EDITORIAL

STANDARDS AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Andrew Updegrove

Do information and communications technology (ICT) standard setting organizations (SSOs) have social responsibilities? If so, which SSOs? And just as importantly, who is entitled to answer these questions?

Many of those who spend their lives in the very commercial trenches of ICT standard setting might view the first question with surprise, the second with puzzlement, and the third with outright hostility, to the extent that it implies that others besides themselves are entitled to impose rules on the technology standard setting process. And if those same individuals are immersed in highly technical and deeply embedded standards, their reaction would be understandable.

But what about the technology standards that enable the Internet and the Web? On the one hand, much of the standards activity in these areas focuses purely on technical issues. But other initiatives involve more fundamental matters, such as deciding which languages the Internet will support, and whether there will be equal access to domain names among all countries.

Today, the Internet and the Web are demonstrating their promised potential of providing a means of instant communication between all of the world's peoples, conjoined with universal freedom of expression and access to knowledge. The possibility for good to come from these new technologies is enormous. But will the immediate future present a widening digital divide, with First World users enjoying pervasive broadband access and ubiquitous wireless devices, while Third World residents languish in an ICT-deprived backwater? Or will the further evolution and deployment of the Internet and the Web be managed with the aim of narrowing, and even eliminating such a disparity?

It is not surprising that the wider world, and particularly the United Nations, has begun to take an active interest in ensuring that the latter alternative will be realized. As noted in our Feature Article in this issue, a multi-year initiative is in process that will culminate in a report to United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan in 2005. That report will contain recommendations for initiating a degree of global and national control over the "governance" of the Internet.

It is certainly true that the Internet and the Web are emerging from an age of innocence, after a heady and free-form youth. In fact, the Internet has come full circle, having been launched by The Defense Advanced Research Project Agency (DARPA), and supported throughout its early years through the largesse of the United States federal budget. Over time, and especially with the advent of the World Wide Web, commercial entities, consumers, education and government have all enthusiastically climbed on board.

How could the Internet not begin to attract the attention of local, national and international government? Increasingly, the Internet is becoming the "enabler of everything," from telecommunications (Voice over IP), to financial transactions, to emergency response, to wide area networks of every conceivable nature and use. In a very real sense, the Internet and the Web have become as essential to the conduct, and even the existence, of society as are clean water supplies and adequate electricity. Ten years from now, the Internet will likely be categorized in anyone's mind as simply another utility. For better or worse, complete resistance by the technical community to government intervention is doubtless futile.

But if the involvement of government in the "governance" of the Internet and the Web are indeed inevitable, what does "governance" entail, and who will make that call?

At the moment, there is little consensus, but some unease in high-tech quarters over how these questions will be answered. Will United Nations bureaucrats be able to differentiate between what is purely technical and what has the potential for societal impact? And will the organizations that have served so well to date to provide the standards for the Internet and the Web be left to themselves, or will they be regulated – or worse yet – replaced?

Moreover, unlike other utilities, which are most often regulated only at the national level, the Internet and the Web will be subject to pressure to satisfy the disparate opinions and circumstances of all of the world's peoples (not to mention the kind of horse trading that goes on in any political arena). How will consensus be achieved among such a diverse constituency, and how disruptive will the process be to the ongoing technical evolution of the Internet and the Web?

Such prospects inevitably lead one to ask, is international "governance" of the Internet and the Web inevitable? We think it is, although the degree and nature of such governance remains to be determined. The lessons of history are far too clear to assume that resources with such enormous potential to favorably affect the future of humanity will escape an increasing level of attention from government.

If this proves to be the case, some level of frustration and regrettable comprises will lie ahead as the Internet and the Web are increasingly subjugated to the will of government, just as more traditional utilities have become regulated in the past. The Internet and the Web are about to become victims of their own success, in the sense that engineering experts may no longer have the freedom of action that they enjoyed when a fully deployed and popularly utilized Internet was just a dream.

But at the same time, it is important to recognize the differences between the creation of the Internet and the Web, and the building of the infrastructure that underlies traditional utilities. Those that built the first telephone and telegraph lines, the oil fields and the railroads were the founders of joint-stock companies that were unabashedly and solely concerned with making a profit. Indeed, standard setting bodies did not even come into existence until most of these areas of commerce were well established.

In contrast, the Internet and the Web were born in a largely non-commercial setting, and the standards that make each possible have been developed by well-established, open, consensus-driven processes. In the case of the World Wide Web Consortium especially, social responsibility has been a core value since its inception, as demonstrated by its manifest commitment to universal access. Similarly, the Unicode Consortium exists for the sole purpose of ensuring that as many languages and character sets as possible (240 and 50, respectively, at this time) are supported by the Internet.

In short, there is already in existence a means by which socially responsible goals may be pursued and secured. But only if those now involved in standard setting embrace, rather than resist, the inevitable intrusion of government will they be likely to maintain an ongoing seat at the governance table.

If one assumes – and we do – that the frontier days of the Internet and the Web are coming to an end, then it is incumbent on all of those that are active in standard setting in this area to join in the WSIS and similar processes. Only by engaging and fully participating as this process evolves will it be possible to state as plainly as possible what is fair game for political influence, and what is technical and should be decided on technical merit alone. Those that are best equipped to make that distinction must engage - for the good of us all.

Comments? updegrove@consortiuminfo.org

Copyright 2004 Andrew Updegrove