Preface

"Standards are not only technical questions. They determine the technology that will implement the Information Society, and consequently the way in which industry, users, consumers and administrations will benefit from it."

You can hardly put it more to the point than this quote taken from a document published by the Commission of the European Union on ‘Standardization and the Global Information Society’. Despite all criticism, and despite descriptions such as ‘hampering progress’ or ‘trailing behind the market,’ standards remain the sine-qua-non in virtually all fields of technology, and especially in information technology (IT).

Our world is becoming networked. The envisaged Global Information Infrastructure (GII), for instance, is going to have a profound impact as the major enabler of the frequently predicted move from an industrial society to the information society. In the meantime, initiatives towards national or regional information infrastructures are gaining momentum. This holds particularly for the US, the Pacific Rim and Europe. Likewise, major developments may be observed in the domestic sector, where stand-alone computers are bound to vanish sooner or later. ISDN interconnectivity, and particularly access to the Internet are increasingly commonplace. It may take some time, but ultimately almost every organisation, company, school and household will be interconnected. Or so they say; this frequently evoked development can only happen if globally agreed standards will be available, upon which this infrastructure can be based.

Perhaps the most fascinating quality to be associated with standards and standardization, and certainly their most problematic characteristic is the multitude of dimensions that need to be considered. These include, but are definitely not limited to the economics of standards, standardization policies, intellectual property rights, the overall structure of standards setting processes and whether their output manages to address today’s needs. Obviously, the technical quality of the specifications, and whether or not they find a window of opportunity play a role as well. Likewise, corporate strategies are vital to a standard’s prospects in the market. Maybe less obvious, the setting within which a standards based system is to be employed also plays a decisive role; that is, these systems need to blend in seamlessly with their respective environment to be acceptable and successful.

Stakeholders in the standards setting process are at least as diverse, ranging from governments to, ultimately, the individual end users. Large multi-national vendors/manufacturers have specific requirements on standards and the standards setting process, which may well contradict those of small or medium sized firms, which in turn are typically very different from the needs and expectations of user companies. The human end-user is again a totally different issue altogether.

Reading the chapters you will find that the approaches to the topic differ considerably, as do the views of the individual authors, their respective explicit or
implicit definition of the term ‘standard’ and, indeed, their styles of writing (I
certainly didn’t want to impose a uniform overall structure or style). Little wonder,
though, given the immense diversity of facets and problems to be associated with
standards and standardization, and their frequently controversial character. The
contributions you will find range from the introductory to the very specific; they
cover different aspects of standards setting processes as well as corporate issues
and economics, and present selected case studies.

You will also note that some topics are discussed in more than one chapter; these
include particularly the issue of ‘speed’ in standards setting and the question of
how to address Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs). This is not coincidental—at
least (but not only) in my view these problems are the most critical ones with respect
to the establishment of a standardization infrastructure. This infrastructure will
have to be capable of coping with the needs and requirements of a technology (and
its users) whose ever increasing importance, together with its sheer pace of
development and its ever shorter life cycles, necessitates a rethinking of today’s
standards setting process, and may well require a process very different from the
one we have today.

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