emphasis on public-value creation, was possible only because the underlying processes of alliance-building were enabled. Deloitte had the capacity to read the environment through continuous skillful engagement. The GPSF was able to place itself in the center of framing, including advantageously positioning itself close to the World Bank.

In many ways CCB represents a natural expansion of Deloitte's services. Government and public services account for the consultancy's third largest global revenue stream (Deloitte, 2020b) and its cybersecurity consulting

remains the world's largest by market share (Deloitte, 2020a). Exercising design power over the development of CCB practices allows for the marriage of existing profit centers with the capitalization of global networks while avoiding clashes with incumbent competitors and professions coming into the market. As such, Deloitte has put in the work to make the most of increased service delivery and profits as the market matures.

This is significant for two reasons. First, it documents how international development is increasingly seen as a target of knowledge colonization for GPSFs (Seabrooke & Sending, 2020; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2001). And second, it documents how global consultancies are an important part of the transnational agora with access to a unique set of resources and the ability to build up social skill over time and to “seed the cloud” on emerging issues before market structures develop.

## 9 | CONCLUSION

How do global consultancies contribute to the shaping of nascent transnational public policy fields? Departing from the observation that GPSFs are an understudied actor type in the global agora, this article has advanced a case study on the early-stage investment of Deloitte into the nascent field of cyber capacity building.

Through a reading of the global agora as a strategic action field, this work contributes to our understanding of how the combination of organizational resources and social skill are equally important elements in GPSFs' strategies to develop alliances and shape the formation of settlements within nascent fields. The advantage of such an approach is that it allows us to interpret the strategic action of global consultancies from an integrated view. From this perspective the processes of knowledge colonialization and market-making cannot be separated from the institutional environment in which such action is embedded. Furthermore, the concept of social skill highlights how strategic action is the outcome of mobilization and coalition-building which, in turn, is underpinned by the deployment of organizational resources and an ability to read the environment in order to develop effective framing strategies. Applying the strategic action field approach asks us to take a holistic view of the knowledge-producing, boundary-spanning, and thought leadership activities of global consultancies. It is these activities that underpin the ability to engage in skillful social action. In this way, Deloitte's actions can be interpreted as an investment into the development and acquisition of social skill which is deployed in a forward-looking manner to “seed the cloud” and normalize itself to act as a staging post as market opportunities increase. Paying closer attention to such early-stage engagement of global consultancies within nascent transnational issues should be an interesting avenue for further research.

Global consultancies are, unquestionably, not the only strategic actors investing into the development of nascent transnational issue arenas. Nor is their involvement necessarily a cause of concern but it is an issue worthy of further research interest. The global agora simultaneously exhibits a high degree of openness and power asymmetries (Stone, 2003). Consultancies working transnationally are well positioned to both contribute to and exploit this system. In this article, it has been documented that GPSFs can successfully place themselves as central actors during early stages of field formation, providing them with design power over the form and practice of global public policy. Given the extensive research on GPSFs' propensity to reproduce global inequalities and post-colonial structures, future research would be well-advised to pay close attention to the effects of such “seeding” activity.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflict of interest.

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## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> In toto, the GFCE is structured around four working groups.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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