FROM THE STANDARDS BLOG

LET THE READER BEWARE
AS ODF NEWS COVERAGE INCREASES

Andrew Updegrove

Tuesday, May 16 2006 @ 06:20 AM EDT

There have been a number of stories published on-line in recent days that warrant both comment and qualification. The good news is that more and more journalists are being attracted to the OpenDocument Format (ODF) story, largely because of the increasing credibility of the threat to Microsoft Office that ODF poses. A measure of the appeal of that story line is the fact that it is beginning to surface in articles appearing in the mainstream press (look for a story in *Fortune* magazine this week, for example).

The bad news is that some of these articles have been poorly researched and/or reported. The result is that more care is now needed when reading the news than was required a short while ago when only a small number of reporters were covering the story, each of whom had taken the time to acquire a good understanding of what was involved, and had the chronology of events and the facts in focus. Free lancer John K. Waters and *ComputerWorld's* Carol Sliwa, in particular, have impressed me with the quality of their coverage.

In this entry, I'll look at some of the significant news that has broken in the past week, and highlight the ways in which it has, and hasn't, been accurately reported on-line.

Let's start with one of the big news stories that emerged yesterday: the first public, pre-release demonstration by IBM of some of the ODF-supporting features of its new "Hannover" release of Lotus Notes. The news that the next release of the Notes client would support ODF is not itself new (IBM had announced last January that its Workplace Managed Client (WMC) software would support ODF), but the demo offered a media opportunity to showcase the fact that progress was proceeding apace.

Before turning to that article, let's see what we might want to know about this story itself. IBM says that there are currently 125 million users of Lotus Notes. If the ODF features of the next release of Notes are available to all users (and not just those that buy into the WMC architecture), then ODF support by Notes would be big news indeed, akin to Microsoft bundling its Explorer Internet browser along with Windows.

The reason is that these users won't have to convert to anything new - OpenOffice, or StarOffice, for example - they simply have to upgrade their copy of Notes in the ordinary course. So - if this is the case, then some very significant percentage of those 125 million people will gain the option of producing documents in an ODF compliant form. That would represent not only a powerful value to those users, but also to non-Notes users that know that if they make a switch to OpenOffice or StarOffice (or Notes), they will have greater freedom of document exchange outside of the Microsoft Office environment. In short, they won't be buying the "first telephone," but will already have *lots* of people to "call" after they make the switch.

Will that be the case? It looks like the answer to that question is "yes," based on the IBM press release issued in connection with the demonstration. As a result, whether or not IBM is successful in selling its WMC concept to the marketplace, it appears that there will be many, many Notes users worldwide that will be capable of saving documents in ODF form in the future. Given that major users (such as

governments) are increasingly concerned with archiving documents that are not formal desktop documents (such as email), this capability is doubly important. So there is indeed a real story here to be reported.

Now let's look at the first article filed by someone who attended the Deutsche Notes Users Group conference in Karlsruhe, Germany, where the demonstration was given. You can find it here.   It looks from the press release that he has the facts of the demonstration down accurately, but his story line is decidedly peculiar, painting IBM's support of ODF as "the completion of a nearly decade-long change of heart at IBM, which in 1996 openly eschewed ODF as something nobody really wanted." At minimum, that statement is a puzzler, since in 1996 a German company called StarDivision owned the software that would eventually provide the template for ODF, and that software was proprietary. In short, I'm not aware that ODF was a gleam in anyone's eye at that point, much less dismissed by IBM. Further, IBM was a long-term member of the OASIS Technical Committee that created the ODF specification.

The article closes with another head shaker: "If Office and Notes truly do make this a real format war next year, then it's likely that Microsoft's reasons for having joined the OASIS body responsible for drafting OpenDocument, could be called into question." My only guess on that one is that he is referring to the fact that Microsoft joined the INCITS subcommittee dealing with the submission of ODF to ISO. But who really knows?

Another major item that drew a lot attention in ODF circles yesterday was the fact that Gartner released a report stating that it is now "highly unlikely" that ISO will approve the Microsoft Open XML specification now being processed in Ecma. In support of that conclusion, it states: "ISO will not approve multiple XML document formats (0.7 probability)." The parenthetical indicates that the authors assign a 70% probability of accuracy to their conclusion. The entire document comprises only a few paragraphs of conclusions and recommendations, with no back-up for its conclusions.

While supporters of ODF will be delighted if Gartner proves to be correct with its ISO prediction, I am aware of no reason at this time to conclude so firmly that "ISO will not approve multiple XML document formats."   If you want a detailed analysis instead of a few paragraphs of conclusions, give Steve Walli's carefully considered blog entry on the Gartner assessment a read.

How about this article at TechWorld, from May 11? It includes the following introductory statement:

> Massachusetts, the US state administration leading the charge for open-source document formats, has approved a third-party plug-in that could keep Microsoft Office on its desktops.

Sorry. All Massachusetts has done so far is to issue a Request for Information (not even a Request For Proposal yet). It still has to evaluate what comes back and decide which plugin(s), if any, will meet its needs. *[ComputerWorld later got in touch with me to say that TechWorld came up with that line all on its own, and that they would ask TechWorld to remove it (TechWorld later did). Eric Lai's original article in ComputerWorld can be found here.]*

And then there's this headline, from an article in Information Week: Trade Group Blasts Massachusetts Call for Office Plug-In. The problem with that title is that it just doesn't square well with these outtakes from the Initiative for Software Choice (ISC) press release upon which it is based:

> The RFP *[sic]* reflects a wise use of market dynamics....Importantly, the RFP, as well as a plug-in's purported existence, will allow Massachusetts to meet its stated goals in a cost-effective, market-friendly way….We applaud these and subsequent market-based developments.

Hmmm. not very blasty, from my perspective, although in truth the press release does roast Massachusetts for its original ODF decision. But that would require a different title, wouldn't it?

My final example, and in some ways the most troubling, is an article that appeared recently at FCW.com, called Mass. relaxes open-format mandate, written by Aliya Sternstein. That article includes the following statements:

Massachusetts is apparently loosening a mandate that all agencies replace Microsoft Office software with products that support open formats just as a major international standards body is endorsing the first open format for archiving government records.... Massachusetts, the state government that had been leading the shift from proprietary to open formats, relaxed its mandate that all agencies replace Microsoft Office by 2007....[State CIO Louis Gutierrez's] statement is a reversal of the state's earlier stance, several software industry officials said.

Problem is, Massachusetts hasn't "loosened the mandate" at all – it's simply looking into the availability of interim tools that could ease its transition to an ODF-only environment more . This article could be considered simply a failure to understand the recent RFI issued by Massachusetts to find plugins that might ease the timely transition to ODF-compliant software, but for one fact: the author actually interviewed Louis Gutierrez, the Massachusetts CIO, who would have made the distinction perfectly clear. Moreover, the author is also guilty of the faux-objectivity that I decried a few days ago in this blog entry. In that piece, I wrote:

[S]adly, under today's journalistic styles, press releases not only generate stories, but also the obligation to quote from them in order to be "even handed," no matter how outrageous the statements quoted may be. The result is that false statements are broadcast around the globe without being contradicted in the story itself. Some inevitably take root, especially when promoted by large marketing budgets.

It's ironic and unfortunate that what is supposed to be even-handed journalism serves so well to help to spread the Big Lies, and to help them flourish.

There is a particularly egregious example of this practice in the FCW.com story (as well as a number of conclusions that appear off-base). It goes like this:

"We prefer the marketplace to choose the open-source formats," said Michael Wendy, a spokesman for the Initiative for Software Choice, a coalition of software companies. "We don't have anything against open source. Our rub is when you have a government mandate saying, 'Thou shalt only use open source to meet government procurement needs.' If these products are truly better, they're going to win out."

Last week, Gutierrez said his state's mandate never excluded proprietary software and was never meant to appear anti-Microsoft.

The fact is that the Massachusetts policy does not now, and never has, mandated the use of only open source software. So why give credence to this assertion at all? Instead, the two positions are presented in a, "she said, he said, you decide" format, leaving the reader unsure what the facts of the matter are, and therefore as likely as not to believe the former false statement as the latter accurate one.

As you can see, the increase in coverage of ODF is not without issues. The moral of this story, as with any other story in the news, is to Let the Reader Beware. Consider the sources of what you read, test their conclusions against facts you already know, and give greater credence to those authors who have followed the story for a long time, and that have demonstrated both a willingness to get to the bottom of things as well as objectivity in their reporting.

In short, if you have been following the ODF saga closely and read something that just sounds wrong, it probably is, unless you've come to trust the source.

For further blog entries on ODF, click here

Bookmark the Standards Blog at http://www.consortiuminfo.org/standardsblog/index.php
or set up an RSS feed at: http://www.consortiuminfo.org/rss/

Comments? updegrove@consortiuminfo.org
Copyright 2006 Andrew Updegrove