More than five years have passed since Idea Group Publishing (IGP) published my first edited book on IT standards and standardisation. Back then, this was a fairly arcane topic, discussed in only a comparably small number of papers, in very few books, and at even fewer conferences.

Luckily, this situation is improving. More and more people realise the true importance of the role standards play in almost all aspects of our lives. I quite like to quote documents published by the European Commission at such occasions, and this one is no exception: “Voluntary standards, properly used, can help establish the compatibility of innovative concepts and products with related products and so can be a key enabler for innovation.” It seems that (even) policy makers are realising the potential of properly done standards, and the impact standards have on innovation. It remains to be seen whether we will also eventually see policy making being informed by standardisation.

Of course, this holds particularly for information and communication technologies. We are surrounded by ICT artefacts and services: Cameras are controlled by microprocessors, and so are cars and telephone handsets. The same also holds for an ever-increasing number of other gadgets that by now are integral parts of our daily lives. And as many of these devices need to interoperate in one way or another, it is safe to say that (interoperability) standards form one of the pillars of what in Europe is called the “Information Society.” The Internet, which may be considered another such pillar, probably would not even exist without standards.

Moreover, standards setting is big business today. The costs of developing one ICT standard may easily run into seven- or eight-digit numbers, and win-
ning or losing a standards war may well be a matter of life or death even for large companies. One should think this fact alone to be sufficient to trigger massive interest in IT standardisation.

Yet, knowledge about the issues surrounding IT standards and standardisation is still rather underdeveloped. Curricula are few and far between, and the number of researchers and scholars with an interest in the subject, albeit increasing, is still fairly small. Possibly even worse, relevant knowledge also seems to be scarce within industry.

I would love to claim that this book will change this situation. It will not, but it may well contribute to a slight improvement. The chapters compiled in this volume should be of interest to practitioners and academics alike; they cover a wide range of highly relevant topics, from the perhaps more theoretical question of what exactly establishes an open standard to aspects of extremely high practical relevance (and equally high financial implications), like IPR and antitrust problems in standards setting.

The book is subdivided into seven sections, each of which comprises one to three chapters.

In Section I, some background will not hurt. In fact, it is quite important here. Therefore, we will start with a bit of theory. The section comprises two chapters that discuss aspects relating to the classification of standards and the terminology used. Together, they should contribute to an improved communication between those involved in standards setting, research, or implementation.

Section II is titled “Coordination in Standards Setting.” Obviously, a standards body’s working group should be the place for cooperation between the different stakeholders. However, it may also be (mis)used as a platform for infighting. We do not have any chapters on that, though. Rather, the three chapters explore various forms of coordination, also including alternatives to the traditional committee-based approach.

The three chapters of Section III discuss the issue of speed. Speed, or rather the lack of it, has always been a major point of criticism of the formal standards-setting process. The three chapters look at this issue from different but complementing angles, from both the top and the trenches. They identify pros and cons of “slowness,” as well as some reasons for it.

IPR problems are (among) the most pressing issues in IT standards setting, and are addressed by the two chapters of Section IV. The inherent conflict between keeping one’s IPR and making it available through its incorporation into open standards is hard to resolve. The chapters analyse different aspects of the problem, and these analyses should be another important step on the way to truly useful IPR policies in standards setting.

Section V looks at the application of standards. After all, an IT standard is not a means in itself, but a means to an end: interoperable applications. The three chapters discuss three different application domains with very different
characteristics. It appears that the particularities of the respective application domain need to be taken into account when developing standards.

Of course, standards also have an economic dimension. Accordingly, the economic perspective is discussed in the three chapters of Section VI, with network externalities being the common ground here. They are playing a crucial role, specifically in the case of compatibility standards.

Work does not stop once a standard has been approved. Rather, quite a bit is left to do after standardisation. This is addressed by the chapter that forms Section VII. Specifically, it looks at problems and issues surrounding conformance testing, and presents a working solution.

Kai Jakobs
Aachen, 2005