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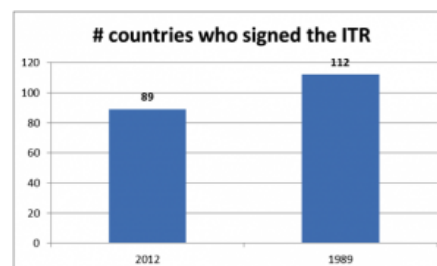
Beyond Dubai: Post WCIT reflections from an Internet Governance viewpoint

Blog Editor



*In the last weeks, we've dedicated attention to [recent debates](#) regarding the Internet post Dubai. In this post, **Carolina Aguerre** joins the debate and addresses some of the economic and developmental stakes to refine the current post-WCIT scenario beyond simplistic dichotomies. Her argument is based on the fact that the Internet does not evolve independently of its technical, political and economic environment. To do so, the author draws on the position from Latin American countries and some general statistics on Internet usage and adoption across regions.*

The World Conference on International Telecommunications (WCIT) took place during the first fortnight of December 2012 in Dubai. After 24 years since the last meeting in Melbourne which developed the current International Telecommunications Regulations (ITRs), the expectations ran high amongst both the Internet Governance group of organizations and supporters, as well as the ITU organizers. Much has been written on the main outcomes of this conference. In a succinct form, the treaty was [signed by 89 of the 152 delegations](#) present, a number which resulted low by itself and even more so when compared with the 112 initial votes the ITRs had in 1988.



The Internet Governance agenda was finally included at the end of the conference, dividing member States since some, most notably the U.S., had claimed they would not support a treaty that included any issue related with Internet Governance. The inclusion of Internet-related aspects in this treaty lead to a polarization between member States, which many analysts have later on labelled as a “Cold War” scenario between the supporters of “national Internet segments”— which favour realist approaches to Internet politics and governance ([Drezner, 2002](#)) on the one hand, and the multistakeholder governance model on the other. Despite these seemingly unbridgeable conceptual differences, this two-camp version of the debate defines the current scenario in simplistic terms.

Beyond the Internet and politics: economic stakes of the ITRs

Some [analysts have posed](#) that WCIT outcomes are correlated with countries' democratic achievements. According to this view, fuller democracies tended not to support the treaty, while less democratic regimes tended to sign the treaty. Below is the summary of countries' position towards the treaty, and their classification according to [the Democracy Index](#).

| | Signed the treaty | Did not sign the treaty |
|----------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| Fully Democratic Countries | 9% | 91% |
| Flawed Democracies | 51.2% | 48.8% |
| Hybrid Regimes | 81.5% | 18.5% |
| Authoritarian Regimes | 91.4% | 8.6% |

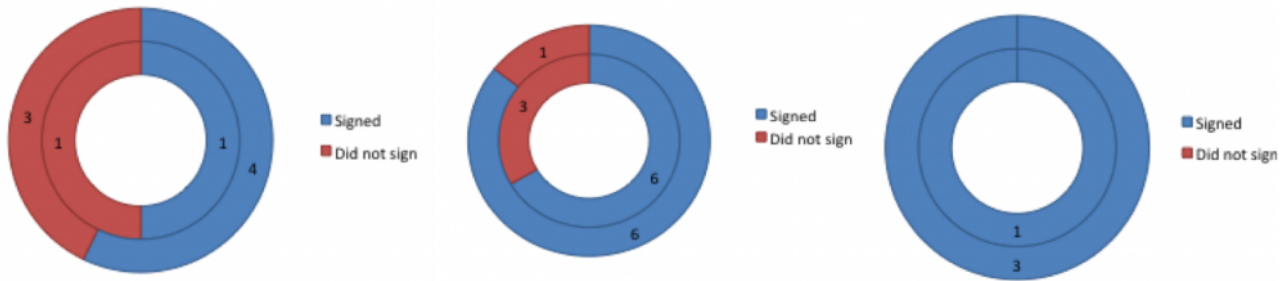
Although at a first glance it seems an eloquent correlation, it grossly generalizes the position and policy making process in some regions, while it overestimates the impact of the inclusion of these Internet provisions in the treaty. The argument I wish to put forward is that most countries in Latin America who signed the treaty did so *in spite* of the Internet and not *because* of the Internet.

Let's now analyse the position of Latin American countries using further democratic rankings. If we consider the [Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index](#), Latin America as a region falls under the category of a “flawed democracy” (that is, second best to a full democracy). However, this seems insufficient to explain the regional position when looking in more detail at the region's votes. Even though the correlation between democracy and Internet control by governments is very eloquent, it is

worth noting that the index produced by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), together with [Yale's Law School Democracy Index](#) only includes political indicators.

[The Democracy Ranking](#), on the other hand, is more comprehensive as a multidimensional tool of democratic performance because it incorporates economic, social, gender and cultural factors.

Chart 1: Number of countries in Latin America that signed the treaty according to the EIU Democracy index (inner circle) and the Democracy Ranking (outer circle)



Full Democracy

Flawed Democracy

Hybrid Regime

Most Latin American countries signed the ITRs, except for Costa Rica, Peru, Colombia and Chile. Only Uruguay and Costa Rica are considered full democracies in the Democracy Index and both adopted divergent positions to the treaty. Most of the others are in the “flawed”/middle section.

When analysing policy-making in Latin America, the absolute majority of governments do not have records of Balkanizing the Internet nor creating “national Internet segments”. Indeed, most countries participate in multistakeholder Internet Governance bodies and forums. The case of Brazil is a unique paradigm where these issues are debated within the multistakeholder body of the Brazilian Internet Steering Committee. But other indicators of multistakeholder performance—such as the participation at ICANN’s Government Advisory Committee (GAC), where the governments of Argentina, Mexico, Uruguay, as well as Colombia and Chile are regular participants of these meetings; or the engagement of governments in regional and global Internet Governance Forums—are some symbols of how these governments have coped with multistakeholder arrangements for Internet-related matters.

Beyond political dichotomies

So why would a region, which despite its tradition of involvement in multistakeholder processes by government actors, has as an overall majority signed the treaty? The “democratic differences” which have been proposed following Democracy indicators is too superficial since it obscures other dimensions involved in the policy-making process, notably the role of the Internet in the region and its access patterns. This has to do with the benefits obtained by updated telecommunications regulations, such as maritime communications, communications for the disabled, access for landlocked countries, disaster communications and lastly, but not less important, international roaming tariffs. The update of the treaty in these matters was much more concrete and economically relevant than any of the Internet provisions.

Why was the Internet not a strong impediment for Latin American governments when considering the new ITRs? Beyond governments’ intentions and goodwill towards the current “multistakeholder” governance model, the Internet as an industry has yet to overcome major developments in this region in order to be seriously considered sufficiently relevant. To most Latin American governments, the ITRs were not about the Internet but about telecommunications.

For example, unequal Internet access still divides regions and countries, as illustrated by the table below.

| Internet individual access | % |
|----------------------------|------|
| Developed countries | 70.2 |
| Developing countries | 24.4 |

Source: [ITU, 2011](#)

Internet access, although growing at an interesting pace in the region, which now comprises 39% of Internet users, is [still far behind those of developed countries](#). “In 31 industrialized economies, an entry-level broadband connection costs on average the equivalent of 1% or less of average monthly GNI per capita, while in 19 countries – most of them least developed – a broadband connection costs on average more than 100% of monthly GNI per capita” ([ITU 2011](#)).

Looking at other Internet related sectors of the industry, the Domain Name System is still underrepresented in the region, with less than twenty firms applying for new gTLDs (with respect to the 1,940 applications). In terms of web influence, as per

February 2013, none of the top ten global websites comes from the region (8 are U.S.A.-based and 3 Chinese) ^[1].

In sum, if access indicators and the economic relevance of the Internet industry are not taken into account, they obscure policy decisions. Notably countries in Latin America, which are not necessarily authoritarian or anti-democratic, looked at the ITRs to reap some of the benefits of the new telecommunications regulations as a whole. The Internet needs to achieve a more defined presence as an industry sector in such a region in order to achieve its own governance and regulatory space.

[1] <http://www.alexacom/topsites> (last access 9 Feb. 2013).

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of LSE Network Economy Blog nor of the London School of Economics.

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About the Author



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