Consortium Problem Redefined: Negotiating ‘Democracy’ in the Actor Network on Standardization

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the standards consortium problem (i.e., lack democratic procedures) and the democratic rhetoric that surrounds it from a European perspective. The social shaping approach is used. The analysis addresses the organizational level (consortium procedures) and the actor network level (processes of meaning negotiation). The research method includes two in-depth case studies of consortium standardization: Java in ECMA and the Extended Markup Language (XML) in the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). The findings illustrate inaccuracies and inconsistencies in the way the consortium problem is defined. They indicate that the dominant rhetoric underestimates the openness of most industry consortia and overestimates the practical implications of the formal democratic procedures. This unbalanced portrayal and sustained indistinctness about what is meant by ‘democracy’ are part of the meaning negotiation that takes place in the actor network. Implicitly, the European actor network is still predominantly defined as an instrument of regulatory governance. This marginalizes the role of consortia. The paper offers several suggestions to redefine the consortium problem.

Keywords: standards consortia, social shaping approach, social constructivist theory, meaning negotiation, European network on standardization, ECMA, W3C, democratic standards procedures

INTRODUCTION

In Article 14 of the Council Resolution of 28 October 1999 on the role of standardization in Europe, 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” (Article 7). The resolution distinguishes between standards developed by official standards bodies such as the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and on the European level, for example, the Comité
Européen de Normalisation (CEN), and those from other sources. In the resolution context a main other 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-oriented and pre-competitive (research consortia, Updegrove, 1995; proof of technology consortia, Weiss & Cargill, 1992). They may focus on heightening the usability of existing standards (implementation and application consortia; Weiss & Cargill, 1992). 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, 1995), organize educational activities for users of standards (Hawkins, 1999), or combine these activities with specification development. In this paper, standards consortium refers to an alliance of companies and organizations financed by membership fees, the aims of which include developing publicly available, multi-party industry standards or technical specifications. In practice, mostly large companies are members of these consortia.

The Council 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.

Much depends on the democratic rhetoric, as it is called in the following. For it is this rhetoric, which largely determines who is part of the European actor network on standardization and who is not. Those who are ‘in’ may have good arguments to emphasize the need for democratic standardization. However, after having gone uncontested for many decades, maybe it is time to question the obvious. This, to avoid a situation where standards consortia are being marginalized for the wrong reasons.

In the following, the assumptions and arguments are analyzed from which the current actor network largely draws its legitimacy. The social shaping approach is used to do so. Two cases of consortium standardization are discussed to uncover possible inconsistencies and asymmetries in the reasoning applied. Indeed, in the last sections of this paper, a redefi-
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