

# ITU Gone Wild

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In 12 days, a very large ITU circus called the WCIT will convene in Dubai. For 12 days, the 1500 plus representatives from 138 countries (and still expanding) will convene to consider how a treaty developed for the world of electrical telegraph networks in Dresden in 1850 known as the International Telecommunication Regulations will apply to the Internet and all other forms of communication, information systems, and content distribution. Even industrial control systems are within the broad sweep envisioned by some of the players. They call it the dominion over ICT (Information and Communication Technologies), and want to assert this dominion over all "operating agencies," defined to include even individuals with Internet connected hosts. It is the ultimate intergovernmental appropriation of private property worldwide. The Arabic and African blocs are even backing a Cuban proposal for a unencumbered right to access to all Internet resources, with examples of Sudan being denied access to the Internet services of 30 American companies because of human rights related sanctions against Sudan.

This treaty making circus is preceded by another smaller ITU circus in Dubai for 10 days that got underway yesterday. It is the ITU's telecommunication standards body called the ITU-T - and an intended beneficiary of WCIT treaty provisions. It promotes itself as the "pre-eminent" ICT standards body. In reality this intergovernmental body largely died about 15 years ago and has been abandoned by almost everyone. ITU-T initiatives for standards over the past 40 years have left the Information Highway littered with a trail of massive roadkill, including ISDN, broadband ISDN, OSI internet protocols, X.400, X.500, IMT-2000, and NGN – to name a few of the more prominent corpses.

For the past ten years, a number of people and nation blocs have been preparing for the WCIT. They include Russia, the Arab and African blocs, and the ITU's current Secretary-General. Studiously, the seeds of the vast expansion of ITU jurisdiction and control have been embedded in copious resolutions, declarations, websites, and assorted other documents as advance groundwork was laid for the WCIT.

Now that the time for the WCIT is arriving, with each passing day over the past few weeks, the proposals have been officially published - capped by a Russian proposal over the weekend for explicitly taking over the Internet. It is part of a directive by Putin when he visited the ITU and its Secretary-General last year, to assume control of the Internet. Russia also has allies in a great many national regimes who see the ITU through its revised 1850 treaty as the salvation for everything wrong with Internet, new media, information systems, cybersecurity, and cybercrime today. Proposals for controlling everything related to ICTs, social networks, industrial control systems, and cloud computing are already before the ITU-T standards body now meeting, and Russia is set for anointing their own in key leadership positions. It is the classic lure of the Snake Oil salesmen of the Old West. Even Iran wants the ITU to continue helping with its Stuxnet centrifuge problems!

On the other side of this nation-State ensemble is the U.S. and the West in general. Other than the ITU's radio spectrum management work, they and nearly all of industry have largely removed themselves from ITU activities. Their proposals quite accurately reflect the fact that the ITU's formal remit includes only a few moribund legacy international telecommunication services, and fundamentally lacks the capacity to deal with anything more. Unfortunately, in huge ITU circuses beset with endless rhetoric, reality and rationality are usually in short supply.

The U.S. is fielding a rather large cast of 115 delegates to the WCIT. However, in the grand design style of Dubai, those nations who are hostile to the views of the U.S. and the West are sending far more boots on the ground. The UAE itself has announced 159 delegates and is expanding them by the day. For the most part, this mass of people consists predominantly of government "regulators" from Developing Countries who like the ITU leadership, see their jobs greatly expanded in their proposals. If one does the math, there are a substantial majority of nations and delegates who would appear to support the Russian-Arab-African proposals.

So where is this all heading? The best possible outcome is for the ensemble to declare the ITRs a worthless relic of 1850 and abrogate it completely - coupled with eliminating future WCIT's and recommending privatizing the ITU-T to salvage its little remaining useful work. Unfortunately, that probably will not happen. Instead, there will be the treaty conference equivalent of "chicken" - with the Russian-Arab-African bloc plus the Secretary-General deciding whether to completely write off the remaining ITU telecommunications constituency in the West. It will likely come to a choice between populating the ancient treaty with provisions that institute the extreme agendas for the proponents, versus a set of feel-good resolutions that kick the ITU can down the road to another generation. Everyone then smiles, shakes hands, and issues press releases about how they did something useful.

In the world of treaties among nation-States, it is all about accepting obligations while remaining sovereign. Any country can limit its obligations by: 1) not signing, or 2) signing but issuing a Declaration at the meeting or during a subsequent ratification process. For 110 years, the U.S. never went to these conferences nor signed the outputs. It has attended only the last two, and largely renounced the provisions in both.

So what does all of this mean? DARPA Director Emeritus Steve Lukasik who authorized the development of the Internet in the 1970s and remains a sage mentor to many, points out that the technology was designed so that "no one is in control." He observes "if the US and Europe take reservations or ignore the whole thing, who will lose more, us or the ragtag bunch that have taken over the Internet via the ITU?"

Assuming a worst case scenario, the last time the ITU tried this gambit at the 1988 WCIT, the resulting ITR provisions mandated use of ITU standards for all telecommunication. As everyone quickly discovered, there were lots of "kings, presidents, and voting" but no running code at the ITU-T. The global market and industry along with it, abandoned the ITU. It is one of many reasons why today there isn't a viable ITU-T.

Lukasik, as usual, accurately summarizes the big picture.