Where's the outcry on the U.N. push to regulate the Internet?
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A regulated Internet regime would disrupt the global free flow of information and commerce. So where is the business opposition to the United Nations' effort to control the web?

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The bureaucrats at the United Nations, prodded by developing countries and exemplars of democracy like Russia and China, have hit on an enticing new way to control global communication and commerce: They want to regulate the Internet.

It's one of those rare issues in this heated campaign season that is uniting the political left, right, and middle in Washington. Business leaders beyond Silicon Valley would be smart to sit up and take notice, too -- and fast. American opponents are being seriously outpaced by U.N. plans to tax and regulate that are already grinding forward in advance of a December treaty negotiation in Dubai.

"Having the U.N. or any international community regulate the Internet only means you're going to have the lowest common denominator of 193 countries," notes Richard Grenell, who served as spokesman and adviser to four U.S. ambassadors to the U.N. between 2001 and 2009.

That the U.N. too often acts as a repository of the world's lowest common denominator is a familiar complaint from American conservatives. Witness blocked attempts to take action against bad actors like Syria. Now those fears are being realized over the Internet, which has a nasty habit of spreading free speech -- and with it, discontent and revolt.

The conduit is a little known U.N. agency called the International Telecommunication Union, which coordinates cross-border issues such as radio spectrum and satellite orbits. At the December 2012 World Conference on International Telecommunications in Dubai (bureaucratically titled the WCIT-12) the ITU will consider expanding its purview to the Internet. That may be six months away -- but ITU working groups are already laying the groundwork.

Behind the effort are efficient censor machines like China, and autocrats like Russian President Vladimir Putin, who last year declared his desire to establish "international control" of the Internet. These are "not exactly bastions of Internet freedom," as Florida Republican Senator Marco Rubio put it during a hearing last month. "Any place that bans certain terms from search should not be a leader in an international Internet regulatory framework."

The House Communications and Technology subcommittee convenes its own hearing Thursday.

Also pushing for international controls are developing countries hungry not only for political control, but also for new sources of revenue. (Allowing foreign phone companies to collect fees on international traffic is one proposal under discussion.) Grenell, who saw the regulatory

effort spring up from the beginning a decade ago, notes that developing countries at the U.N. "get excited about taking up global issues that will give them more control and influence over commerce, that require businesses to seek their input and approval."

While the ITU may not have the authority to impose controls over the Internet here or inside other resisting nations, those following the process fear the establishment of a separate, regulated Internet regime that would disrupt the global free flow of information and commerce, as well as the development of such cross border technologies as cloud computing.

Grenell predicts a slow but steady gain of U.N. jurisdiction if these efforts aren't blocked. "The ITU can put out reports and mandate goals of what percent of commerce to share," he says. "It can issue a global tax on Internet commerce to allow poorer countries to benefit from those more sophisticated."

Fears over top-down U.N. meddling in a system that has thrived under a bottom-up, centralized, consensus-driven approach cross the political divide. U.N. regulation of the Internet -- which requires just a simple majority vote -- threatens "freedom and prosperity across the globe," Robert M. McDowell, a Republican commissioner on the Federal Communications Commission, recently wrote in the Wall Street Journal. "Even though Internet-based technologies are improving billions of lives everywhere, some governments feel excluded and want more control."

A memo issued by the Republican majority of the House communications subcommittee argues that the U.N. effort threatens the "flexibility and innovation" built into the Internet's decentralized structure, something that has enabled it to "evolve and grow so quickly, both as a technological platform and as a means of expanding the free flow of commerce and ideas."
Meanwhile, FCC Chair Julius Genachowski, a Democrat, told a Senate committee that this proposed new layer of international regulation is "a bad idea, bad for the global economy, bad for freedom and democracy across the world." And senior administration officials sounded the alarm on the White House Office of Science and Technology blog, arguing that the U.N. plan would "put political dealmakers, rather than innovators and experts, in charge of the future of the Internet."

So far, though, the threat hasn't caught widespread public attention. As Grenell notes: "The Internet is such a daily part of our lives that people can't fathom the idea that an international bureaucracy would be able to take it over." The ITU's stated mission is to "connect all the world's people..[to] protect and support everyone's fundamental right to communicate."

Holding the U.N. to those words will require, at the very least, the kind of mobilization and attention generated by last winter's mass outcry over SOPA, the ill-fated Stop Online Piracy Act.

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