

History of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU)



Transnational techno-diplomacy from the
telegraph to the Internet

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Table of Contents

Gabriele Balbi and Andreas Fickers

Introduction: The ITU as Actor, Arena, and Antenna of Techno-Diplomacy — 1

Part I ITU as a Global Actor in the History of Telecommunications

Marsha Siefert

1 The Russian Empire and the International Telegraph Union, 1856 – 1875 — 15

Andrea Giuntini

2 ITU, Submarine Cables and African Colonies, 1850s–1900s — 37

Richard R. John

3 When Techno-Diplomacy Failed: Walter S. Rogers, the Universal Electrical Communications Union, and the Limitations of the International Telegraph Union as a Global Actor in the 1920s — 55

Christiane Berth

4 ITU, the Development Debate, and Technical Cooperation in the Global South, 1950–1992 — 77

Gianluigi Negro

5 The Rising Role of China in the Promotion of Multilateral Internet Governance, 1994–2014 — 107

Dwayne Winseck

6 Is the International Telecommunication Union Still Relevant in “the Internet Age?” Lessons From the 2012 World Conference on International Telecommunications (WCIT) — 135

Part II ITU as an Arena of Techno-Diplomatic Negotiations for Emerging Technologies

Simone Fari

- 7** **Telegraphic Diplomacy From the Origins to the Formative Years of the ITU, 1849–1875 — 169**

Maria Rikitińska

- 8** **The International Radiotelegraph Union Over the Course of World War I, 1912–1927 — 191**

Christian Henrich-Franke and Léonard Laborie

- 9** **Technology Taking Over Diplomacy? The ‘Comité Consultatif International (for) Fernschreiben’ (CCIF) and Its Relationship to the ITU in the Early History of Telephone Standardization, 1923–1947 — 215**

Heidi Tworek

- 10** **A Union of Nations or Administrations? Voting Rights, Representation, and Sovereignty at the International Telecommunication Union in the 1930s — 243**

Anne-Katrin Weber, Roxane Gray, Marie Sandoz, with the collaboration of Adrian Stecher

- 11** **ITU Exhibitions in Switzerland: Displaying the “Big Family of Telecommunications,” 1960s–1970s — 265**

Nina Wormbs and Lisa Ruth Rand

- 12** **Techno-Diplomacy of the Planetary Periphery, 1960s–1970s — 297**

Valérie Schafer

- 13** **The ITU Facing the Emergence of the Internet, 1960s–Early 2000s — 321**

Index — 345

Heidi Tworek*

10 A Union of Nations or Administrations? Voting Rights, Representation, and Sovereignty at the International Telecommunication Union in the 1930s

On December 9, 1932, the president of the Spanish Republic, Niceto Alcalá Zamora, congratulated the assembled delegates at the end of a three-month international conference in Madrid. He was happy with the results. “We have created here a telecommunications union,” he stated, “in a spirit of cordiality, justice, and conciliation.”¹ Delegates signed the Convention, regulations, and protocols of the new International Telecommunication Union. As with any signing ceremony, the genial atmosphere masked spirited debates beforehand.

The Madrid conference was convened for one main purpose: to fuse the International Telegraph Union (created in 1865) with conventions on radiotelegraphy. The International Telegraph Union officially became the International Telecommunication Union on January 1, 1934. The 1932 Convention defined “telecommunication” as “any telegraphic or telephonic communication of signs, signals, writing, facsimiles and sounds of any kind, by wire, wireless or other systems or processes of electric signaling or visual signaling (semaphores).” The idea to fuse the conventions had emerged at the Washington conference on radio in 1927. Delegates adopted a resolution to “examine the possibility of combining the International Radiotelegraph Convention with the International Telegraph Convention.”²

In 1932, 100 countries, 100 companies, and about 450 representatives attended the Madrid conference to do just that. Representatives would review around 1500 proposals on tariffs and technicalities.³ The biggest technological concerns

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1 Procès-verbal de la dixième assemblée plénière des conférences télégraphique et radiotélégraphiques réunies et séance de clôture de la conférence radiotélégraphique, December 9, 1932, *Conférence radiotélégraphique internationale de Madrid (1932). Tome II*, 238. Henceforth known as *Conférence Tome II*. I am very grateful to Natasha Williams for excellent research assistance as well as Andreas Fickers and Simone Fari for comments on this chapter.

2 “Les Conférences télégraphique et radio-télégraphique internationales de Madrid,” 329. On 1927, see Schwoch, “The American Radio Industry and International Communications Conferences, 1919–1927.”

3 “À la veille de la Conférence de Madrid,” 153.

were coded language and telegraph tariffs; the commission working on those issues convened the most sessions. But another issue really set the conference alight: voting rights. Countries like Switzerland believed the issue was “inflammatory” and could even provoke “a separatist element, a germ of disunion.”⁴ Behind the boring bureaucracy, debates about issues like voting rights and language were about more than technicalities. They were about power, representation, and the meaning of sovereignty itself.

The Madrid conference challenges assumptions about international organizations as basic as the idea that every nation has always received one vote. Membership in international organizations was contested, and sovereignty not clear-cut. By focusing on voting rights and other forms of representation at the Madrid conference, this chapter explores how states, colonies, and companies understood communicational sovereignty in the early 1930s. The very creation of the International Telecommunication Union was not nation-state based. In multiple meetings and in a special commission on the subject, delegations debated who exactly was allowed to vote to create the new organization. Would it only be independent nation-states? Or colonies like under the International Telegraph Union? Or just particular colonies? What about communications firms? These questions were obviously about power: imperial nations whose colonies could vote too would obviously wield greater influence within the union. They also created competition between colonial powers about whose colonies mattered most. Countries like the Netherlands, Portugal, and Belgium argued most strongly that colonies be included as a way to increase their clout. These nations might not have been communications heavyweights, but they were still fought for representation.

At Madrid, representation was a multi-faceted question. It was not just about colonies, but also about companies and financial considerations. The final resolution had more to do with politics than international law. No international legal doctrine had come to the same conclusions about sovereignty as the ITU conference. No legal doctrine would allow certain countries like Germany two votes. The questions were less about law than separating notions of sovereignty and jurisdiction to protect imperial interests. Voting rights did not come from political and legal sovereignty as recognized by the League. Instead, they came from recognizing the active participation of a colony like the Dutch East Indies combined with active support from smaller empires like Portugal and Belgium. The com-

⁴ Propositions reçues avant la conférence et publiées sous forme de suppléments, *Documents de la conférence radiotélégraphique internationale de Madrid (1932)*. Tome I, 852–3. Henceforth known as *Conférence Tome I*.

promise final resolution seemed to recognize that communicational sovereignty could be separated from political independence.

States played with sovereignty on the international level for political gain; representation at international organizations was similarly varied. While voting rights might seem technical, they highlight the different approaches to representation, jurisdiction, and sovereignty within the international realm in the interwar period. Independence meant something very different at the ITU versus the League of Nations. The ITU also adds to the scholarship that looks beyond the League to understand international interactions in the interwar period. Multi-national enterprises crossed borders as did civil society and religious organizations like the Salvation Army.⁵ While the debates at the ITU raise questions about sovereignty, they also raise questions about the nature of the ITU. What type of organization was it really? Was it akin to the League that was comprised of nations? Or was it, as the Dutch East Indies would argue, a union of administrations rather than a union of nations?

There is much scholarship on the intellectual history of sovereignty.⁶ Other work has examined sovereignty through liminal territories like the sea, imperial borderlands, or islands.⁷ The interaction between law and empire has shown how international law could justify imperialism and conquest.⁸ This literature has yet to examine how the intersection between law and empire was crucial in creating international organizations beyond the League.⁹ Communications was as much about the technological and regulatory frameworks as content. And those frameworks were as embedded in debates about sovereignty and imperialism as the mandate system.¹⁰ Concrete issues like voting rights show how these debates played out in practice and how multi-faceted sovereignty could be. The problem of votes was legal and political. Assertions of “technical” procedures could hide very political aims. Andreas Fickers has described this dynamic as “techno-political diplomacy” or “the inscription of political and symbolic cap-

5 De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire*; Gorman, *The Emergence of International Society in the 1920s*; Gorman, *International Cooperation in the Early Twentieth Century*.

6 Ben-Dor Benite, Geroulanos and Jerr, *The Scaffolding of Sovereignty*; Fitzmaurice, *Sovereignty, Property and Empire, 1500–2000*; Lorca, “Sovereignty beyond the West”; Shinoda, *Re-Examining Sovereignty*.

7 Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire*; Rüger, “Sovereignty and Empire in the North Sea, 1807–1918.”

8 Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty*; Benton, “AHR Forum: Law and Empire in Global Perspective. Introduction.”

9 On the League and legalism, see Wertheim, “The League That Wasn’t”; Wertheim, “The League of Nations.”

10 Pedersen, “The Meaning of the Mandates System”; Pedersen, *The Guardians*.

ital into debates over technical standards.”¹¹ The same held true for debates over voting, which in turn would determine technical standards.

The voting rights debate was protracted and proved hard to solve. Despair over voting rights spread into other issues. By mid-November, the Belgian delegation started to wonder about the utility of a single Convention at all, given that the attendees could not even agree on a voting system.¹² By the end of the Madrid conference, however, the delegations had muddled through to a solution. But their discussions had raised serious questions about the reality of sovereignty and power in the realm of communications.

10.1 Voting Rights at the Madrid Conference

A timing conflict prevented the Spanish president from opening the conference. Instead, Spanish Prime Minister Manuel Azaña Díaz, later the second and final president of the Spanish Republic, gave the inaugural speech. Azaña Díaz noted that delegates would have to surmount “technical, commercial, and also political difficulties.” But he also tried to inspire delegates to cooperate through some surely dull days ahead, reminding them that “these international collaborations are exactly the sort that give human life its real meaning and raise the moral level of the peoples.” Indeed, “progress and world civilization depend on fraternal collaboration between all peoples.”¹³ The actions of the ITU at conferences in the early 1930s were part of a broader interwar belief among officials and professionals like engineers that international institutions and technical agreements could ease interwar political tensions.¹⁴ But lofty rhetoric hid internal power struggles over representation that were very much about hard power and getting one’s way.

Both the International Telegraph Union and the International Radiotelegraphy Convention had struggled with the issue of voting rights. For the International Telegraph Union, article 16 of the Convention signed at St. Petersburg in 1875 determined that every administration had the right to a vote if they sent separate delegations to an ITU conference. This included colonial administrations even if another government decided other political matters for the colony. Those guide-

¹¹ Fickers, “The Techno-Politics of Colour,” 96.

¹² Nineteenth session, Sous-commission 1 de la commission de la convention (mixte), *Conférence Tome II*, 349.

¹³ Procès-verbal de la séance inauguration, September 3, 1932, *Conférence Tome II*, 6.

¹⁴ For a similar sentiment amongst e.g. engineers, see van Meer, “The Transatlantic Pursuit of a World Engineering Foundation.”

lines had governed ITU voting since 1875 (see Simone Fari's chapter on the debate up to 1875).

By the 1920s, there were far more colonies than there had been in the 1870s, and thus far more votes for certain imperial powers. In the interim, Africa had been almost completely colonized. Colonies were also more integrated into global communications networks. The International Radiotelegraphy Convention signed in Washington, DC in 1927 similarly foresaw a role for colonies. The preamble to the Convention listed almost every colony as a separate party to the Convention, including the Belgian Congo, India, and the Dutch East Indies. The preamble even separated colonies such as Portuguese East Africa and Portuguese West Africa.¹⁵ At Washington, however, the contracting countries could not agree on a voting system. They delegated to the United States (the conference host) to figure out the issue diplomatically after the conference. By the time of Madrid, however, the issue remained unresolved.

Different approaches to voting rights caused tension from the start. Should colonies have votes? Would they ever vote independently from their empire? Or were colonies and protectorates just proxies to provide imperial powers with more votes? These were not idle discussions. Voting rights enabled territories to act as members on commissions and vote as contracting parties to the Convention. As delegates discussed the issue throughout the conference, they were also voting on important and difficult matters, like telegraph tariffs. Any disputed or close votes at the conference could turn on the number of votes accorded to colonies because votes in the plenary assembly had to pass by an absolute majority.¹⁶ Many votes at Madrid would be debated because the voting process remained uncertain until the end. Some questions requiring a vote – and even the plenary assembly itself – had to be postponed until a resolution to voting rights was found.¹⁷

Various countries had submitted proposals and suggestions about voting reform prior to the conference itself. The issue was discussed at the start of the Madrid conference in the second plenary assembly, with the aim of resolving the question as early as possible before discussing the details of merging the radio and telegraph conventions. Italy and the UK believed that the St. Petersburg Convention did not apply in Madrid because St. Petersburg voting rights were only for administrative matters, not rewriting an entire Convention. The United States put forward a proposal that it had submitted prior to the conference. Ironi-

¹⁵ International Radiotelegraphy Convention, 1927, 9–10.

¹⁶ Article 22, Règlement intérieur de la conférence radiotélégraphique internationale de Madrid, 1932, *Conférence Tome II*, LI.

¹⁷ Commission mixte du droit de vote, *Conférence Tome II*, 49–50.

cally, for a country that was not a member of the League of Nations, the American proposal relied upon League definitions of sovereignty. The Americans believed that voting rights should only be conferred on mainly autonomous countries. The U.S. defined autonomy through two criteria: being a member of the League or sending delegations to international conferences. The delegations had to be independent, meaning that they were not under the purview of any other delegation. Perhaps rather conveniently for its ally, Great Britain, the American proposal really only foresaw independent votes for British colonies or dominions like Australia, South Africa, or Canada.¹⁸

Although the U.S. suggested League membership as a criterion for voting, the ITU was not a subordinate organization of the League. Indeed, the ITU predated the League by over 50 years. Although the ITU was not officially an agency under the umbrella of the League, it was intimately tied to the organization. The ITU headquarters were in Berne, not far from Geneva. The two organizations also coordinated their policies. The League had an Information Section, headed by the Frenchman Pierre Comert. That section hosted a Conference of Press Experts in 1927. Among other issues, the conference agreed upon resolutions about different types of press telegrams, such as urgent press telegrams or tariffs. The League in effect attempted to regulate press telegrams without the ITU's presence. The American proposal on ITU membership in turn drew on the League's understanding of sovereignty and membership.

The Madrid conference also intersected with growing interest at the League of Nations in communications and communications infrastructure. The League sought to use new media to communicate directly with a "world public."¹⁹ It established an International Educational Cinematograph Institute in Rome in 1928; it convened a first conference of press experts in 1927. The League's initiatives in cinematography, communications, and conferences in the late 1920s coincided with the zenith of optimism for using international initiatives to preserve peace. The International Broadcasting Union had a similar philosophy and worked closely with the League.²⁰ The Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928 pledged that signatory states would not use war to resolve disputes between them. By the early 1930s, League of Nations officials implicitly believed that communications infrastructure and media could foster peace and truth amongst members. The League of Nations Assembly passed a resolution in September 1931 to con-

¹⁸ Procès-verbal de la deuxième assemblée plénière des conférences télégraphique et radio-télégraphique réunies, September 6, 1932, *Conférence Tome II*, 69. On ideas about self-rule for the dominions and later Commonwealth, see Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain*.

¹⁹ Akami, "The Limits of Peace Propaganda."

²⁰ Lommers, *Europe – On Air*.

sult the press about the “spread of false information which may threaten to disturb the peace or the good understanding between nations.” By September 1932, 16 nations and two international associations of journalists had replied with suggestions for the Third Conference of Press Experts in Madrid in 1933.²¹ Similar discussions also occurred at the International Broadcasting Union. These projects of moral disarmament occurred simultaneously to efforts at the World Disarmament Conferences from 1932 to 1934 to remove physical weapons.

Although the U.S. was not a member of the League, American journalists had participated in the League’s conferences of press experts and the American delegation may have used a criterion from the League to confer legitimacy on their proposal. When the American proposal was put to a vote, 42 delegations voted for it. Most countries found the proposal fine. Only 4 voted against it and objected vehemently: Portugal, Belgium, France, and the Netherlands. Even such a clear vote seemed insufficient to participants. After all, any decisions at the conference relied upon accepting voting processes. Without a legitimate voting procedure, no decisions at Madrid could achieve international acquiescence.

It was clear that one session would not resolve these tensions. The conference created a special commission to discuss the subject and find a unanimous resolution.²² The commission was comprised of the two countries that had created proposals, Italy and the United States, along with Britain, France, and the Dutch East Indies.

The commission discussed the issue at length in meetings from September to November 1932. They considered not just the American proposal, but also others suggested before and during the conference. The Italian proposal had received considerable attention. Italy proposed that considerably more colonies be allowed a “deliberative voice” at the new ITU than the American proposal. On top of British colonies and dominions, Italy added the Dutch East Indies, Morocco, and Tunisia as well as colonies and protectorates of Belgium, Spain, the United States, France, Great Britain, Japan, Italy, and Portugal. Others could qualify if they paid a financial contribution to the ITU Bureau and were represented by a distinct delegation at ITU conferences.²³ Italy’s proposal, it seemed, would find more acceptance among colonial powers just like itself: little communications clout, but colonial votes as a route to a voting bloc.

²¹ Tworek, “Peace Through Truth?”

²² Procès-verbal de la deuxième assemblée plénière des conférences télégraphique et radiotélégraphique réunies, September 6, 1932, *Conférence Tome II*, 39–43.

²³ Propositions reçues avant la conférence et publiées sous forme de suppléments, October 1, 1932, *Conférence Tome I*, 880.

Non-colonial delegations found it absurd that imperial powers accumulate more votes, when colonies would only vote like the metropole. China emphasized that colonies were simply part of contracting governments' vote. Colonies, protectorates, or anything similar, China asserted, were "only the citizens" of empires.²⁴ Some Latin American nations like Argentina agreed and argued that only independent nations should have a vote.²⁵ Greece proposed that only sovereign states could be contracting parties to any convention.²⁶ It seemed legally impossible that colonies could operate with legal autonomy. Colonies might be able to sign, but that was only under guidance from the "real" sovereign power – the metropole.

The home of the League, Switzerland, took that organization as the benchmark to measure a state's independence; this followed the Americans' lead. It had been a mistake, the Swiss delegation argued, to allow colonies to act as contracting parties to conventions, like at St. Petersburg. The conference at Madrid could correct this misinterpretation and exclude colonies from being contracting members to the new convention, because they did not have complete autonomy to decide whether they could join or not.²⁷ Host of the ITU's headquarters since its creation in 1865, Switzerland had constructed its national identity since the mid-nineteenth century around the idea that it was a neutral land perfectly suited to host international organizations.²⁸ It made sense for Switzerland to focus on nation-states both because it possessed no colonies and because the League now seemed the most important model organization.

After several weeks of discussion, however, Switzerland changed its mind to support Italy's idea to allow certain colonies a vote.²⁹ The active participation of a colony – the Dutch East Indies – seemed to show that a delegation's participation was more important than their independent political status. The Dutch East Indies had impressed Switzerland with its contributions and active role in the conference. It had convinced Switzerland that a colony could be a legitimate member of the ITU.

Part of an empire often forgotten, the Dutch East Indies was the most active colonial participant at the Madrid conference. For the Dutch East Indies, participation at the ITU was a particularly important issue, because control over com-

²⁴ Proposal to alter article 41, *Conférence Tome I*, 96.

²⁵ Seventh session, Rapport de la commission mixte du droit de vote, *Conférence Tome II*, 463.

²⁶ Second session, Rapport de la commission mixte du droit de vote, *Conférence Tome II*, 439.

²⁷ Propositions reçues avant la conférence et publiées sous forme de suppléments, *Conférence Tome I*, 828–30.

²⁸ Balbi et al., "Swiss Specialties"; Balbi et al., *Network Neutrality*.

²⁹ Seventh session, Rapport de la commission mixte du droit de vote, *Conférence Tome II*, 463.

munications had become so central to Dutch empire over the past few decades. The Dutch were also deeply concerned about a system dominated by Anglo-American cable companies and had worked to create a different world with radio. The Boer War had sparked many of these fears, particularly about British censorship of content carried over submarine cables.³⁰ In 1904, the Dutch Telegraph Administration had established a joint cable company with the Germans, *Deutsch-Niederländische Telegraphengesellschaft*, to link German and Dutch colonies in the Pacific with the American Pacific cable in 1904. These efforts had often dovetailed with German operations into the 1920s.

Wireless and radio were particularly important to the Dutch, because their colonies were so far-flung and thus expensive to connect with cables. During World War I, the Dutch had technically remained neutral. But in 1917, they allowed the Germans to erect a wireless tower on Java in the Dutch East Indies as part of the German plan to create a world wireless network to bypass Anglo-American cables. Technical difficulties meant that the tower on Java never worked reliably during the war. Although the Germans never completed their world wireless network, the German engineers working in Java remained after the end of the war. In 1919, those engineers would fulfil a contract signed by the German Post Ministry and German wireless company, *Telefunken*, for *Telefunken* to deliver three large wireless stations to Java.³¹ In the 1920s and 1930s, the Dutch remained invested in wireless and radio as the simplest way to connect the Netherlands to the distant Dutch East Indies.³²

At Madrid, the Netherlands were willing to relinquish all other colonial votes, except for the Dutch East Indies, its largest and most important colony. The Netherlands found it fundamentally “unjust” to provide votes only to countries with complete political independence. Many colonies “possess autonomy in the ITU’s domain,” the Dutch argued.³³ This was not an anti-colonial argument or an attempt to increase independence. It was a way to get more votes. The Netherlands left the heavy-lifting on this issue to its most persuasive colony: the Dutch East Indies.

The colony pursued multiple strands of argument for its seat at the table. It actively participated in the conference: it made more proposals about the ITU’s new regulations than any other colony. It was the only colonial member of the special commission tasked with investigating the issue of voting rights. It also argued definitions, starting with the League’s definition of sovereignty. The Lea-

30 Kuitenbrouwer, *War of Words*.

31 Tworek, “How Not to Build a World Wireless Network.”

32 Kuitenbrouwer, “Radio as a Tool of Empire.”

33 Fourth session, Rapport de la commission mixte du droit de vote, *Conférence Tome II*, 449.

gue allowed “any fully self-governing state, dominion or colony” to be a member. The Dutch East Indies declared that, in the realm of communications, it was a self-governing colony. It even questioned whether it made sense to follow the League’s rules at all, because the ITU was a fundamentally different type of body. The ITU was not necessarily a union of nations like the League; it was a union of administrations.³⁴

The Dutch East Indies used arguments about the subtle layers of sovereignty to convince others that it deserved a vote. This meant defeating the Greek analysis. Greece believed that colonial territories could have a “deliberative voice” at conferences if they had signed the convention, but that they should not be accorded a vote.³⁵ The Greeks separated voice and vote. The Dutch East Indies sought to unite them. It claimed that the question of votes was “not a political question nor a question of *plurality of voices*.” It was about whether individual ITU members with a deliberative voice also had the authority to regulate and legislate about telegraphy, telephony, and radio on their own territory. This should be sufficient, the Dutch East Indies believed, for ITU voting rights; it was “not necessary that a country be entirely sovereign in other domains” in order to be recognized as a “contracting party” in telecommunications.³⁶ Sovereignty could be split, in the eyes of the Dutch East Indies: administrative and legislative authority over telecommunications in the international realm could be separated from other elements of political and economic independence.

Portuguese colonies participated less but made a similar argument to the Dutch East Indies. They argued that the financing and administration of telecommunications were highly decentralized. Colonies deserved a vote to represent their particular concerns, because “the interests of metropolitan administrations and colonies are not always the same; sometimes they are in opposition.”³⁷ Portugal believed that the St. Petersburg Convention had provided the precedent for its colonies to retain representation. Portuguese colonies had attended telegraphy conferences since 1894 and Portugal did not want them to lose their colonial votes now. The colonial voting system was particularly advantageous for empires like Portugal with disparate colonies as this provided more votes than contiguous territory. Like the Dutch, Portuguese colonies were often far-flung and could not be connected by cables landing only on Portuguese colonial territory.

³⁴ Third session, Rapport de la commission mixte du droit de vote, *Conférence Tome II*, 446.

³⁵ Propositions reçues avant la conférence et publiées sous forme de suppléments, *Conférence Tome I*, 827–28.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 795.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 832. Portugal did propose the compromise that colonies would only get a vote if they disagreed with their colonial administration. This was not discussed at length.

The Portuguese had become interested in radio too as a way to connect colonies; retaining as many votes as possible seemed critical to influence the development of the new medium.³⁸

Belgium agreed with Portugal that colonies could have different points of view. Like Portugal and the Netherlands, Belgium had long invested in wireless for its colonies. Prior to World War I, the colonial administration in the Congo had erected wireless towers to communicate more effectively across the enormous territory. These towers were so successful that the German consulate in Brussels sent numerous reports on them back to Berlin so that German colonial officials could learn from Belgian technical prowess.³⁹ Wireless in the Congo continued to matter after World War I. In Madrid, Belgium argued that the administration of the Congo was “totally distinct” from the metropole.⁴⁰ It would simply be unfair to force colonies to vote with their metropolises if they had divergent opinions. The Belgians declared that no delegation had advanced “any tangible proof that colonial voices had any pernicious influence on the atmosphere of the congress or conferences.”⁴¹ The Belgians even threatened to leave the ITU if Congo’s vote was removed.⁴²

After these interventions from Portugal, Belgium, and the Netherlands, other colonial powers came to similar conclusions. Japan wanted as many colonial votes as any other imperial power. As the commission’s sessions progressed, Japan demanded a separate vote for Korea.⁴³ France wanted to stick with the Italian proposal that accorded votes to Tunisia and Morocco. French and Japanese arguments drew on analogies within the communications world, specifically with the Universal Postal Union (UPU). France argued that all colonies had voices at the UPU, while Japan noted that Korea had a separate vote at the UPU. France understood that the two organizations looked to each other for rules and regulations: the last Postal Congress had only used a provisional voting structure because it was waiting to see how the Madrid conference resolved the issue.⁴⁴ Fighting for colonial votes was a fight for a louder voice in all debates over international communications.

38 For the history of Portuguese radio after Madrid, see Ribeiro, “Censorship and Scarcity.”

39 See letters in Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde R1001/7199.

40 Procès-verbal de la deuxième assemblée plénière des conférences télégraphique et radiotélégraphique réunies, September 6, 1932, *Conférence Tome II*, 41.

41 Propositions reçues avant la conférence et publiées sous forme de suppléments, *Conférence Tome I*, 841.

42 Sixth session, Rapport de la commission mixte du droit de vote, *Conférence Tome II*, 460.

43 Eleventh session, Rapport de la commission mixte du droit de vote, *Conférence Tome II*, 488.

44 *Ibid.*, 489.

Dominions were always another matter. Both the American and Italian proposals had allowed votes for British dominions, India, and Ireland. At the very start of the debate, Britain had even offered to renounce voting rights for its colonies in the hope that others would do the same.⁴⁵ This was possibly a somewhat cynical gesture, because Britain knew that its dominions like Canada or Australia would receive voting rights and probably vote with Britain. The appearance of multi-faceted support for particular standards or regulations strengthened Britain's position. No wonder it was happy to support the American voting proposal.

The question of colonies versus dominions proved particularly fraught between Britain and France. In one discussion, Britain complained that France had used 5 colonial votes the day before in a vote over telegraph tariffs, while Britain could only use one. (This ignored the dominions which had voted with Britain).⁴⁶ Political debate over voting was stopping the conference from progressing in other technical realms. France, meanwhile, thought that the American proposal was only fair for the British Empire and no one else. Like Switzerland, France had come to see the Dutch East Indies as the paradigmatic participatory colony. France pushed Britain, asking "is a dominion more autonomous, from a technical point of view, than the Dutch East Indies, for example?"⁴⁷ The answer, France implied, was obviously no.

During these arguments over representation, voting rights were put to the vote multiple times. A first vote asked whether the right to vote should be reserved only for independent countries. That failed to pass with 5 votes for and 11 against. Only Germany, Greece, Mexico, Poland, and the USSR had voted for the proposal.⁴⁸ Poland and the Soviet Union later claimed that they had misunderstood and thought India plus dominions were counted as independent.⁴⁹ Germany and the Soviet Union would soon be placated with extra votes to stop their opposition to the compromise proposal that the special commission would suggest.

At the Madrid conference only, each country technically had one vote. There were two exceptions: Germany and the Soviet Union who had "the right to one extra vote."⁵⁰ This was ostensibly, according to the official minutes, to acknowl-

45 Procès-verbal de la deuxième assemblée plénière des conférences télégraphique et radiotélégraphique réunies, September 6, 1932, *Conférence Tome II*, 40.

46 Third session, Rapport de la commission mixte du droit de vote, *Conférence Tome II*, 442.

47 Fifth session, Rapport de la commission mixte du droit de vote, *Conférence Tome II*, 457.

48 Fourth session, Rapport de la commission mixte du droit de vote, *Conférence Tome II*, 452.

49 Fifth session, Commission mixte du droit de vote, *Conférence Tome II*, 454.

50 Article 21 § 2, Appendix, *International Telecommunication Convention*, 35.

edge “a special place for non-colonial powers due to their importance.”⁵¹ Because each colonial power gained one or more extra votes through their colonies, the delegations implicitly acknowledged, Germany and the Soviet Union would have to be compensated to acquiesce to a system that disadvantaged them. The ITU’s voting system would be more political than legal.

The Soviet Union had a famously anti-colonial stance, emerging from the longer history of anti-colonialism within Marxist thought. The Soviet Union initially proposed that no colonies or protectorates should receive votes because this merely bolstered the position of European colonial powers. The delegation pointed out that colonies could only join the ITU with the approval of their colonizer.⁵² While praising the work of colonial delegations, the Soviets remained wary of approving votes for colonies. It held this position even though this meant that the Soviet Union would only receive one vote (despite being comprised constitutionally of multiple republics). The appearance of an anti-colonial stance was more critical for Soviet delegates than accruing more votes.⁵³ At the very end of deliberations, the Soviet Union tried a last-ditch maneuver to ask for a vote for each of its seven republics. It did not work.⁵⁴

Germany was similarly opposed to certain colonies or groups of colonies holding voting rights.⁵⁵ This made sense for a country that had lost all its colonies after World War I. Germany seemed to want to shape the ITU Convention. That would be far harder if colonial votes accorded more weight to imperial powers. Successive Weimar governments and civil servants were heavily invested in international organizations and influencing their procedures to carve out space for national room for maneuver within international conventions. Germany’s strong participation in international conferences after it joined the League of Nations in 1926 was a means to that end. German participation at the 1927 Conference of Press Experts is one example.⁵⁶ Madrid was no exception. While Germany realized it could not stop colonies getting a vote, its protests and eager participation did secure the nation an extra vote.

51 Eleventh session, Rapport de la commission mixte du droit de vote, *Conférence Tome II*, 492.

52 Fourth session, Rapport de la commission mixte du droit de vote, *Conférence Tome II*, 451.

53 On Soviet attitudes to communications, see Zakharova, “Des Techniques Authentiquement Socialistes?.” On the importance of information for the Soviets, see Holquist, “Information Is the Alpha and Omega of Our Work.”

54 Thirteenth session, Commission mixte du droit de vote, *Conférence Tome II*, 504–5.

55 Propositions reçues avant la conférence et publiées sous forme de suppléments, *Conférence Tome I*, 850–51.

56 Tworek, “Journalistic Statesmanship.”

The final resolution of November 10, 1932 was a compromise. This was true for basically all resolutions at purportedly technical conferences. What the 1932 conference laid bare was “the complex interplay of technical expertise, international law, and political interests,” as Andreas Fickers and Pascal Griset have put it for debates over radio frequency in the International Broadcasting Union.⁵⁷

In 1932, no proposal could receive unanimous support. After votes on all the various proposals, the most popular was an odd mixture. It reduced colonial voices compared to previous ITU conferences, but still retained those that seemed most autonomous.⁵⁸ The Dutch East Indies’ enthusiastic participation in the conference had paid off. Article 21 of the Madrid regulations gave votes to groups of colonies from Britain, Belgium, France, the US, Spain, Italy, and Portugal, while the Dutch East Indies, India, the dominions, Morocco, and Tunisia had their own votes. Colonial powers were allowed to vote on behalf of their colonies.⁵⁹ Germany and the Soviet Union each received two votes. Finally, the voting method would only be used for Madrid and not form the basis for future conventions.

The issue of voting rights was never constrained just to that topic. It extended to broader questions, like accession. If colonies could not join the ITU independently, how could they receive independent votes? Britain and France argued that they could not add their colonies to the ITU without the colony’s permission. France claimed it “did not have the right to force one of them to enter the Union.”⁶⁰ While some colonies received voting rights, none had full independence over accession. Article 5 of the final Convention regulated the accession of colonies and protectorates. Contracting governments could choose whether to include their colonies when signing the Convention or later. The governments could also choose whether to include colonies individually or as a group. The colonies (or group of colonies) could then accede separately to the ITU. Colonies and protectorates’ membership was thus a combination of permission from the metropole and a potentially independent choice on how to accede.⁶¹

The Convention also drew from broader understandings of international organizations in the interwar period. The League of Nations Charter devoted multiple articles to discussing membership and procedures for leaving the organization. The ITU’s 1932 Convention worked along the lines of the League of Nations Charter. Article 10 allowed the right to denounce the Convention. The denunciation would come into effect one year after the notification. Like leaving

⁵⁷ Fickers and Griset, *Communicating Europe*, 137.

⁵⁸ Tenth session, Commission mixte du droit de vote, *Conférence Tome II*, 484.

⁵⁹ *Conférence Tome II*, L.

⁶⁰ Fourteenth session, Commission sur le droit de vote, *Conférence Tome II*, 511.

⁶¹ Article 5, *International Communication Convention, Madrid 1932*, 6.

the League, the denunciation only affected the denouncing government. For many looking back in 1945 as they debated the United Nations Charter, the very mention of procedures to leave the organizations had been a mistake. In the eyes of delegates at the San Francisco conference to devise the UN Charter in mid-1945, exit procedures had made the organization like a tennis club, something that could be joined and left with little effort. In fact, the delegates at San Francisco decided not to even draw up procedures for leaving the UN. This would show that the UN was committed to international membership forever.

10.2 Corporations, Language, and Other Forms of Representation

The most rigorous debate on voting rights circled around colonies. But there were two other important aspects of representation at the ITU: economic considerations and companies. At the very start of the Madrid conference, smaller member-states like Czechoslovakia and Denmark argued that they were at a disadvantage because they could not afford to send delegates for months at a time, particularly with the economic crisis unleashed by the Great Depression. This had constrained their resources and made it more difficult to participate fully in international conferences. Czechoslovakia asked that committees be staggered to enable countries to send fewer delegates who could attend the specific sessions relevant to them. Denmark suggested that the conference discuss the important questions at the start; then even governments with constraints could be present for those issues.⁶² Larger states like Britain and Germany dismissed these suggestions. Their resources provided power even in their ability to participate in discussions. As the conference neared its end in November, many delegates were required to return home. Only major powers could afford to remain and determine the final outcome of questions like voting rights or tariffs. These hidden economic considerations tipped the balance in favor of colonial powers.

Representation went beyond countries and colonies. For the United States, companies were equally important. The U.S. had not joined the telegraph convention because corporations, particularly Western Union, operated and owned telegraph lines.⁶³ This meant that the U.S. could not sign the telegraph

⁶² Première assemblée plénière (de la conférence télégraphique), September 5, 1932, *Documents de la conférence télégraphique internationale de Madrid (1932)*. Tome II, 28–29.

⁶³ John, *Network Nation*.

convention because the convention assumed state-held powers over telegraphy that the American government simply did not possess. The American corporatist approach to communications meant that the American delegation demanded representation for firms at the new ITU.

At the same time as a special commission discussed voting rights for colonies, another sub-commission on the Convention debated the role of private communications companies. These discussions built on dynamics as old as the ITU itself, as Simone Fari explores in his chapter. Submarine cable companies had long attended ITU conferences as observers and had shaped outcomes by their presence.⁶⁴ Here, the sub-commission debated whether corporations should be allowed a deliberative or consultative voice in plenary assemblies and commissions. In other words, were companies allowed to shape outcomes by participating in discussions or simply allowed to be consulted? Canada wanted companies to have a consultative voice, while Britain wanted to ensure that European corporations would be represented as well to counterbalance the American companies. Meanwhile, the USSR worried that companies would get votes. The United States went further. It argued that companies needed to be as fully included as nation-states, because in certain countries (principally the U.S.), governments did not run telecommunications systems. The United States even proposed that private companies should be allowed full participation if they represented a country whose government did not operate the communications networks governed by ITU rules. i. e. if telegraph operated privately, a company could represent the United States rather than the U.S. government.⁶⁵

The final rules compromised to include multiple categories of representation. Article 1 of the rules of procedure for the convention foresaw three groups that could attend. First, “delegates” were people sent by governments. Second, “representatives” were people sent by private corporations and had to be recognized by a contracting government. Third, “observer-experts” were people from radio communications companies or other international organizations.⁶⁶ This rule’s tripartite division effectively allowed contracting governments to elevate certain firms into the second category over the third. Still, at least half of all contracting governments had to approve the participation of firms and organizations.⁶⁷ Not all companies were created equal at the ITU.

⁶⁴ Müller, “Beyond the Means of 99 Percent of the Population,” 99.

⁶⁵ Fourth session, Rapport de la sous-commission 1 de la commission de la convention (mixte), *Conférence Tome II*, 293–5.

⁶⁶ Annex C, article 1, *International Communication Convention, Madrid 1932*, 31.

⁶⁷ Article 2, *ibid.*

The role of corporations had real effects on the shape of the final Convention. The United States and Canada wanted companies involved. The two nations were not party to the telegraphic conventions because those regulations assumed that governments controlled domestic telegraphy. Only if the new Convention applied to governments that did not control all communications networks could Canada and the United States sign.⁶⁸ To sign, they wanted corporations to have representation.

In the end, the final Convention fudged the issue to enable the United States to sign. While there was a single Convention, it included reservations protocols. Article 2 of the Convention noted three sets of regulations to which members had to adhere: telegraph regulations, telephone regulations, radiocommunication regulation. The Convention did not see the three technologies as inextricably interlinked. Governments could choose to accede to one of the sets of regulations. They need not accede to all in order to be a signatory of the Convention. Even expenses for the Bureau were divided between radio versus telegraphy and telephony (article 17). The Americans could thus include additional protocols to exempt them from various regulations. This retained U.S. communications companies' autonomy from telegraph regulation by the ITU. International organizations like the ITU have never existed without business interests.

Voting rights and representation were intertwined with linguistic rights. French had been the ITU's official language. Prior to the conference, the United States proposed that English become an equal language to French because English was "the main language in the world of communication." Britain wanted to include English for "practical reasons."⁶⁹ At the start of the Madrid conference, the United States again requested that English be an official language. Canada suggested that both English and French be made official languages, following the conventions of the League. Others, like the Soviet Union, proposed that English be allowed in discussions, but not classified as an official language.⁷⁰ The Soviet Union's compromise held the day: both English and French were allowed in discussions, but official documents were all produced in French.⁷¹

Meanwhile, Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America and the Caribbean found the question of official languages as important as voting. Cuba countered that Spanish should be an official language too and made its speech at the open-

68 First session, Rapport du comité de la commission de la convention (mixte), *Conférence Tome II*, 261.

69 Proposal for article 42, *Conférence Tome I*, 97–98.

70 Première assemblée plénière de la conférence radiotélégraphique et de la première assemblée des conférences télégraphique et radiotélégraphiques réunies, *Conférence Tome II*, 27–28.

71 Article 21 of the Convention, *International Communication Convention, Madrid 1932*, 13.

ing plenary assembly in Spanish.⁷² Cuba and Argentina argued that Spanish was spoken in 22 countries, necessitating official Spanish translations. Other countries swiftly jumped on board, requesting that German, Portuguese, and Italian be included too. In the end, the Spanish president of the conference intervened to stop the inclusion of his own native tongue. Asking participants to remember the enormous investment of time and money into translation, he tried to turn languages into a pragmatic rather than political questions. It was not about “privileging one language,” he argued, but rather “a practical question.”⁷³ Like voting rights, language was about representation and power. But where colonial powers succeeded, Latin American countries failed. Only after World War II would Spanish become an official language at the United Nations and become a potential language of techno-diplomacy.

Even the very name of the new union tied up with the question of representation. The German delegation cited an analogy with the Universal Postal Union to suggest that the ITU should change its name to the Universal Telegraph Union. The German delegation claimed that the future union could claim to be universal because of its coverage, even if certain countries were not signatories. The German delegation also thought that the word “telegraph” could serve as a general term for all current and future modes of telecommunication. The Belgians wanted to change name to International Telegraph and Telephone Union to emphasize what they saw as the two most important technologies. France suggested the name International Telecommunication Union.⁷⁴ International won the final vote. The word “universal” seemed “vague and general,” while international was more precise.⁷⁵ The union now regulated the exchange of electrical information at a distance. The name was meant to reflect that rather than generalize the term telegraphy. It also reflected a community of nations, rather than administrations. The name contrasted with the Dutch East Indies’ vision of a union of administrations as well as the American vision of a union of countries and companies.

72 Procès-verbal de la sixième assemblée plénière des conférences télégraphique et radiotélégraphiques réunies, December 2, 1932, *Conférence Tome II*, 99–100.

73 *Ibid.*, 102–3.

74 *Conférence Tome I*, 23–30.

75 Thirteenth session, Rapport de la commission mixte du droit de vote, *Conférence Tome II*, 506.

10.3 Conclusion

“Is this Convention perfect?” asked the *Journal Télégraphique* in December 1932. “Obviously not,” the journal concluded. But “it represents incontrovertible progress.”⁷⁶ Perhaps that was true for a few years. But the Convention could not fulfill Azaña’s high hopes for international cooperation. Between Madrid and the Convention’s entrance into force in 1934, the Nazis had taken power in Germany, Japan had left the League of Nations, and the Great Depression had continued to wreak economic havoc. The Nazi government walked out of the disarmament conference (and left the League itself) in late 1933. The U.S. scuppered the World Economic Conference in London in 1933. The 1930s would see increasing competition on the airwaves, signal jamming, and black radio.

The ITU as an organization would survive World War II. Arguments about representation would too. At the first ITU conferences after the war, the American delegation sought to reshape the organization around the principle of freedom of communications. This would be stymied, ironically enough, by a coalition of the very countries whose voting rights the Americans had secured at Madrid: British dominions and Commonwealth countries.⁷⁷

Representation at the ITU mattered. As delegations were well aware, voting procedures had political ramifications. It meant the chance to determine how an organization would develop standards and regulations. Institutions and standards are sticky; they are hard to change once created. Delegates understood this and fought hard to create a world where their colonies could ensure greater representation for particular points of view.

Ironically, winning the voting debate meant arguing that colonies were more independent. Debates at the ITU remind us that sovereignty and jurisdiction are multi-faceted and hard to define. Colonies or dominions could, European imperial powers argued, have communicational sovereignty, even if they were not otherwise politically independent. Procedures and representation can also reveal particular nations’ investment or influence in international conventions. At the ITU, colonial powers and particular colonies argued that colonies had independent jurisdiction over their communications, even if they were otherwise politically subordinate to the metropole. This fiction mattered for voting rights and, at least theoretically, created space for later decolonization and independence.

⁷⁶ “Les Conférences télégraphique et radio-télégraphique internationales de Madrid,” 329.

⁷⁷ Beyersdorf, “Freedom of Communication.”

The American delegation at Madrid knew from the start that combining two conventions would require “much good will and patience” as well as a “spirit of cooperation.”⁷⁸ The spirit of cooperation was a colonial one. Though now forgotten, the resolution over voting rights shaped the very foundations of the ITU.

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⁷⁸ Première assemblée plénière de la conférence radiotélégraphique et de la première assemblée des conférences télégraphique et radiotélégraphiques réunies, September 6, 1932, *Conférence Tome II*, 26.

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