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CONSIDER THIS

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#33 Do Standards Matter?

Yes, that's a rhetorical question. But like a lot of things we "know," it is sometimes interesting to ask ourselves what, exactly, supports what we are sure we know.

I recently asked myself that sort of question when I was notified that I would receive a standards-related award, and that I would be expected to say a few words by way of an acceptance speech. Since I like to present ideas in an "out of the box" fashion, I thought I would try this question out when I stood in front of a room full of people who have spent most or all of their professional careers developing standards.

As hoped, it made an impact, perhaps because I put into words what I suspect many of them had always sensed, but which was too non-traditional for them to articulate. After all, standards are just dry, dusty, boring specifications, are they not?

I've never thought so, perhaps because I don't actually help create them. Instead, I help create the organizations that develop the standards, and perhaps this enables me to focus more on the forest of meanings and effects that standards represent, rather than on the pieces of paper themselves.

So here is what I said:

I'm very pleased to be here this evening to accept the 2005 ANSI President's Award for Journalism. As some of you may know, I am receiving this award in recognition of my work at a website, ConsortiumInfo.org, and in a monthly eJournal, the *Consortium Standards Bulletin*, now in its 33rd issue. Each of these ventures is public and free, and each addresses standards, standard setting (both SDO and consortium-based), and the role of standards in society.

You may wonder why, as a full-time practicing attorney, I have spent over a thousand hours a year for the past three and a half years in such a pursuit. There are two possible answers to that question. Since one reflects poorly on my mental state, I will turn to the second, which is this: Because I believe that Standards Matter.

Since I'm sure that all of you already share that opinion, I would like to offer you three reasons that may not have occurred to you before.

The first reason I will identify with the word "Humanity."

What I am suggesting by this is that the type of standards that you and I work with are simply the latest form of a tool that mankind has been creating since long before the dawn of history. After all, what is a standard but an abstraction that people voluntarily agree upon for a particular purpose. The first standards system may well have been sign language: "this sign means that thing," followed by spoken words, then written words, then weights and measures, and eventually the types of standards that we know and help create today – safety, performance and interoperability standards, and, most recently, open source software – a new way to solve old problems. There is no question in my mind that there will be other types of standards that will come into being in the future.

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the creation of standards, like the creation of tools, differentiates us from all other forms of life. To create standards, therefore, is inextricably intertwined with the very concept of what it means to be human.

The second reason I will call "Hope."

What I wish to point out with this word is that there is something important and unique about standard setting: in what other process do people from all backgrounds and from all nations come together to mutually agree on matters of common concern, and then voluntarily bind themselves by rules that restrict their freedom of action in order to make the world a more productive and useful place? The United Nations has had nowhere near the same success in its efforts, despite a vastly greater budget and the official support of governments from all over the world. Surely there are lessons that national and world governments can learn from the standard setting process that could have great benefit to humanity as it struggles with the challenges of a shrinking world.

The last reason I will call "Service."

There are on the order of a million supported standards in the world today, and the value that they convey is incalculable. With the extension of the Internet and the Web to the third world – something that would be impossible and unimaginable without standards – that value is about to multiply a hundred fold, as everyone, everywhere, will gain equal access to the riches of science and the arts, to unbiased accounts of history and current events, and to a competitive education -- something that only twenty years ago would have been an inconceivable goal to achieve even in the lifetimes of our children.

And yet all of these standards, old and new, have been created by a comparative handful of people, unknown, unsung, and utilizing the most modest of resources. To be fortunate enough to be among those that serve in this pursuit is, I believe, a privilege indeed.

Thank you very much.

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