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Winning at WCIT

by .Nxt | 26 Jul 2012 |
A treaty meeting in December is pitching powerful forces against one another. The good news is that with fear comes opportunity.

Click for larger version. Cartoon: Patrick Taylor.

When representatives of the world's governments sit down in Dubai this December to discuss how to update global telecommunication regulations, they will, in one way or another, be deciding the future of the Internet's evolution for the next decade.

That's not something that has been missed by the country that continues to dominate the Internet's development, the United States, nor by the emerging powers of Brazil, India, China and Russia, who will use the WCIT conference as an opportunity to challenge the way the Internet is currently governed.

For months, in submissions and speeches, papers and private meetings, that tension has been playing out. And in the middle lies the UN organization that is running the meeting, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). Adding to an already complex situation, there is a suspicion that the ITU itself has its own agenda: to reassert a traditional authority over telecoms development.

In the 21st century, telecoms means the Internet, but Internet standards bodies have grown up autonomous and independent of government influence. Having been the primary body for telecoms standards for nearly 150 years, and feeling threatened, the ITU has signed and renewed agreements with standards organizations over the past year (see "ITU, MoUs and the web of standards development bodies".)

There is nothing new in this tension: the two camps have warily eyed one another for a decade. In 2010 there was even a rapprochement when the ITU formally acknowledged several Internet bodies for the first time, albeit in a footnote. But both sides failed to overcome their suspicions of one another and the chance to build bridges was lost. The arrival of the WCIT conference and the review of the ITRs for the first time in over 20 years has pushed old tensions into the spotlight.

By all accounts, WCIT is shaping up to be an almighty fight (see "Making the choice: ITU or ICANN?"). On the one side stands the US government and Internet giants, protecting their interests and, they would claim, the Internet itself by trying to keep the ITU's hands off anything to do with the Internet. And on the other, countries tired of the United States' dominance of a critical global resource and who want to see decisions made in an organization where they exert greater influence.

Stepping back from the cliff

It needn't be like this. With a distance of six months from the conference itself, it is not difficult to see how the different players' positions can be accommodated and an unnecessary fight avoided. The WCIT may even emerge as a success, just as the original World Administrative Telegraph and Telephone Conference (WATTC) conference was, despite an equally difficult build-up. The only question is whether the ITU's staff and Secretary-General are sufficiently focused to achieve it.

The United States has outlined its position in stark terms in a number of speeches from government officials as well as private sector figures. It is worth noting that the US took an equally belligerent position at the original WATTC conference in 1988, and was the only country that opposed a compromise package reached after several day-long meetings, leaving it isolated. We can expect to see history repeat itself.

Likewise, as in 1988, the centre ground will be dictated by the powerful African voting block. It is here that ITU Secretary-General Hamadoun Toure, from Mali, can have a significant impact.

On the other side are countries that continue to see the Internet - particularly while dominated by US companies - as a threat. There is a tendency by Western governments to paint these concerns as a despotic desire to control citizens. But that argument is overly simplistic. The Internet has been embraced more fully in Asia that in the US or Europe, as statistics about broadband speed, coverage and adoption continue to demonstrate. The

> *"the centre ground will be dictated by the powerful African voting block"*

real problem lies in cultural norms, and in particular the very American belief that freedom of expression trumps all other considerations.

Cultural subtleties will not be considered in the pressured environment of a global conference, but they could form a useful backdrop to a compromise solution.

The solution

If the ITU wants to deliver a successful WCIT conference, it will ultimately need to do three things.

- **Stop pretending that WCIT is not about the Internet.**

  In the same way that the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in 2005 was all about ICANN; WCIT is about the Internet. Pretending otherwise will only deepen suspicions. At the most recent WCIT meeting, the (Russian) chair was forced into all sorts of verbal contortions to avoid saying that a particular proposal related to the Internet. Such game-playing will make compromise harder.

- **Accept a limited ITR impact**

  The main fight at the 1988 WATTC conference, and in the year of preparatory work leading up to it, was over the attempted expansion of the existing rules to "new services". The fact that this effort was defused with some careful diplomatic wording ultimately helped create the environment that enabled the Internet to take off a number of years later.

  Likewise, current efforts to forcibly expand the ITRs into new spaces such as cybersecurity and data privacy, as well as trying to shoehorn old pricing models onto the Internet, is only ever going to be a step backwards.

  The solution lies in giving each group sufficient leeway to adopt what measures they think best, while leaving the path open for subsequent changes in direction.

- **Acknowledge that multistakeholderism is the only path forward**

  The one thing that can defuse WCIT tensions will be an acknowledgement that the "multistakeholder" model is the appropriate one for future decisions relating to the Internet.
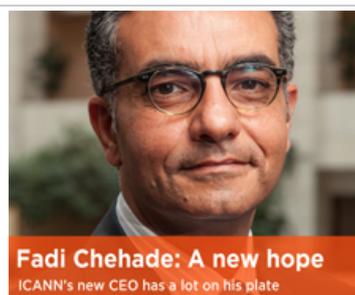
  Already this greater reality has forced the ITU into unhappy compromises. A recent WCIT meeting saw non-government representatives given equal status in discussions. And the ITU Council was formally asked to publish the currently restricted WCIT documents (it refused and published a summary document instead).

  A recognition of multistakeholderism is the key to bringing Western nations to a compromise solution at WCIT. Handled correctly, it could also form the crowning achievement of the conference. In the same way that WATTC liberalized telecoms markets, WCIT is in a position to liberalize policy processes used to arrive at future rules and regulations.

If the ITU manages that, it can then play to its strengths - professionalism, experience, solid policy processes, high government support - and get off the back foot when it comes to the future of telecommunications.

An Internet that is allowed to evolve through competitive development rather than ideological opposition will bring far greater advantages to all sides. But to get there, this December all governments will again need to rediscover the value of *not* seeking control.

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