

## Ethiopia Shows That Congress Is Right to Be Worried About UN Control of the Internet

By Steve DelBianco ----

Today a key committee in the US Congress approved a resolution opposing United Nations "control over the Internet." While some in the Internet community have dismissed the bipartisan effort as mere political grandstanding, recent actions by some UN Member States show that lawmakers have good reason to be worried.

Last month, UN voting member Ethiopia made it a crime — punishable by 15 years in prison — to make calls over the Internet. The Ethiopian government cited national security concerns, but also made it clear that it wants to protect the revenues of the state-owned telecom monopoly. (those guys really hate it when people use free Internet calling services like Skype and Google Talk)

The news out of Ethiopia is just the latest indication that many UN members don't think too highly of the free and open Internet, or of its multi-stakeholder governance model. Aside from the Ethiopian law, we've heard a drumbeat of news about governments seeking to regulate and tax the Internet through the upcoming World Conference on International Telecommunications (WCIT) in Dubai.

So while some Internet insiders snicker at Congress and its nonbinding resolution, I give props to those lawmakers for having the courage and savvy to focus on this issue.

Over and over again in recent months, United Nations supporters — including ITU Secretary General Hamadoun Toure — have publicly scoffed at the notion that the WCIT and the renegotiation of the International Telecommunications Regulations (ITR) treaty will lead to UN control of the Internet.

But the words and actions of ITU member states, not to mention the text of the proposals they are offering in advance of WCIT, reveal that governments and multi-governmental bodies openly covet a bigger role in Internet governance.

One of the key areas for debate at WCIT will be how developing country telecom monopolies can regain the revenue they lose when their citizens use free internet calling services. With the news out of Ethiopia, we've seen how at least one ITU member proposes to solve that problem.

It's frightening to consider applying wire-line telecom regulations and tariffs to international Internet traffic. Those regulations have the potential to dramatically impact traffic flows, censor content, and raise access costs for precisely the same populations that stand to benefit most from a free and open Internet.

In fact, states like Ethiopia should embrace the broad economic upside of letting their businesses and citizens take advantage of convenient and inexpensive Internet communications. That could mean less revenue for a state-owned telecom monopoly, but to maximize GDP you want to encourage Gross Domestic Product &mdash; not Government-Directed Profits. Now, these tariffs and regulations become even more insidious when you consider the byzantine ITU and UN policymaking process, as I described here.

The name of the game in big multi-governmental bodies is coalition building, or what we used to call &ldquo;horse trading&rdquo;. In the one nation/one vote world, the only way for powerful countries like China to get anything done is to buy allies by offering to support issues like economic aid and &mdash; you guessed it &mdash; telecom tariffs.

So picture a world where some portion of Internet oversight resides with the UN, ITU, or some new multinational body. Now imagine how easy it will be for China to scratch Ethiopia&rsquo;s back on something like telecom tariffs, in exchange for a vote favoring Internet censorship. Not only is this possible, it&rsquo;s precisely what countries like China and Russia want to see happen.

Before we embrace the rule of &lsquo;one nation/one vote&rsquo; to govern the Internet, let&rsquo;s understand how many of those governments will vote once the UN makes the rules. And they&rsquo;re not being all that secretive about it &mdash; Vladimir Putin wants to vest the UN with &ldquo;International control of the Internet.&rdquo;

In the International environment, the United States is an easy target and nonbinding Congressional resolutions are causally dismissed. But wherever in the world you live, it&rsquo;s worth hearing Washington&rsquo;s alarm and knowing that the threat is real.