

Global Internet Governance and the ITU

The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) is a specialized agency of the UN that works to ensure interoperability of international telephony. This December, delegations from 193 member states will gather at the ITU's World Conference on International Telecommunications (WCIT), where they will re-negotiate the International Telecommunication Regulations, the agency's underlying treaty, for first time since 1988. There are a number of proposed amendments to the treaty that could affect fundamental aspects of Internet functionality. These address cybersecurity, routing of Internet traffic, data protection, net neutrality, charging for traffic, and a range of other important issues.

ITU intervention in Internet policy presents two central problems:

First, many of the proposed changes to the ITU's role could threaten human rights online and Internet openness. Key principles at stake include:

- Freedom of expression and access to information
- Online privacy
- Efforts to expand ICT access throughout the world

Second, the treaty re-negotiation could lead to a paradigm shift for Internet governance, replacing the current decentralized model of open, transparent, consensus-based multistakeholder groups with a mostly closed, government-centric treaty body where civil society and technology experts have a very limited role in decision-making.

Internet governance today

At present, a range of groups, most of which are non-profit multistakeholder entities, set voluntary standards for the architecture, naming, numbering, and functionality of the global Internet. The majority of these groups are:

- Open to new members, regardless of their professional or national background
- Transparent in their practices and decision-making
- Multistakeholder in membership: governments, ICT companies, technologists, academic experts, lawyers, and human rights advocates, have equal participation

While more must be done to increase participation from a more diverse range of stakeholders, particularly from the global South, this ecosystem of groups is designed to consider and achieve balance among the interests of government, industry, the technical community, and civil society.

Internet governance under the ITU

In contrast, the ITU is a treaty body in which only government representatives are allowed full participation.

- Companies and NGOs may have "sector member" status, but may not vote on policies or participate in all conversations.
- It is extremely expensive to become a sector member; most NGOs cannot afford to join.
- ITU processes are generally closed to the public, making it difficult for civil society outside of the ITU to influence internal negotiations.
- Treaty bodies are generally slow-moving—a characteristic that would be problematic in the rapid-paced Internet governance environment.

If the ITU becomes a leading standard-maker for the Internet, civil society voices suddenly will have limited capacity to participate in Internet governance decision-making.

