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EDITORIAL

THE AFFECTING, THE AFFECTED AND THE INTERNET: SOLVING THE STAKEHOLDER CONUNDRUM

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*A **conundrum** is any problem where the answer is very complex,
possibly unsolvable without deep investigation.*

- the Wikipedia

Those that study standards development and utilization have adopted a variety of methods to make their investigations more disciplined and their observations more meaningful. One of these techniques is the identification of the various classes of persons and entities that affect, and are affected by, standards. Once such "stakeholders" are described, a variety of useful studies can be undertaken, such as exploring why a given stakeholder class does or does not participate in the process of standards development, and the impacts of this decision on the class in question.

As is often the case with social science, it is a challenge to be totally objective in such studies, since simply framing a study question can suggest that something is "wrong" to begin with. When one seeks to use similar techniques to then construct a standards development process, objectivity becomes virtually impossible. For example, if there is an affected class (consumers, for example), it is easy to take the next step, and say that consumers "should" have a say in standards development – whether they want it or not.

In truth, consumers and some other classes of stakeholders are profoundly affected by what standards are developed, and how they turn out. Involving such disorganized groups is challenging, however. Even when a mode of representation is identified (e.g., by recruiting consumer interest organizations as members), it may be difficult to make that method effective. Such recruitment also has its costs, since the process of pleasing yet more stakeholders with divergent interests can slow the standards development process and make achieving consensus around a (still) useful standard more difficult.

So how can this conundrum be solved?

In the traditional world of accredited standards developers, the principle of guaranteeing access to all stakeholders has been fully embraced for years. In consequence, organizations such as ISO and the ITU (among others) have embedded that precept in their very definitions of "openness." Appropriately, a detailed procedural and accrediting structure has also been developed to protect the right of all affected parties to have their say regarding outcomes that will affect them.

Of course, even a "voluntary consensus process" is a political process, and those that may be affected must not only dedicate time and other resources to participate, but must be aware in the first instance that something of interest to them is about to begin. Ensuring that all affected parties have their say, and moreover that their say is given equal weight with those that have more resources and more to gain or lose as a result of those outcomes, is therefore often difficult to the point of impossibility.

Hence, even in a system that seeks to guarantee equal access to all, practical difficulties can leave the conundrum largely unresolved.

As alluded to earlier, managing a process by consensus – and especially global consensus – can have its costs in time and dilution of effectiveness in the end product. The rise in the information technology (IT) sector of narrowly focused, non-accredited consortia, as well as less open forums and special interest groups, was in part an effort by vendors to escape both the time required by, as well as the technical dilution that could result from, affording other stakeholders the same rights of participation as vendors wished to enjoy themselves.

Over time, many consortia have become almost indistinguishable from their accredited cousins in openness of process and adoption of the standards they create. But few have classes of membership that provide meaningful participation to individuals or make an effort to appeal to representatives of stakeholders such as consumers or the community of the disabled. In fact, almost no non-accredited IT standard setting organizations have charters that direct them to take the concerns of such non-member stakeholders into account. The W3C provides a notable exception, providing cheaper membership to applicant organizations from third world countries and exhibiting a strong commitment to social issues such as accessibility.

In the world of non-accredited standards development, the conundrum is therefore not even recognized as such, much less resolved.

There is now a way, however, that the ability to offer meaningful input can be offered to virtually all classes of stakeholder. That means, of course, is through technology, which has the potential to level most, if not all, of the barriers to entry that have traditionally kept groups such as consumers largely beyond the pale.

With the advent of the Internet, new collaborative models have evolved that provide the promise of greater access to stakeholders than have any of the previous methodologies. And these models work. For example, open source software projects are open to all and operate as meritocracies, providing an engineer in Ukraine with the same ability to influence results as one in Silicon Valley.

The [Wikipedia](#) provides an even more striking example of the leveling potential for Internet-based collaborative activity. Since local language editions continue to be launched, only literacy, Internet access and the ability to type stand in the way of the ability to participate. Significant barriers for billions, it is true, but the numbers of the disconnected and the illiterate will continue to decrease each year, and even now there are able individuals everywhere that could log on and speak for their peers.

At the same time, sophisticated electronic platforms (such as those provided by [Kavi](#)) have been developed specifically to serve standards development. Through the use of such nimble tools, as well as more humble wikis, participation in standards development in some fashion by all types of stakeholders is now within realistic grasp.

Thus, with the ability of every connected stakeholder to participate only a mouse click away, a major element of the stakeholder conundrum has at last been resolved.

How could such participation take place? The good news is that there are many experiments that could be launched. For example, using the open source project as a model, consortia that do not today have a class of membership open to individuals could provide one at nominal or no cost, with a merit-based mechanism that would allow those that demonstrate the ability to contribute most meaningfully being allowed progressively more ability to do so.

And all types of standard setting organizations, from consortia to ISO, could launch moderated discussion forums where consumers could learn what initiatives are under way, how they might be affected by the outcomes, and offer their thoughts and suggestions. Where consumer impact is likely to be significant, advisory councils, also electronically enabled, could be formed on a working group by working group basis.

The greatest challenges would remain spreading the word effectively, attracting those individuals that would be able to provide the most meaningful contribution, and then determining how to incorporate these voices into existing structures. There would, of course, be many purely technical standards projects with little or no real relevance or interest to end-users, so the active involvement of such stakeholders should

not be deemed to be essential to qualify all standards as such. But where relevance does exist, none of these hurdles should be assumed to be insurmountable.

After more than a hundred years of struggling to provide equal access to all, the means is finally within our grasp to once and for all solve the stakeholder conundrum. It's time we took advantage of this new opportunity.

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