Convergence

WHEN THE INTERNATIONAL TELECOMMUNICATION REGULATIONS (ITRs) were agreed in 1988, there was a clear distinction between different services (phone, video, etc.), as well as the means of delivering them. You only ever received voice calls or faxes down the telephone line. Computers mostly had their own networks, and broadcasting was another separate world. Since then, the convergence of technologies, and the appearance of new ones, has changed the landscape dramatically — and the ITRs might need to be changed to reflect this.

There is no single definition of convergence. However, a key innovation is the transformation from circuit-based telecommunication networks to packet-based ones using the Internet protocol (IP): so-called next-generation networks, or NGN. The "vertical" structure of independent networks is evolving into a "horizontal" structure based on IP that can deliver many kinds of content through a single platform. This has profound implications for the market, regulators, and ultimately the expansion of communications to people everywhere.

The global boom in mobile phone and mobile broadband subscriptions is driving development and reform. Consumers around the world have moved far beyond viewing their handheld devices as just phones on which they speak to other people.

Increasingly, the expectation is that any service provider will be able to offer any communication service to anyone, anywhere, using any type of available technology. This has created fundamental challenges for regulators — and, in many jurisdictions, it is considered that convergence means the old distinctions among services are no longer practical.

Proposals concerning convergence are being put forward to the review of the ITRs at the World Conference on International Telecommunications 2012 . Some relate simply to updating the language of the regulations. Other proposals seek to make substantive changes to accommodate convergence, and refer to the need to incorporate "technology neutrality" into the ITRs; that is, dealing even-handedly with different technologies that offer similar services.

Meeting the challenges of convergence and the digital economy requires cooperation among all sectors. Regulators can no longer focus narrowly on classically defined telecommunication services, but need to understand the wider ICT ecosystem. A broader perspective might be in order, moving away from a network–centric approach to one encompassing services, content, and consumers' rights and responsibilities.