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EDITORIAL:

STANDARD SETTING IN THE GLOBAL VILLAGE

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Imagine a hypothetical organization that sets standards for pipes and pipe fittings. There are some interfaces with other building materials that must be taken into account (e.g., pipes have to match up with faucets and taps, pass through walls, hang from structural supports, and so on). And while the standards relating to materials, tensile strength, and so on could become complex, those standards would not need to acknowledge, or be acknowledged by, other standard setting organizations. After all, a pipe is fundamentally just a tube, and its interoperability aspects start to run out after gauge and thread characteristics are agreed upon.

Now think of what we refer to when we use the single word "Web" (the one with the capital "W"). The name is rather apt from the standards perspective, when one envisions the skein of layers and protocols that enable it, let alone the myriad standards that sit on top of it and make it more useful (think of the myriad XML-based specifications alone). And yet the sources of the standards upon which the Internet and the Web are based are a variety of consortia, and not just one single, coordinated body. While each consortium has a clear view of the boundaries of its own allotted domain, its peers in the standard setting infrastructure would not necessarily agree on where those boundaries lie. Reasonable overlaps in competence not only can and do exist, but the organizations themselves are fundamentally different in their membership, philosophy, style, rules and approach. A brief look at the websites of the W3C, the IETF and OASIS makes that point abundantly clear. These differences can be exploited productively (and otherwise) when companies decide which organization to approach with a proposal for a new initiative.

Most standards, after all, emerge from the unregulated world of consensus-based standard setting. And while everyone agrees on the utility of the results, and thousands of companies and individuals participate in the production of the standards we all use, there is no arbiter that is acknowledged to be entitled to settle boundary disputes. The situation is not unlike lobster fishing off the coast of Maine, where generally recognized, but unwritten laws roughly control where someone can fish, and the rights to exploit a given territory evolve incrementally over time. If any one seeks to push the boundary too suddenly, or to enter a new territory unannounced, the reactions start with severed pot buoys, and rapidly escalate to scuttled boats and even gunfire.

Happily, standard setting never leads to physical violence, although the commercial tactics can become pretty hardball. And to be sure, the ease with which new consortia are launched results in a rich offering of standards, and a Darwinian struggle of competing solutions. When this system works best, the results are more robust, and everyone benefits. When it works poorly, there is inefficiency and contention, and sometimes the best solution does not predominate.

This situation is destined to become more problematic rather than less so, as convergence intensifies and the potential benefit that participants can derive from influencing widely adopted standards rises. It will be interesting to see how the market reacts to this reality. Will the status quo continue pretty much as it exists today? Will members seek to merge organizations, in order to maximize efficiency and coherence? Will government be invited to the table, or perhaps even demand a seat (beyond mere membership by its agencies) at the table on its own volition? Already, ISO is recognizing that global equal opportunity is

becoming inevitably tied to access to the Internet -- and that such access also needs to include technical accommodation of cultural, linguistic and economic differences as well. It cannot be too long before national governments take note of the fact that society is becoming dependent for its very survival on the Internet to the same extent as it is on any regulated utility. Indeed, are we not already there?

We don't know today what a mature standard setting infrastructure might look like. Given the dynamism of the subject matter that technical standard setting addresses, perhaps we never will. But whether we think that it should take a "village" of standard setting organizations working together to make things work, that is what we have today. Like any village, not everyone gets along with everyone else, or has the same opinion of the importance or cooperativeness of their neighbors. But everyone does need to get along.

In this issue, we look at standard setting in the global village. In our lead article, we profile NISO - an accredited standards developer that acts more like a consortium, and despite its roots in library science, has the temerity to tweak the IETF lion's tail by setting name space identifier standards. In our IPR update, we describe efforts by the standards community to support the Federal Trade Commission in its effort to enforce good faith conduct obligations in standard setting. And finally, in this month's selection from the Standards Blog, we recognize that standard setting occurs in a world that must pay attention to standards of conduct and accountability as well as interfaces and protocols.

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