Chapter V

Beyond Consortia, Beyond Standardization?
Redefining the Consortium Problem

Tineke M. Egyedi, Delft University of Technology, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

This chapter analyzes the rhetoric that surrounds the problem of consortia, that is, the supposed lack of democratic procedures. The social shaping of the standardization approach is applied. Two cases are used to illustrate what is at stake in consortium standardization, namely, the standardization of Java in ECMA, and XML in W3C. The findings show inaccuracies and inconsistencies in the way the consortium problem is defined: The dominant rhetoric underestimates the openness of most industry consortia and overestimates the practical implications of formal democratic procedures. This unbalanced portrayal and sustained ambiguity about what is meant by democracy are part of the meaning of negotiation at work in the actor network. Implicitly, the European network still predominantly defines standardization as an instrument of regulatory governance. This marginalizes the role of consortia. The chapter offers several suggestions to redefine the consortium problem.

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INTRODUCTION

In Article 14 of the “Council Resolution of 28 October 1999 on the Role of Standardization in Europe” (Council of the European Union [EU], 2000), the European Commission is requested to examine how the European Union should deal with specifications that do not have the status of formal standards. The council recognizes “an increasing tendency of interested parties to elaborate technical specifications outside recognized standardization infrastructures” (p. 1, Article 7). The resolution distinguishes between standards developed by official standards bodies such as the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), those on the European level, for example, the Comité Européen de Normalisation (CEN), and those from other sources. In the resolution context, another main source is the standards consortium. The council’s feeling is, apparently, that there may be a need to deal differently with consortium standards than with formal ones, a feeling which, for example, the U.S. government shares (Center for Regulatory Effectiveness [CRE], 2000).

No accepted definition exists as yet for the term standards consortium. In practice, it can cover a variety of alliances. Some standards consortia focus solely on the development of technical standards or specifications (specification groups; Updegrove, 1995). These may be R & D- (research and development) oriented and precompetitive (research consortia; Updegrove; proof-of-technology consortia; Weiss & Cargill, 1992). They may focus on heightening the usability of existing standards (implementation and application consortia; Weiss & Cargill). Or, their goal may be to formalize dominant existing practices and de facto standards. Again, other consortia may foremost promote the adoption of a certain technology (strategic consortia; Updegrove), organize educational activities for users of standards (Hawkins, 1999), or combine these activities with specification development. In this chapter, a standards consortium refers to an alliance of companies and organizations financed by membership fees, the aims of which include developing publicly available, multiparty industry standards or technical specifications. In practice, mostly large companies are members of these consortia.

The council’s resolution is but one example that there has been some unease and discussion about the role of standards consortia in the network of actors involved in standardization. The actor network appears to be caught up in a polarized discussion about what type of organization best serves the market for democratic and timely standards: standards consortia or the traditional formal standards bodies. The general feeling is that standards consortia work more effectively, but that they have restrictive membership rules and are undemocratic. The latter is a cause of concern for governments that require democratic accountability of the standards process if they are to refer to such standards in a regulatory context.