

INTEROPERABILITY

ITU Decision Turns Back the Clock

Pekka Tarjanne started his tenure as secretary-general of the International Telecommunication Union with high hopes, but has been forced to heed the overwhelming presence of the conservative, permanent bureaucracy that works in Geneva.

On Oct. 11, Dr. Tarjanne stepped onto a podium in Gene-

va and, via a satellite link, made a historic announcement to the attendees at the Interop Fall '91 Conference. He was giving permission to post ITU standards, including the 19,000-page Blue Book, on the Internet for distribution at no charge.

By any measure, the experiment has been a great success. It

started with a central server in Colorado, and four weeks later 21 other servers on four continents contained a complete copy of the data and were serving hundreds of thousands of documents to users all over the world.

The Colorado server was named after Bruno, a Dominican priest in the Middle Ages who

revealed the closely guarded secrets of Greek memory to the world and was later executed for heresy. The Bruno server, donated by Sun Microsystems Inc., is about to meet a similar fate.

After a mere two months in operation, I got a letter from the ITU telling me that it was terminating the experiment Dec. 31.

The reason for this abrupt reversal in policy is a lesson in bureaucratic politics. Tarjanne wanted to make the ITU more relevant to the world, and what better way than making its work available to an internetwork of 4 million people, growing at 15 percent to 20 percent per month?

The bureaucracy fought this move every step of the way. They felt threatened. If we gave away the standards, there would

be fewer jobs at the ITU. There would be less control over distribution and more pressure to start responding to the realities of engineering in the rest of the world.

Although Dr. Tarjanne gave permission to start in June, it took several more months before we could get the data from the reluctant ITU staff. Even then, it took a trip to Geneva, only half the data was furnished, and much of the documentation was omitted.

Yet, in a mere 20 days, the conversion of the data from the internal, proprietary ITU format was done and the standards were put on-line to an eager group of engineers. This was too much for the bureaucracy and they swung into high gear, ultimately going around Tarjanne to the executive committee that is the real power base at the ITU.

The ITU, in its letter to me, claimed that the experiment was such a success that they would begin offering the service themselves. This sounds good, but the reality is that the ITU internal plans consist only of a method for sending out working group documents to a very tightly controlled group of people.

The server is still in its conceptual stages.

In the meantime, the ITU bureaucracy cynically wasted the time of thousands of engineers who thought they could finally begin seriously working on key standards. Their efforts were for nothing and the ITU is returning to business as usual. The only difference is that the ITU bureaucracy has reasserted control.

CARL MALAMUD IS WRITING 'EXPLORING THE INTERNET: A TECHNICAL TRAVELOGUE,' A BOOK THAT WILL BE FEATURED AS THE INTEROP BOOK AT INTEROP '92 FALL. THE OPINIONS EXPRESSED ARE HIS OWN.



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