

# Standards Today

A Journal of News, Ideas and Analysis

A publication of  
**CONSORTIUM  
INFO.ORG**  
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February–March 2008

Vol. VII, No. 2

## EDITORIAL:

### BRM Blowback

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The last issue of *Standards Today* was titled, [ODF vs. OOXML on the Eve of the BRM](#). That issue focused on the Ballot Resolution Meeting (BRM) about to be held in Geneva, Switzerland as the penultimate act in the Fast Track approval process of DIS 29500, the specification submitted by Ecma and based upon Microsoft's OfficeOpen XML document formats (OOXML).

My editorial in that issue was prophetically titled [The Overwhelming of ISO/IEC JTC1](#), due to the fact that only one week had been allocated to resolving more than 1,100 separate comments (some 900 of them substantive) that had been registered by National Bodies from around the world during the voting period that failed to approve OOXML during the initial balloting period in mid-2007.

Without exception, every fear that I raised in that editorial was realized, and worse. Here is a sampling:

*Prior concern:* “Due to the 6,000 page length of OOXML, not all problems are likely to have been identified during the formal review period. But any deficiencies in OOXML discovered after September 2, according to the JTC1 Directives [as cited by Brown](#), are “out of scope,” and may not be addressed at the BRM. Instead, they must await resolution in the next review cycle (i.e., years in the future).”

*Reality:* Far from worrying about addressing new concerns, there was (as expected) insufficient sufficient time to interactively discuss and, as necessary, revise the vast majority of old comments. One consequence was that addressing even many of the concerns submitted in 2007 were deferred to resolution during a future “maintenance phase” of the specification.

*Prior concern:* “It does not appear at this time as if the resolutions proposed by Ecma will be made available at a public Web site before the BRM, if ever. Consequently, the 500 million users of Office and the legions of independent software vendors whose software must be used in conjunction with Office will have no opportunity to convey their

opinions to the delegates that will nominally represent their interests at the BRM.”

*Reality:* Not only did those who were not involved have the opportunity to access the proposed resolutions for review, but one official delegation complained that it had not been able to consider any proposed resolutions other than those offered in response to their own comments.

*Prior Concern:* “The final vote on OOXML will follow the conclusion of the BRM, whether or not all comment resolutions have been resolved. It appears that if the vote is in favor of adoption, unresolved comments will not be dealt with, if ever, until the next review cycle.”

*Reality:* Only a small percentage of the c. 900 substantive resolutions were interactively discussed and, as necessary, revised. The remainder was disposed of in a process that allowed each delegation to vote upon each resolution that it wished to weigh in on, and to make a blanket choice of “approve,” “disapprove” or “abstain” as to the balance, if desired. The time permitted for voting on all c. 900 proposed resolutions (comprising well over 1,000 pages of text) was less than 24 hours.

Confronted with this impossible task, only six delegations chose to approve and four chose to disapprove. Of the remainder, 18 chose “abstain” – and four chose not to register a position at all. As one delegate stated in the meeting, “If this was all that would be permitted, I would have preferred to have stayed at home and had two weeks to consider how to vote.” Despite the fact that in the ordinary course all resolutions would be discussed, during as many meetings as needed, OOXML proponents announced that the BRM “was an unqualified success.”

*Prior Concern:* “No outsiders will be allowed to attend the BRM, nor will any transcript be prepared and made available.”

*Reality:* Only a skeletal summary of the actions discussed and resolutions adopted was made available. Moreover, those in attendance were requested not to discuss anything that transpired during the BRM with anyone outside the meeting, either during the course of the meeting or afterwards. Not surprisingly, the result is that widely different accounts were posted even by those who had attended the BRM, ranging from the pronouncement by one delegate that the BRM had been “complete, utter, unadulterated bullshit,” and the statement by another that “The process really worked (it was very cool).” (I have provided links and excerpts from the accounts of nine delegates from 7 countries here, and much more original source material here, so that those that are interested can form their own judgment.)

In the absence of a detailed official record or the admission of the press or any other neutral third party, those around the world whose lives will be impacted by the final result can only scratch their heads and wonder what just happened, and who to believe.

While every first hand account applauded the efforts of Convenor Alex Brown and of the delegates at making the best of the situation and achieving the greatest degree of improvement in DIS 29500 possible, the result by anyone's account was the submission for final voting of a specification that had received less attention and collaborative effort to improve its quality than would typically be the case under any other circumstance.

And there was more to come. During the thirty-day voting period that immediately followed, accusations of abuse of process at the National Body level once again abounded. And once again, accounts of what actually happened varied widely. Here is a sample, posted by Geir Isene at his blog on March 30. In it, he gives his version of [what happened](#) when the appropriate committee met in Norway to decide whether or not to change its vote on OOXML:

March 28th: Meeting in the Norwegian Standards Institute (Standard Norge).

Purpose: To decide the final vote for Norway on whether the document format OOXML should become an international standard.

The meeting: 27 people in the room, 4 of which were administrative staff from Standard Norge.

The outcome: Of the 24 members attending, 19 disapproved, 5 approved.

The result: The administrative staff decided that Norway wants to approve OOXML as an ISO standard.

Their justification: "Standard Norge puts emphasis on that if this [OOXML] becomes an ISO/IEC standard, it will be improved to better accommodate the users' needs."

This translates to: "Yes, we know the standard is broken, 79% of our technical committee have told us. But we hope that it someday will be repaired by someone. And we'll be happy to help if someone can give us the resources."

Alright, the Norwegian Standards Institute is moving away from adopting quality standards to promoting a repair shop philosophy.

Needless to say, such accounts do not inspire confidence in those that must live with the decisions made by those with the authority to make them. Nor did the news on March 31 that the Chairman of the same committee had just sent a formal protest to ISO, that included the following language:

Because of this irregularity, a call has been made for an investigation by the Norwegian Ministry of Trade and Industry with a view to changing the vote.

I hereby request that the Norwegian decision be suspended pending the results of this investigation.

The *denouement* of this ongoing drama is that at the end of the thirty day voting period, a sufficient number of National Bodies – including Norway - appear to have changed their votes to secure the final adoption of OOXML (the formal announcement may not be made until just after this issue is delivered).

Without assigning blame to either the proponents or opponents of OOXML, two questions that demand answers must be posed: Is this any way to conduct the process whereby the global standards upon which governments and society rely are developed and adopted? And if not, what will be done about it?

It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that the credibility and integrity of the formal standards development process has suffered serious damage as a result of what has just transpired. While that process may serve perfectly well under less contentious circumstances, reforms are obviously needed to address those exceptional circumstances in which greater protections are needed.

In order for the credibility of the traditional system to be restored, a thorough review of the just completed DIS 29500 Fast Track process should be immediately commissioned. That review should include recommendations for reform that would include, but not be limited to, suggesting revisions to the rules relating to Fast Track and PAS submissions, new National Body and ISO/IEC JTC1 rules relating to transparency and conflicts of interest, and providing for circuit breakers and corrective actions that could be invoked the next time such a process has clearly run off the rails.

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