EDITORIAL

WHY DOES STANDARD SETTING WORK?

Andrew Updegrove

As this editorial is being written, Americans are hurtling towards an election that contrasts two dramatically different views of the role that the United States should be entitled to play in the modern world.

On the one hand, Neo Conservatives in the Bush administration believe that power is reality, and that it is the prerogative of those with power to reshape the world to match their vision of what the world should be.

Senator Kerry, on the other hand, claims that a better world would be one in which the United States leads, but does so by building consensus among nations.

Leaving aside the important issues of which approach is "right" in a philosophical, moral or legal sense, one might ask which approach is more likely to produce durable and desirable results? With the rise of global terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the answer to this question is more vital today than ever.

But where does one turn to answer such a question? Traditionally, the history of governments and nations has most often been consulted for guidance in such matters, and certainly it would be foolish not to continue to look to the past in this fashion. But the history of formal international relations is not the only reference point available to determine how peoples can interact most productively on a global scale.

We believe that the modern process of consensus based, international standard setting can also shed valuable light on this important question, since it subsumes many of the important attributes of international relations. It is, after all: a global process; it involves fiercely competitive participants; it demands compromises that require the cession of some rights in order to enjoy the beneficial results of common agreement; it achieves the advancement of the public good; it can protect the many from the monopoly of the few; and most important of all: it has been demonstrably successful over a diverse range of issues on a global scale, all without the use of force.

It is not usual to look at standard setting in this light. Most often, this important process is viewed situationally, by analysts and participants that seek to determine if this or that organization is effective, and whether one standard or another is likely to be widely adopted. Those that take a systemic approach typically address the topic from an economic or historical perspective, in each case limiting their focus to the importance of standards to commerce and innovation.

While these perspectives are important and necessary, they fail to appreciate what may be the most interesting aspect of standard setting: that it is based upon a common belief that there is more to gain from voluntary cooperation than from going it alone. Viewed dispassionately, the success of the process is all the more remarkable because those that engage in it are rarely interested in the common good, but rather in achieving as much commercial success for themselves as possible. In other words, it is a process that benefits all as a result of the effective pursuit of self-interest.

Needless to say, there are too few examples of such systems in the world today. Can a careful examination of standard setting help us learn how to reshape other processes in the pursuit of different international objectives?

We think the answer to this question is "yes." We hold that opinion for two reasons.

The first is that history is rife with high-minded movements that have failed. Utopian visions have never, to date, been successful in achieving stability and longevity. Similarly, those international alignments that have been based on the projection of force have persisted only for so long as that force has remained credible. Where these two forces have come into direct contact, as in the United Nations, the results all too often are based upon success in forming coalitions rather than on a shared commitment to further the common good, or on preventing action from being taken at all rather than inspiring it.

For better or worse, it is extremely difficult to modify behavior, whether at the level of the individual or the state. Those social and political movements that have sought to tame innate human instincts have either required the power of the state to enforce them, or have eventually degraded back into an acceptance of pre-movement behavior. Simply put, systems that are based upon how people naturally act are more durable and stable than those that require people to operate in ways that require unfamiliar forms of sacrifice or conscious conformance to non-intuitive norms.

Another way of saying this is that fighting the gravity of natural human behavior is not only exhausting, but on the international level impossible, without the threatened or actual use of economic or military force to compel compliance.

The second reason that we find the standard setting example to be meaningful is that the concept of standards is so intrinsic to the human condition that it has become a part of our beings. From the earliest days of civilization, there has been an acceptance that common norms of understanding (speech), exchange (bartering, based on a common understanding of equivalents) and behavior (taboos) are both necessary and beneficial. These early standards arose before there was a state that could require agreement on such abstractions. With the rise of states, legal, measurement, and monetary systems were accepted domestically, and then internationally, due to the realization that more could be gained than lost through consensus.

When these two observations are combined, modern, global standard setting may be viewed in a new light. Even when all of the game playing and trade barriers are acknowledged and accounted for, we are still left with a rather remarkable reality: the participation of the peoples of virtually all of the nations in the world in a voluntary, consensus-based process that leads to the near-universal use of a myriad of standards.

How much can be learned from studying this phenomenon? We think that the answer may be "a great deal." The evidence is both broad as well as deep, as non-regulatory standards cover every conceivable area of commerce, and those that help create them come from an ever increasing number of nations.

Why is this process so successful? One key may be that all that participate in the creation of a given standard have agreed upon the goal to be achieved.

It is true that some of the motivation for such participation may arise from the knowledge that a failure to join in may work to corporate or national disadvantage. But so long as access to the process is guaranteed and the process is legitimate, the results are likely to be respected, and there is an incentive for most to support the process and not to subvert it. And while the system is far from perfect, it continues to spread and to be reinforced through ever-broader voluntary participation.

Another key to this success is that the standard setting system does not try to modify human behavior, but to harness it. Rather than seek to fight the gravity of natural human behavior, standard setting organizations use that force to make the process more secure. Certainly this is the type of model that other international processes could well emulate. After all, the global standards infrastructure is equivalent to a United Nations with a more limited focus. Indeed, the United Nations itself has chartered standard setting organizations such as UN/CEFACT to help it achieve its goals.

We believe that a careful study of why standard setting works so well might hold valuable lessons for international relations and diplomacy. After all, the urge to band together for security is certainly as innate as the willingness to collaborate on standards. Perhaps such an examination could help nations come together to create the type of beneficial, lasting and internationally supported policies that seem so elusive today.

Comments? <u>updegrove@consortiuminfo.org</u>