

ITU: Internet Governance or Just Governing the Internet?

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As public awareness and debate about the ITU's [World Conference on International Telecommunications \(WCIT\)](#) [2] widens, a point of contention has been whether "Internet governance" will be on the table. A number of regulators, industry, and civil society groups, including CDT, have raised concerns about the WCIT's potential to stray into areas of Internet governance and policy, moving beyond mere technical interoperability issues. Others have dismissed these concerns as "rumors," echoing the ITU Secretary General's assurances that the ITU is just a technical body and there are no references to "Internet governance" in the preparation documents for the WCIT.

As we discuss in our [Policy Post](#) [3], the answer depends on who's defining "Internet governance."

What is "Internet governance"?

The definition of "Internet governance" has been the subject of much debate. For some, Internet governance is synonymous with the work of ICANN, which allocates IP addresses and manages the domain name system. Under this view, the only way the WCIT could address this narrow view of "Internet governance" would be for it to consider proposals to move the entire addressing resource allocation system under the control of the ITU. So far, this outcome has not been raised so directly (though Russia and Côte d'Ivoire do support a [proposal](#) [4] for the ITU to have some role in allocating a portion of IPv6 addresses).

While ICANN's work is integral to the functioning of the Internet, CDT and many others around the world use the term "Internet governance" to encompass a much broader set of activities. In this view, Internet governance could include the development and implementation of policies that affect the Internet's functionality, evolution, and use at any layer of the network. This includes a range of activities, from assigning domain names and IP addresses, to developing technical protocols, to regulating infrastructure, to crafting policies for online content.

Importantly, Internet governance is also about *who* gets to participate in decision-making about Internet policy and technology, and *how*. Since its infancy, the Internet has benefitted from a lightweight, decentralized, multistakeholder approach to governance that combines targeted government regulation with various formal and informal multistakeholder organizations to help guide its global development. Multistakeholder organizations like the IETF, the W3C, and the IGF involve participation from engineers, academic experts, industry, and civil society, in addition to government actors.

To be sure, current implementation of the multistakeholder model remains imperfect and there are still challenges to address – we must find ways to democratize global representation and expand participation, particularly from the global south. But in general, the open, transparent, multistakeholder model is what has made the Internet the robust, global platform for human rights, development, democratic participation, and commerce it is today.

What is the WCIT about?

In the WCIT preparatory process, Member States have made [proposals](#) [5] to address cybersecurity, regulation of traffic routing for security reasons, limitations on public access to telecom infrastructure, mandatory technical standards, spam, and IPv6 address allocation. A group of European telecomm operators has suggested completely upending the current system of peering and interconnection between networks on the Internet (see our [report on the ETNO proposals](#) [6] for more detail). *Deliberating whether and how to regulate the functioning and use of the Internet?* That sounds like Internet governance.

The concern about the WCIT is that these issues will be debated, and ultimately decided on, in a forum that heavily favors governments and is in many ways opaque and closed to civil society, Internet engineers, and others who have a strong stake in the Internet's future. CDT has joined civil society organizations from around the world in [demanding better access to WCIT documents](#) [7] and arguing for civil society to [have a voice in the debate](#) [8]. While the ITU, as an intergovernmental treaty body, is emphatically not the right place to make decisions about Internet policy, no one can deny that the WCIT has become a major focal point for discussing these key issues of Internet governance.

For those who care about the future of Internet policy and governance, the WCIT is well worth watching.

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- [3] <https://www.cdt.org/policy/itus-wcit-negotiation-internet-governance-or-just-governing-internet>
- [4] <http://files.wcitleaks.org/public/CWG%20WCIT12%20TD62.pdf>
- [5] <http://wcitleaks.org/>
- [6] <https://www.cdt.org/report/etno-proposal-threatens-access-open-global-internet>
- [7] <https://www.cdt.org/letter-for-civil-society-involvement-in-WCIT>
- [8] <https://www.cdt.org/blogs/cynthia-wong/1705itu-discussions-must-be-opened>