STANDARDS BLOG:

Introducing the Hague Declaration

Andrew Updegrove

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When one thinks of international human rights, one thinks of The Hague - home of the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court, and the situs of an increasing number of Tribunals chartered to redress the assaults on human dignity that inexcusably continue to plague this planet. It is therefore appropriate that The

Hague has been chosen to witness yet another announcement in defense of human rights. That pronouncement has been titled The Hague Declaration by the new international group, called the Digital Standards Organization ("Digistan," for short), that crafted it. In this blog entry, I'll talk about what the Declaration is all about, and what it is intended to achieve.

The basic premise is that as more and more of our basic freedoms (speech, assembly, interaction with government, and so on) move from the real to the virtual world, care must be taken to ensure that our ability to exercise these freedoms is not inadvertently eroded or lost. On the opportunity side, the Internet and the Web provide incredible and unique ways to bring the benefits heretofore enjoyed only in developed countries to those struggling for equality of opportunity in emerging countries.

But our freedoms can only be preserved, and theses benefits can only be extended, to the extent that everyone has affordable, unrestricted access to the Internet. Just as we should be free to choose our newspapers, radio stations and political parties, we should be able to choose how we log on to the Internet, and the tools we use to interact there. For the less advantaged, this should be achievable at the lowest possible cost.

In order to achieve this end at the technical level, we need the type of free and open digital standards that can ensure adoption in many different competing products, prevent vendor capture, and enable implementation in free and open source software as well as proprietary products. If we are successful in creating

such standards and achieving their ubiquitous adoption, then we can assure lowest cost solutions and the greatest breadth of choice. And we can also thereby help preserve what I have previously called our "Digital Information and Communication (ICT) Rights." These are issues that I've written on frequently of late, most thoroughly in this issue of Standards Today.

The Declaration expresses these goals this way:

> Considering that all countries are moving, at different rates and from different starting points, towards a society in which full and effective participation in government and society, and access to public services, education and opportunity, are increasingly dependent upon access to electronic communications;
>
> Considering more specifically that:
>
> - Government information, services and resources are increasingly provided virtually rather than physically;
> - Freedom of speech and association are increasingly exercised on line rather than in person;
> - The Internet and the Web provide an unprecedented avenue to equality of education and opportunity for all peoples throughout the world;
>
> Considering that the benefits of the Internet may only be guaranteed, and our hard-won human rights may only be preserved as we make the transition to a digital society, by ensuring affordable, equal access to the Internet, and if the openness of the Internet is also preserved;
>
> Considering the unique role that free and open digital standards can play in ensuring this result by fostering competition and innovation, lowering costs and increasing choice;

Because governments have the authority to protect human rights and the moral obligation to promote equal economic and educational opportunities, the Declaration also recognizes the need for governments to recognize and support free and open standards. As a result, the Declaration concludes as follows:

> We call on all governments to:
>
> 1. Procure only information technology that implements free and open standards;
> 2. Deliver e-government services based exclusively on free and open standards;
> 3. Use only free and open digital standards in their own activities.

I personally believe that The Hague Declaration is an important statement that articulates essential values and goals in a way that is easily understood. My hope,

and that of the other founders of Digistan, is that it will be useful in helping both citizens and legislators understand something that many have already sensed, but might not have been able to find the right words to wrap around their concerns.

It is difficult to advocate for something that is difficult to describe. With this Declaration, I believe that we have found the words we need to recognize and protect something that has been hard won, and is too precious to lose through inadvertence: our basic human rights, as expressed and exercised in the virtual world.

I'd encourage you to read the full Declaration (the text also appears at the end of this blog entry). If you agree with what you read, please consider adding your name to the growing list of signatures (the Declaration was posted publicly just a few hours ago at the Digistan site). *[As of May 29, a total 1963 individuals have signed the Declaration]*

The Hague Declaration will be officially issued on May 21 in The Hague at a workshop to be held by Digistan. That meeting (like Digistan) is open to all, and you can read more about it here.

In my next blog entry, I'll tell you about Digistan itself - and how you can become involved.

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The Hague Declaration

*Adopted and proclaimed
by the founders of the Digital Standards Organization
in The Hague on 21 May 2008.*

Whereas almost 60 years ago the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, established in international law these rights and freedoms:

1. Freedom from discrimination by government or law (Article 2, Article 7).
2. Freedom of movement within the borders of each state (Article 13.1).
3. The right to participate in government (Article 21.1).
4. The right of equal access to public services (Article 21.2).

Whereas these rights and freedoms are today accepted by every democratic government and backed by the constitutions of most states;

Considering that all countries are moving, at different rates and from different starting points, towards a society in which full and effective participation in government and society, and access to public services, education and opportunity, are increasingly dependent upon access to electronic communications;

Considering more specifically that:

- Government information, services and resources are increasingly provided virtually rather than physically;
- Freedom of speech and association are increasingly exercised on line rather than in person;
- The Internet and the Web provide an unprecedented avenue to equality of education and opportunity for all peoples throughout the world;

Considering that the benefits of the Internet may only be guaranteed, and our hard-won human rights may only be preserved as we make the transition to a digital society, by ensuring affordable, equal access to the Internet, and if the openness of the Internet is also preserved;

Considering the unique role that free and open digital standards can play in ensuring this result by fostering competition and innovation, lowering costs and increasing choice;

Considering that governments, through example and procurement, are uniquely able to ensure that all people achieve the benefits that free and open digital standards can provide;

Considering that these benefits are of particular importance to the economically, socially, and geographically disadvantaged peoples of the world;

Considering that there is increasing consensus on the attributes of a free and open digital standard;

We call on all governments to:

1. Procure only information technology that implements free and open standards;
2. Deliver e-government services based exclusively on free and open standards;
3. Use only free and open digital standards in their own activities.

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