Windows to ... ON-LINE STANDARDS

An Argument for Placing Standards on the Internet

by Carl Malamud

Putting standards online is a political issue, not a technical one. Granted, there are problems of authentication and accounting, of file formats and access methods, but the main question is *who* should get access, not *how* to get access. Last year, I became involved in an experiment that demonstrated the potential—and the politics—of on-line standards.

In June 1991, a group of volunteers, headed by myself, approached the Secretary-General of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) with an offer. At the time, the 1988 version of the International Telegraph and Telephone Consultative Committee (CCITT) standards (the "Blue Book") was stored in a proprietary text-formatting system developed by the ITU. Internal staff estimates had concluded that it would be prohibitively expensive to transfer the data into a more modern text-processing system. We offered to convert their standards, and in exchange for our services, the ITU agreed to an experiment whereby the standards would be posted on the Internet for distribution. Our group did a preliminary conversion of the data and posted the standards on a server at the University of Colorado.

The standards were converted into a variety of formats, ranging from plain ASCII text to WordPerfect to PostScript. Access to the data was through the Anonymous File Transfer Protocol mechanism or via e-mail based requests, and was available to anybody via the Internet or through any system connected to the Internet with a mail gateway.

The results were astounding. Within days of making the standards available, with no coordination or solicitation, 21 other mirrored servers on four continents had come into operation. In less than 90 days, over 500 000 files were transferred to several thousand hosts in over 40 different countries.

Clearly this experiment was answering an unmet need for on-line distribution of standards. The ITU began to realize that the Internet is not some academic toy but is, in fact, a global network with over 10 million users. Just as our team of volunteers was getting ready to enter the next stage of reformatting the data to fix presentation flaws in the initial conversion, the ITU cancelled the experiment.

The ITU became scared because they could see that on-line distribution would quickly overshadow their paper distribution effort and would diminish their hard copy sales. Apparently, the ITU did not feel that wider dissemination of technical standards was important enough to merit on-line distribution.

Standards bodies have many arguments for not distributing standards online. Revenue is usually the first consideration, since standards bodies rely upon document sales to fund a substantial portion of their operation.

In the case of the ITU, it was true that substantial revenue was available through document sales, but it was also true that an incredible amount of waste went into the production of printed documents. A decrease in revenues could easily be offset by modern management techniques and by the exercise of fiscal responsibility. The same would hold true for other standards developing bodies, and for the American National Standards Institute (ANSI).

The big question is one of will. Standards bodies have a reason for being: the widespread application of their standards. Charging rates of $1 per page and up is no way to get standards used. Even though knowledge of standards is a prerequisite to a broad education in the field, young professionals at computer companies cannot justify buying increasingly expensive standards in large quantities.

Standards bodies, including the IEEE, must decide if the wide application of technical standards is an important part of their mission. If so, selling high-priced documents is not compatible with that mission. On-line, free distribution of standards is a vital part of a successful standards effort. ◆

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Jay Iorio Joins Board of Directors of SGML Forum

Jay Iorio of the IEEE Standards staff recently accepted an invitation to join the Board of Directors of the SGML Forum of New York. The Forum is devoted to the exchange of ideas and information about SGML. Organized primarily as a user group, the Forum seeks to promote an understanding of the scope and benefits of SGML and to further its practical application within a variety of industries. For more information about the SGML Forum and a meeting schedule, contact Joe Davidson at (212) 691-4463.

✗ Errata ✗

In the "Congratulations" section of the July 1992 issue, Jeffrey S. Kimmel should have been listed as the chair of the 1003.1-1988/INT, 1992 Edition, POSIX Interpretations.

In the same section, Eike Waltz's name was misspelled.