

International Radiotelegraph Conference

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Description The International Radiotelegraph Conference (IRC) met at Washington in 1927 to address the issue of international broadcasting. The growth of radio in its early years was ad hoc and unregulated, especially after commercial usage began by 1920. By the mid-1920s mutual interference on the electromagnetic spectrum threatened to destroy the new and global radio industry. While globalization is often described as the expansion of capitalism and free markets, the radio industry provides a rare example where both private and public interests instead actively sought regulation to ensure their survival. In North America, the radio industry had been turned over to the private sector, while in much of the rest of the world it was controlled by the state. This divide meant it was not feasible to allocate space on the "air-waves" by country. Instead, the IRC divided the electromagnetic spectrum by service (commercial, aeronautical, amateur, military, maritime), a system which continues to be used today.

Each nation deposits its domestic frequency use with the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), creating an international database which can be consulted to prevent cases of cross-border mutual interference when new stations are contemplated. The IRC thus maintained the principle of national autonomy over radio usage within a binding international agreement. Reflective of the geopolitics of the era, the IRC was dominated by Western nations, who in turn applied its terms to much of the rest of the world through their colonial possessions.

The practice of reporting frequencies to the ITU also informally established vested rights for the station or service which first used a frequency. Countries which did not adhere to the regulations of the regime established by the IRC and its predecessors, particularly those concerning non-interference, found negotiating with signatory nations over radio rights more difficult. The allocations agreed upon through the IRC have been challenged in the post-1945 period by developing countries who, after achieving their independence, have sought greater autonomy in using the spectrum within their borders. Nonetheless, while the early radio conventions did not constitute international law per se, they did establish a global model for the use of radio which continues to be influential in the early twenty-first century.

Suggested Reading: **Mander, M.S.** 1984. The public debate about broadcasting in the twenties: An interpretive history. *Journal of Broadcasting* 28: 167-85.