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EDITORIAL

A LOOK INTO THE FUTURE: NOT STANDARDS, BUT "COMMONALITIES"

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Abstract: *Those involved in standard setting often think of standards as ends, rather than means. In fact, while standards are useful, they are not the only tools that may achieve ends traditionally solved with standards, or for achieving new challenges for which there are not historical solutions. As the advent of open source helps us understand, it is important to be open to conceiving other new tools that may be appropriate or necessary to meet new challenges. In this article, the author proposes the concept of "commonalities," which he defines as "whatever tool(s) we need; that we need to agree on; in order to do what we agree needs to be done." This is a more useful construct within which such solutions for the challenges of the future might best be determined.*

This article focuses on that most fascinating (and sometimes worrisome) of all places: the future. More specifically, what the future holds for standards and standard setting.

There was a time when standard setting was a pretty relaxed activity. In most non-technology areas it still is. I'm just back from giving the keynote address at a standards conference. The Executive Director of a smokestack industry standards organization was complaining that ANSI accreditation rules were forcing his members to work faster than they thought was necessary.

But in the world of ICT standards, where I spend most of my time, the pace continues to quicken, driven by the need to create standards in a useful time frame. The challenge of keeping up with the pace of technical innovation has been much discussed for at least 20 years. But what about the ways that standards are created? Are the old methods up to the new demands of the 21st century?

In fact, the very concept of a "standard" may be becoming outdated, or at least too limiting. Recent years have seen the evolution of new ways of achieving results that traditionally would have been reached through the development of standards. The most obvious example of such a new technique is the open source project, of which there are thousands now in process.

As a result, these days, I usually speak and think in terms of "commonalities" instead of standards when I want to describe how to get the interoperability job done. What is a "commonality?" A commonality, I would submit, is:

- Whatever tool(s) we need
- That we need to agree on
- In order to do what we agree needs to be done

Let's look at each of these elements individually. For a given job, more than one tool may be needed (perhaps a traditional standard, or set of standards, and an open source reference instantiation). The second element is the most familiar, because consensus is still necessary for all the usual, good reasons. And while the third element also has a familiar sound, it contains a subtle, new twist, because what we agree needs to be done is changing. Most obviously, new realities (such as the marriage of telecom and wide area network computing) need the interplay of scores—if not, indeed, hundreds—of interoperability standards in multiple devices to complete tasks that we now take for granted.

I would also suggest that there is another evolutionary change in the third statement. We need to address the question: whom should the "we" be that decides what needs to be done?

Historically, that "we" has primarily comprised three groups: *government*, which imposes standards through its regulatory power, typically relating to issues such as health and safety; *industry*, in ways that are supplemental to health and safety concerns (e.g., building codes); and *vendors*, in pursuit of commercial opportunities (e.g., interoperability standards).

All of that might have been well and good while we lived in the "one product, one standard suite" world of yesterday. But in the increasingly interconnected world of tomorrow, what will life be like for each of us, if there is no importance set on the experience of the individual user? How many different interfaces will we need to deal with, how much data will we drown in, and what, God forbid, will we do if we lose that data?

In the two articles that follow, we focus on the near-term and the long-term future of commonalities, and how they can best be agreed on and developed. The first highlights seven trends that those engaged in standard setting will need to deal with in the next several years, while the second will urge you to look at standard setting in a new way. That way is from the bottom up, where end-users live, rather than from the top-down, where vendors live, and from where conception, development, and commercial deployment of standards usually come.

I believe the time has come to think from the bottom-up, and in terms of commonalities. The result will be a world in which collaborative efforts will better address the real needs of real people. At the same time, commercial opportunities for vendors and service providers will evolve faster, and with less risk, than through the continued development of the standards of old, using the methods of yesterday.

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