Chapter VI
Traditional Institutional Structures and Practices

The noisiest of those competitive battles [between suppliers] will be about standards. The eyes of most sane people tend to glaze over at the very mention of technical standards. But in the computer industry, new standards can be the source of enormous wealth, or the death of corporate empires. With so much at stake, standards can arouse violent passion.

—The Economist, 23 February 1993

INTRODUCTION

In order to understand how traditional processes and discursive spaces may be undergoing enclosure, it is useful to examine the baseline from which recent changes have taken place. In other words, it is important to ask, How open were these standards-setting institutions and their practices in the past? This is not an easy question to answer. The diversity among various institutions is considerable. Even the question, What institutions should we be talking about? is not easy to answer. A detailed historical account, analysis, and comparison of standardization bodies is beyond the scope of this study, but the three oldest and most established international standards-setting organizations, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC), and International Organization for Standardization (ISO), have been selected here because they are stable, they are respected, and their authority and legitimacy are well established. These organizations were mentioned briefly in an earlier chapter, as part of an historical overview of the global standardization system. They will now be examined in more detail.
In the previous chapter, certain key terms of discourse were identified and considered. These terms included public, private, and open. The present chapter will examine the history, structure, and practices of the three abovementioned standard-setting organizations in an attempt to form a profile for each. It will then draw comparisons between them on the basis of these terms. The assumption here is that history can help reveal the meaning embedded in this social practice. Only sufficient history will be visited here to find the contextual meaning of the terms. This examination will proceed chronologically, beginning with the oldest of the three organizations—the ITU, then the IEC, the ISO, and finally JTC1, a collaboration between IEC and ISO. The ITU differs significantly from the others because it is a governmental treaty organization, now part of the United Nations, while the others are voluntary non-treaty and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Nevertheless, the standards that come out of these three organizations are all voluntary in their application. They may later become “national” standards if adopted by an appropriate national body and may subsequently acquire force of law or regulation on a national or regional basis.

**ITU—INTERNATIONAL TELECOMMUNICATION UNION**

**ITU History**

The ITU dates from the formation of the International Telegraph Union at a conference called by Napoleon III and held in Paris in 1865. The Paris conference produced a treaty known as the International Telegraph Convention, which established an organization and a set of regulations. The “electric telegraph” had previously been introduced in a number of nations and was immediately employed to improve the operation of their railway systems, but international operations were encumbered by a lack of uniformity and interoperability. One of the earliest tasks of the ITU was the establishment of technical standards, in particular for deciding on a code to be used—the international Morse code. The ITU also addressed matters such as the interconnection of important cities, hours of reception for telegrams, the obligation for foreign message delivery, and the commitment of transmission capacity (Coddington & Rutkowski, 1982, p. 4). Another outcome of the 1865 Paris conference was the concept of periodic meetings, known as conferences, of delegates from national telegraph administrations to keep the standards, rules, and regulations up to date. This hierarchical conference-based structure became the basic organizational model of the ITU.

The early application of the telegraph was seen not simply as a means of operating railroads, but more generally, according to the ITU, as “...an efficient means of
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