EDITOR'S NOTE

STANDARDS AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

In this issue, we consider what responsibilities information and communications standard setting organizations should have regarding social concerns. Our choice of this theme is inspired by a number of recent developments in this area.

While the accredited standards organizations of the world have long been open to all stakeholders, their traditional purpose has been to create standards that are implemented by commercial entities. Perhaps as a result, consumer and civic groups have historically had little interest in participating in the standard setting process. Consortia have been even more dominated by commercial interests, and have promoted membership only to supply-chain participants such as vendors, commercial customers, universities and government agencies.

The result is that ICT standards have to date largely been created in order to serve the goals of vendors. This may be about to change, however, occasioned by the success and potential of the Internet. And so we are dedicating this issue to a review of some of the efforts that are in play today to bring social responsibility to the top of the Internet standard setting agenda.

In our Editorial, we consider the inevitability of increasing government involvement in the "governance" of the Internet and the Web, and conclude that standard setting organizations must embrace, rather than resist, this trend in order to ensure that technical excellence, as well as social responsiveness, will continue to enable the further evolution of these vital global resources.

In our Feature Article, we report on the status of the ongoing World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), which is charged by the United Nations with developing a plan for ensuring that all of the world's peoples have equal access to the educational, economic and other benefits that Internet access can provide. The results of the WSIS may have a significant impact on the future governance of the Internet and the Web.

Our Trends Article focuses on social responsibility in an even broader context, reporting briefly on the decision of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) to develop an international guideline for social responsibility -- its first venture outside the technical standard setting arena.

Finally, our Standards Blog selection for this month reflects on the fact that social standards must sometimes be interpreted flexibly through the perceptions of the times rather than mechanistically, if they are to continue to be useful.

Underlying each of these articles is the recognition that standards, by their very nature, are consensual agreements to voluntarily conform for the common good. Thus, while technology standards are in the first instance commercial in nature, they are nonetheless based upon a fundamental belief that only through cooperation can competitors and related parties secure a mutual benefit. While admitting non-commercial stakeholders into the existing process will result in new strains and sometimes unwelcome compromises for traditional participants, the good news is that the fundamental concepts of the standard setting process are compatible with these new challenges.

Acknowledging that the standard setting process is first about consensus, and only secondarily about technology, leads to the realization that standard setting organizations are inherently able – if they choose to -- to lead the way in meeting the needs of a global society. The alternative is for them to be ignored by larger societal and political forces, and perhaps to be replaced by new organizations that will be less responsive to historical stakeholders, and less capable to do what needs to be done for the benefit of old and new parties alike.

Best regards,

Andrew Updegrove
Editor and Publisher