



Attorneys at Law

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EDITORIAL

A SEASONAL STANDARDS MESSAGE

Andrew Updegrove

What makes a good standards news story good?

Despite the fact that as many as a million standards are being maintained in the world today, much standards news would not be considered to be “hot” in any conventional sense. Which is not to say that standards are unimportant, since almost everything we buy, use, eat, and otherwise rely upon is based upon them. Still, that is not the same as saying that standards news is exciting news.

We think that’s a shame, because standards are not only important in a practical sense, but they also have many attributes that transcend mere pragmatics. As we have observed in past articles and Blog entries, we believe that the practice of creating standards goes to the very heart of what it is to be human -- and to the good side of being human at that.

After all, in what other process do hundreds of thousands of people from a multitude of nationalities, faiths and cultures meet on a regular basis to *voluntarily* agree to do things the same way, even if it means giving something up without coercion? That, in and of itself, is certainly newsworthy.

The process of setting standards is also a crucible within which wider forces often play out. To give but three examples, this year international trade jockeying between the United States and China played out against a backdrop of wireless standards; some of the largest technology companies in the world bet a significant measure of their future success on a standards-based bid to convince the marketplace to embrace Web services; and not only vendors but governments sought to escape the dominance of Microsoft by embracing an operating system named Linux that had been created by software engineers in their spare time.

Similarly, standards can create vast benefits to society above and beyond their immediate utility by creating the type of “network effects” that occur when more and more independent elements become interoperable. Such standards-based networks as railways and telecommunications have literally transformed society in a matter of generations -- something that the Web has managed, through more advanced technology (and standards) to accomplish in a mere decade.

We consistently try in this journal to bring standards, and the process of creating and promoting them, alive in this type of broader context, not only for those that know little about standards, but also for those professionals that may be too close to their work to truly appreciate the added dimensions that standards entail.

We believe that standards *matter* – powerfully. All at the same time, standards and the fact that people are capable of working together to create them benefits us, informs us about who we are, and perhaps even shows a better way for human society to interact in the increasingly complex and dangerous times in which we live. The fact that we can so pervasively create consensus-based standards may be one of the most hopeful signs that humanity is capable, against all the abundant evidence to the contrary, of more than international strife and advantage taking.

It is one of the principal goals of this journal and the site that hosts it to encourage the realization of this reality, and in some small measure to promote the serious appreciation, study and adoption of standards, both technical and of human decency. We will be well rewarded indeed if that goal is achieved.

In that spirit, we wish all of our readers the peace of the season, now and in the year to come.

Comments? updegrove@consortiuminfo.org

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