



EDITOR'S NOTE

THE COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP OF GOVERNMENT WITH STANDARDS

Over the past several years, I have found myself returning repeatedly to the role (or, more properly, the many roles) that governments play in standardization. Recent issues with government themes include [Government and SSOs: Optimizing the System](#) (August 2005), [Massachusetts and OpenDocument: the Commonwealth Leads the Way](#) (September 2005), [Standards for a Small Planet](#) (October 2005), [WSIS and the Governance of the Internet](#) (November 2005), and [Standards and Human Rights](#) (September 2006). Stories in other issues along the way have explored related themes.

That's not surprising, because private-sector standard-setting is a quasi-governmental process in its own right. Moreover, there are many interdependencies between the private and public sectors when it comes to standards: governments set standards (in laws and regulations); they adopt private sector standards (by referencing them in laws and regulations); they participate directly in standard setting when they join standards organizations as members; and they influence standards through procurement, to highlight only the more obvious examples.

This public-private partnership has been extremely productive for all concerned, allowing standards to be set by those parties that have a direct interest in their specifics (thus saving government from the burden of creating the standards themselves), while still allowing governments to vet and utilize the results when they wish. But in the United States, which supports a "bottom up" standard setting philosophy, the relationship between government and the private sector is much looser and ad hoc than is the case in many other countries. The result is that the U.S. federal government maintains a more detached, and less informed, relationship to standards than is often the case abroad.

In this issue, I focus on an area in which I believe governments should take renewed interest: the role of information and communications technology (ICT) standards in modern society. With our increased reliance on the Internet and the Web and the digitization of public records, the need for a citizen to have full access to ICT at home and in the workplace has become fundamental. In consequence, I believe, it is incumbent upon governments to reevaluate the roles they play in relation to standard setting in ICT domains.

I begin this exploration in my **Editorial**, focusing on "accessibility standards," broadly construed – highlighting the role of standards domestically in areas such as IT accessibility for those with disabilities, and internationally at the level of domain names and broadband access.

I continue this theme in this month's **Feature Article**, in which I review the various ways that governments interact with standards and standard setting, examine how various roles might best apply in the case of accessibility standards, and finally make recommendations on how governments could best evolve their relationship to ICT standards going forward.

Next up is an **Update** on the long-running prosecution of semiconductor design firm Rambus, Inc. by the Federal Trade Commission. The FTC's decision to sanction Rambus highlights the traditional and ongoing role of government as the ultimate (and perhaps too occasional) guarantor against abuse of the standard setting process.

This month I've decided to include two related entries from the **Standards Blog** rather than one, as each relates to an accelerating trend among governments to mandate the use of "open document formats" to preserve public records. Four U.S. States now either already specify (Massachusetts) that their

employees create and save documents in such standards-based formats, or have current legislation in process that, if adopted, would require such action (Minnesota, Texas and California).

Finally, I turn to a different type of accessibility standard in my **Consider This** piece for this month. That standard assigns a simple three-letter code to each language in existence (and to many that are now extinct). This humble and little-noticed standard, like the Unicode, helps ensure that all peoples of the world will be able to access the Internet. You may be surprised how the standard came into being, and the nature of the organization that has taken responsibility for keeping it current.

I'm certain that this won't be the last issue that I dedicate to the relationship between government and standards, and I look forward to continuing to share my thoughts with you in the future on this important topic. Perhaps you will find the time to share a few of your thoughts with me as well.

As always, I hope you enjoy this issue.

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Editor and Publisher
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