

Gabriele Balbi, Andreas Fickers (ed.), History of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). Transnational techno-diplomacy from the telegraph to the Internet, Berlin, Boston, MA (De Gruyter) 2020, VI–354 p., 23 b/w ill. (Innovation and Diplomacy in Modern Europe, 1), ISBN 978-3-11-066960-2, EUR 77,95.

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Bob Reinalda, Nijmegen

Determining that a history of the ITU as a global actor had been published was a pleasure, but viewing the book after receipt excited even more because it is so rich and multidimensional. It starts with telegraphy in the Russian Empire (1856–1875), rather than as usual in Western Europe, and then moves to submarine cables and African colonies (1850s–1900s), rather than trans-Atlantic submarine cables. The book covers many world regions and a long time period and discusses both successes and failures, with the latter revealing essential problems.

The book has two parts. The first part discusses the ITU, established in 1865 as the first one of a group of international organizations known as 'public international unions', as a global actor in the history of telecommunications: originally telegraphy, but followed by other forms such as radio broadcasting, telephony, satellite communication and the Internet. The ITU has been relevant because of its roles in the fields of standardization and regulation of information and communications technologies. Apart from Russia and the African colonies the first part discusses a failure in the field of cable and radio networks in the 1920s, the development debate and technical cooperation in the Global South from 1950 to 1992, the rising role of China in multilateral Internet governance (1994–2014), with China among the states that support a multilateral rather than multi-stakeholder model for Internet governance, and the important and exciting 2012 World Conference of International Telecommunications (given the need to show the ITU's relevance in the Internet age).

The two editors mention the lack of scientific research on the ITU, which they regard as surprising, given the ITU's key role regarding the regulations of tariffs, technological standardization and homogeneity, the establishment of shared norms and the promotion of projects and studies worldwide. They regard the organization not only as an international actor, but also as an arena for the negotiation of a regulatory regime in a technical field. They argue rightly that with the ITU a new culture of regulation emerged, which combined the importance of political networks, interpersonal communication inside and outside official meetings and a community of practice driven by the belief in the power of techno-scientific expertise. Given the variety of actors (individual



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experts, state institutions, intergovernmental organizations and private transnational actors) and the tensions between normative ideals and political or economic realities, they speak about techno-diplomacy (a term used to analyze negotiations of technological matters even when political circumstances are under strain, such as during the Cold War) and see the ITU also as an antenna that is able to pick up such issues and tensions and bring them to international discussions. The term techno-diplomacy helps to understand processes that are characterized by strategic actions and tactical manoeuvres among all actors involved. These require not only a high degree of technical knowledge but also diplomatic skills by all those engaged in the negotiations.

The chapters in the second part of the book discuss the ITU as an arena of techno-diplomatic negotiations for emerging technologies. The chapters discuss the formative years of the ITU as a telegraph organization (1849–1875), the new issue of radiotelegraphy between 1912 and 1927 (in fact a bitter conflict within the ITU, although its collaboration with national governmental agencies, private companies and individuals and its knowledge transfers eventually helped radio to develop internationally) and telephone standardization (1923–1947). Another chapter discusses the issue of voting rights, representation and sovereignty in the 1930s, which was a debate between states, colonies and companies about communicational sovereignty, which challenges the general assumption in international relations that every state always receives one vote. The outcome had more to do with politics than with international law. The remaining chapters analyze the ITU exhibitions in Switzerland in the 1960s and 1970s (relevant because the ITU had become part of the United Nations system in 1949, which caused Switzerland to readjust its relationship with the ITU), techno-diplomacy of the planetary periphery in the same period (related to the power of satellite communication technology, also an effort to avoid a clash as had happened with radiotelegraphy) and the ITU facing the emergence and competition of the Internet from the 1960s to the early 2000s. When the ITU tried to take a position in the management of Internet domain names, it received strong criticism, but it adapted and sought to restore its techno-diplomatic role through multi-stakeholderism at the 2003 and 2005 World Summits on the Information Society. Eventually the ITU had to deal with its transition from a central techno-diplomatic player to a more peripheral position in Internet governance.

The book edited by Gabriele Balbi and Andreas Fickers is the first volume of a promising new series on Innovation and Diplomacy in Modern Europe. It is a rich, coherent and comprehensive reference book, given the selection of the most relevant and problematic issues in the history of the ITU. It has no concluding chapter, but the order of the chapters in both parts show how the organization has developed as a global actor in the field of telecommunications and as an arena of techno-diplomatic negotiations. The chapters are written with an open mind and explain the methods and sources that have been used, including many archived materials.



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It is relevant to mention here that the ITU Library and Archives Service launched a digitization program in 2007 to catalogue, scan and OCR key ITU documents and publications. The results have been made available on the History of ITU Portal (see <http://handle.itu.int/11.1004/020.2000/s.001>), which allows further research easily. Hopefully other international organizations will develop the same openness and service as the ITU is providing.



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