

International Telegraph Union (ITU)

Organization: International Telegraph Union (ITU)

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Description The International Telegraph Union (ITU) is the world's oldest international body. The telegraph, invented in the 1820s and commercialized by the American Samuel Morse in the 1830s, was a revolutionary discovery. It allowed for long-distance communication through the making and breaking of electrical connections (Morse code). International telegraphy was complicated, however, by national rivalries and technical difficulties, prompting the creation of the ITU. It was formed in 1865 at the Paris Telegraph Conference, and illustrates the centrality of communications in the historical evolution of globalization. Napoleon III convened the conference to harmonize the workings of the two existing European telegraph unions, the Austro-German Telegraph Union and the Western European Union. More broadly, the formation of the ITU meant that states no longer had to negotiate separate telegraph agreements with all neighbouring states. The ITU was created as an international body which would oversee developments in telegraph technology, harmonize telegraph rates and tariffs, and establish Morse code as the international standard in telegraphic communication.

While the ITU, informally known as the Berne Bureau, had no formal jurisdiction, it became an international clearing house for telecommunications information. It continued to provide a venue for the global regulation of new technologies, including telephony and radio-telegraphy, into the early twentieth century. The ITU is the forerunner of the modern International Telecommunications Union. The latter body has continued to regulate new technologies with an eye to global harmony, such as its regulatory work regarding satellite communications.

The ITU was a forerunner of modern international organizations. It articulated a sense of global community, a recognition that shared interests and problems required international cooperation. The original twenty member nations of the ITU were European, but the ITU soon welcomed nations from the non-Western world, including India (1869), Egypt (1876), Brazil (1877), Thailand (1883), and Argentina (1889). Its membership continued to grow in the twentieth century, particularly from the 1950s through the 1970s as many of the world's new post-colonial states became members. The ITU has provided a model for transnational cooperation on issues of mutual interest, and its organizational structure was copied by many later international organizations.

Suggested Reading: **International Telecommunications Union website.** www.itu.int/aboutitu (accessed 2 August 2005).

Savage, James G. 1989. *The politics of international telecommunications regulation*. London: Westview Press.

Standage, Tom. 1999. *The Victorian Internet: The remarkable story of the telegraph and the nineteenth century's on-line pioneers*. New York: Berkeley Books.

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