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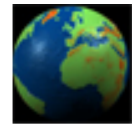
STANDARDS BLOG:

Leading Standards Organizations Asserts Principals of a 'New Global Paradigm'

Andrew Updegrove



The big news in the standards arena yesterday was a [joint announcement](#) by five of the standards setting organizations (SSOs) that have been most essential to the creation of the Internet and the Web: IEEE, World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), Internet Architecture Board (IAB), Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF), and Internet Society (the last three being closely affiliated entities).



Joint announcements by SSOs are rare, and the subject matter of this announcement was more so: each organization was joining in the endorsement of a set of five principles that they assert support a "new paradigm for standards" development.

Most of the principles will likely strike those not familiar with standards development as being rather self-evident (one commentator from the utility industry who spoke with officers of the SSOs wrote, "frankly, I found their logic unassailable"). But to those who have engaged in debates for many years over what should qualify as an 'open standard,' the announcement, and the further information to be found at the [Web site](#) established to support the initiative, the message was a bit cryptic.

My own first reaction was to wonder what had inspired the announcement, and what the five SSOs hoped to specifically achieve? I was able to connect with some of the people who were instrumental in constructing the initiative to learn the answers to those questions, and some of the back story leading to the launch.

Before I go there, however, let me provide an overview of the information made available by the five organizations.

First, there is a brief joint statement of purpose, reproduced in full at the end of this blog entry. It begins by pointing, quite justifiably, to the creation of the Internet and the Web as hugely beneficial and successful products of standards development. It then asserts that this result could only have been achieved as a result of "key characteristics of a modern global standards paradigm." It goes on to read as follows:

We embrace a modern paradigm for standards where the economics of global markets, fueled by technological advancements, drive global deployment of standards regardless of their formal status.

In this paradigm standards support interoperability, foster global competition, are developed through an open participatory process, and are voluntarily adopted globally. These voluntary standards serve as building blocks for products and services targeted at meeting the needs of the market and consumer, thereby driving innovation. Innovation in turn contributes to the creation of new markets and the growth and expansion of existing markets.

'Paradigm,' of course, is an oft-used (and almost as often, misused) term. Properly employed, it should mean that a new construct, methodology or business model incorporates real differences from its predecessors, that these differences have meaningful effects, and that these effects are important. The first question to be answered then becomes how successfully have the five SSOs been able to substantiate their claim?

Let's start with the principles themselves, which are phrased in the [press release](#) as follows:

- cooperation among standards organizations;
- adherence to due process, broad consensus, transparency, balance and openness in standards development;
- commitment to technical merit, interoperability, competition, innovation and benefit to humanity;
- availability of standards to all; and
- voluntary adoption.

At first I was puzzled by this list, because in most respects it incorporates the same principles that virtually every definition of best practices in standards development would include. More to the point, these principles are very similar to those that the traditional standards development infrastructure, comprising national and global SSOs, already endorses. The only exception is the mention of benefiting humanity in the third bullet, which is wholly novel.

However, if one goes to the OpenStand Web site (strangely, the press release does not include a link to that site, nor to the sites of two of the parties to the announcement), there is a [Principles page](#) that provides additional text, and at this level of detail the concepts being endorsed start to become more interesting, and the differences between traditional definitions of open standards and OpenStand's definition become more clear.

The elaboration of the first principle is very brief. 'Cooperation' is summarized as follows:

Respectful cooperation between standards organizations, whereby each respects the autonomy, integrity, processes, and intellectual property rules of the others.

The decision to include, and begin, with this principle is rather interesting because SSOs, like most other entities, can be territorial. At the same time, as I've written many times before, the greatest standards challenges today require an integrated effort across many technology sectors. Since most SSOs (and particularly those formed in the United States) have historically focused on the standards requirements of a single industry, or relating to a single (sometimes very narrow) technical area - or even on a single product feature - effective collaboration is essential if cross-sectoral standards challenges are to be successfully met.

Examples of such ambitious and essential efforts include designing a workable SmartGrid, achieving and maintaining network security, enabling national systems of electronic health records, and much more. The SSOs behind the OpenStand principles are therefore very right to emphasize that a new commitment to collaboration is essential if the standards-related demands of today are to be successfully addressed. They are also correct in holding the Internet and the Web up as examples of the great benefits that can be achieved from such collaboration.

In most respects, the criteria listed under the second Principle (Adherence to Principles) are traditional rather than novel. For the most part, they recapitulate the process values and steps of SSOs that are part of the historical standards development infrastructure, such as requirements for due process, broad consensus, and transparency. Unfortunately, the criteria become more granular, to the point where they would exclude consortia that may take a less regimented, streamlined approach but still quite successfully achieve overall goals of transparency, due process, and so on.

For example, the due process bullet includes as an element, "opportunities exist to appeal decisions." By their nature, appeals of decisions can result in delay, and may also give openings to game playing. But it is also possible to achieve the same result through (for example) working conscientiously towards consensus in real time and including a process review at completion. Similarly, consortia are usually based on 'pay to play' business models, and do not always offer all of the opportunities for public comment that traditional SSOs do. At the same time, not all traditional SSOs would meet all of the criteria listed, and some consortia are in fact much more transparent than traditional SSOs (the IETF and OASIS, for example).

The third Principle (Collective Empowerment) includes perhaps the most interesting criteria, not because they are new, but because they are being emphasized over other criteria that could have been mentioned (the last being the notable exception). Collective Empowerment is described as follows:

Commitment by affirming standards organizations and their participants to collective empowerment by striving for standards that:

- are chosen and defined based on technical merit, as judged by the contributed expertise of each participant;
- provide global interoperability, scalability, stability, and resiliency;
- enable global competition;
- serve as building blocks for further innovation; and
- contribute to the creation of global communities, benefiting humanity.

The last bullet aside, one would assume that each of the other criteria would be assumed in the development of standards (what SSO would want to admit that decisions were not made based on 'technical merit?') That said, some of these attributes can often be neglected (e.g., a commitment to "scalability, stability, and resiliency"). It is also worth noting that while some of these criteria are indeed essential to developing standards for networked systems, they would not be as important outside of information and communications technology (ICT).

The last bullet, of course, is the stand-out attribute of the entire set of principles. And while the ability to benefit humanity is not unique to ICT, the ability to create global communities largely is. The inclusion of this criterion is particularly relevant when it is remembered that most standards development is driven by industry, and that industry tends to be values-neutral at best (some would substitute 'amoral' for values-neutral, and others might use a less tactful term). The five SSOs behind the announcement represent some of the very few

SSOs, both traditional as well as consortia, that have incorporated such a concern into their missions, and to a varying degree, each has acted on that conviction.

In what will prove in some quarters to be the most controversial Principle and in others the least, 'Availability' reads in its entirety as follows:

Standards specifications are made accessible to all for implementation and deployment. Affirming standards organizations have defined procedures to develop specifications that can be implemented under fair terms. Given market diversity, fair terms may vary from royalty-free to fair, reasonable, and non-discriminatory terms (FRAND).

The last sentence will please all traditionalists, in that it restates the view expressed most frequently by commercial interests. At the same time, it will disappoint open source advocates, as well as supporters of openness of all types in Europe and elsewhere. These advocates believe that at least some essential standards (e.g., those used in government procurement and in citizen-facing government portals) should be available without payment. European debates on this topic have raged since at least 2004 in connection with evolving government policies, and those debates continue today.

Free standards advocates are likely to be particularly disappointed that a group of SSOs that use the Internet and the Web as examples of a new global standards paradigm in action would not come out in favor of free standards, since much of the success of these same networks has so often been attributed to the fact that key participants decided not to charge for the infringement of their patents by those implementing key standards. In light of W3C's insistence on discouraging economic encumbrances on its standards to the greatest extent possible, and the marathon effort it took to craft and adopt a Patent Policy true to that goal, it is likely that this OpenStand founder will receive the greatest criticism for agreeing to endorse Principle number 4.

The background for this position is not difficult to guess: the IEEE has over 500 active working groups, most of which are in technical and industrial areas that are accepting of standards that require payment of license fees. It would not have been likely that IEEE (or, for that matter, the other SSOs) would have agreed to a statement limited to royalty-free standards, and I have been able to confirm that this was, in fact, the case.

Some will say that given such a split, it would have been better to say nothing at all than to include the statement made with respect to IPR. Others will say that this is a battle to be fought elsewhere, and that the W3C can be excused for not being intransigent on this point.

The last Principle, 'Voluntary Adoption,' is deceptively brief, reading in full as follows:

Standards are voluntarily adopted and success is determined by the market.

This last Principle, I subsequently learned, starts to hint at one of the main reasons for issuing the Principles. Many governments have traditionally shown a preference for, or indeed restricted themselves entirely, to including standards in procurement decisions that were created through the traditional, global standards infrastructure. For example, until recently European governments have engaged in a sort of Neverland exercise of refusing to alter their procurement rules even as they make wholesale use (like everyone else) of technology that is rife with standards developed by consortia. Indeed, most of the Internet and Web is enabled by standards developed through these organizations.

Europe is currently reevaluating this position, and in the United States, the government is also deciding whether to amend, or reinterpret, Office of Management and Budget Circular

A-119, which includes criteria for the utilization of private sector standards. Moreover, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) has for many years tried to insert itself into control of standards enabling the Internet, and those efforts are continuing. Finally, increased attention is being paid to the open standards criteria laid out under the World Trade Organization's Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade. Under that Act, signatory countries are barred from using 'home grown' standards to bar, or impede, entry of products conforming to globally adopted standards. Proponents of standards developed by traditional standards organizations frequently assert that consortium-developed standards should not be regarded as meeting this threshold.

I've confirmed that one motivation behind the release of the Principles at this time is to publicize the view that 'non-traditional' SSOs, such as the founders, are not only capable of creating world-class standards that can result in vast benefits to humanity, but that the processes that they employ are the equal of, and perhaps superior to, those of their more traditional peer organizations. I've also confirmed that it's no coincidence that the Principles map to (and in some respects go beyond) those that the traditional standards organizations espouse, and which the Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade require.

In this light, the inclusion of IEEE in the mix might seem incongruous, since it is an ANSI-accredited standards developer. But such a categorization would sell IEEE short, as it has a global membership with hundreds of thousands of individual members, hundreds of corporate, academic and government members, and a library of authored standards larger and more influential than those of all but a surprisingly small number of nations. Moreover, adoption of its standards, like those of consortia, is immediate, occurring before those standards are adopted as American National Standards, or by ISO/IEC JTC 1. Indeed, in the case of IEEE's wildly successful wireless standards, many companies jump the gun and begin releasing products built to a new version of a standard before that version has even been adopted within IEEE.

With this background in mind, a statement from the very short, three paragraph Joint Statement already quoted above takes on a clearer meaning (emphasis added):

We embrace a modern paradigm for standards where the economics of global markets, fueled by technological advancements, drive global deployment of standards *regardless of their formal status*.

My understanding is that other motivations for the initiative included an effort to set the five organizations apart from more proprietary consortia, and to set the bar by which other organizations are to be measured. My own proposal to a similar purpose can be found in an article I wrote in the fall 2007, which you can find [here](#) (my related editorial is [here](#)).

A review of the OpenStand site provides other details of note, such as a call for organizations to endorse the Principles, a [list of a few organizations](#) that have already done so (as of yesterday, they were mostly affiliated to some extent with one or more of the five SSOs), a request for [individuals](#) to join in expressing support (and another [list](#)), and 'site badges' that can be downloaded to indicate support, one of which you can see above.

My final impression, after a detailed review, can be summarized as follows:

- The Principles. I think that in the main they are laudable and sound. A few are too granular, requiring specific mechanisms that I think can be replaced with others while achieving similar goals in a more streamlined fashion. This level of specificity will make it unnecessarily and needlessly hard for some consortia to endorse the Principles. And it is unfortunate that a more appropriate statement on IPR was not agreed upon which recognized not only that different sectors find different IPR rules

appropriate, but also that in some areas – and particularly where ‘humanity’ has a stake – only royalty-free standards might be appropriate.

- The messaging could have been better. It’s easier to understand what something is if it states what it isn’t. In this case, it’s necessary to take a deep dive and know some of the back story to understand how what is being proposed is really all that different from what are already commonly thought of as best practices. While I eventually ‘got it,’ it would have been beneficial to the initiative if some of the messaging had been more straightforward.
- The execution could have been better. The timing for the announcement was surprisingly bad (two days before the Labor Day weekend in the U.S., and in the summer doldrums in Europe). Apparently, an early August launch was originally intended, and the date continued to slip. Other slips include a very short white paper featured at the Web site that has obvious errors in it, the absence of a link in the press release to the OpenStand Web site, and the fact that few endorsers were recruited before launch. I was able to find only a [single article](#) online that indicated any journalists had been pre-briefed on the launch so that they could insightfully cover it (I did find about a dozen that were based on the press release), but I have since learned that press briefings did in fact occur. Presumably some of these journalists may be delaying their coverage until after the holiday weekend.

It will be interesting to see how the initiative fares in the weeks ahead. Hopefully this will be the beginning of a dialogue involving a wider audience, and perhaps as a result of that dialogue the Principles will continue to improve and evolve.

Let’s hope that that’s the case, because the definition of ‘open standards’ is indeed important. And the continuing rapid development of world class, universally available standards becomes more essential to almost every aspect of society by the day.

[I wrote again about OpenStand on October 15, 2012, in an entry you can read [here](http://www.consortiuminfo.org/standardsblog/article.php?story=20121015082119976): <http://www.consortiuminfo.org/standardsblog/article.php?story=20121015082119976>]

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