EDITOR'S NOTE:

What Just Happened?

In our last issue, OOXML (a/k/a Ecma 376, a/k/a DIS 29500) was packing its bags to head for Geneva, there to be pored over behind closed doors by c. 120 standards professionals from around the world. With some 1,100 comments to consider (c. 900 substantive, and the remainder non-controversial editorial clean ups), they knew that their task would not be easy. It wasn't.

As I write these words, the votes are being tallied from the thirty day final voting period on OOXML, which closed at midnight, Geneva time, on Saturday, March 29. More properly stated, what is being tallied are the votes that changed, since re-voting is not required. If votes are changed with a sufficiently positive net effect, OOXML will have been adopted by ISO/IEC JTC1. At this moment in time, someone in Geneva knows whether OOXML has been approved, but the public does not. But on April 2, ISO plans to announce the vote, at which point the rest of the world will learn the result as well.

As of now, I have been able to determine, through public and private sources, that enough votes have changed to approve OOXML – unless enough as yet undisclosed votes have shifted in the other direction (my running tally can be found here; as of this moment in time, 22 out of 87 eligible National Bodies are recorded there, and OOXML has a margin of victory equal to three votes under the more difficult of the two tests used to determine success or failure). Already, however, that margin is eroding, as Norwegian Ministry of Trade has already filed a formal protest with ISO – asking that its own vote be disregarded, pending the results of in internal investigation.

But the vote itself is only one of two bottom line stories. The other is "what does it all mean?" And that's what this issue is all about.

In my **Editorial**, I focus on the collateral damage that the formal standards development and adoption system has suffered during the Fast Track adoption of OOXML – an over 6,000 page specification. That process has been marred by many allegations of improprieties (most frequently "stacking" of committees, but also fun and games with rules, and one confirmed case of financial incentives being provided to business partners to help ensure the desired vote in Sweden), undue pressure applied by vendors, and more.

In the penultimate step, the Ballot Resolution Meeting in Geneva predictably had time to actively debate and, as necessary, revise only a small percentage of all proposed resolutions. Accounts of the meeting varied wildly, as did the claims relating to its success or failure. Since the meeting was held behind closed doors and memorialized by only skeletal minutes, there is no way for the public to know exactly what happened, who to believe, or what it all means. It may come as no surprise, therefore, that my Editorial calls for a thorough review by a neutral committee, and for that committee to recommend appropriate rules to ensure a better result the next time such a contentious situation arises, as it surely will.

In the **Feature Article** for this issue, I focus on the accelerating transition from in-person to on-line exercise of civil rights, and note that to date we have given insufficient attention to ensuring that these precious rights are not compromised as their exercise grows increasingly dependent on information and communications technology (ICT). I suggest a new term to recognize this new reality, and refer to them as "Civil ICT Rights." I also note that in many important respects – as is the case with document format standards – these rights may only be protected by standards – which I logically refer to as "Civil ICT Standards." Using the just-completed OOXML process a business case, I make the case that the development of such Civil ICT Standards requires greater attention and protection, so that our Civil ICT Rights can also be protected and preserved.

My **Standards Blog** selection seems, from this remove, to be almost a nostalgic, Edenic, "Before the Fall" reminiscence: written before the Ballot Resolution Meeting, it describes the daunting task that BRM Convenor Alex Brown would face in Geneva, and how he planned to deal with that challenge.

I also include another sample chapter from **War of the Words**, my ongoing eBook project chronicling the ODF-OOXML contest from its early days. The included chapter tells the story of how the architects of the decision by Massachusetts to adopt ODF, but not OOXML, for its Executive Agencies' exclusive use moved towards that decision.

I close, as usual, with my **Consider This** essay, which departs from the document format theme to reflect upon opportunities seized and, perhaps lost, in another closely contested and enormously strategic race: the global contest to dominate the "smartphone" platform. Will Steve Jobs not only take the early lead this time, but also continue to dominate the Smartphone marketplace? Or will he once again lose his advantage, through asserting too great a degree of proprietary control? In this essay, I give my view. Only time, of course, will tell.

Meanwhile, it's an awesome cool tool.

As always, I hope you enjoy this issue.

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Andrew Updegrove
Editor and Publisher
2005 ANSI President's
Award for Journalism

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