BOOK REVIEW:

Standardization and Digital Enclosure

By Timothy D. Schoechle, University of Colorado, USA
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This book, based on a PhD dissertation, studies the process of technical standardization from a social sciences perspective. However, the author is an active participant in technical standardization committee work. The author's thesis is that standardization (particularly computer and technical communications standardization) is moving from formal standardization bodies to private consortia. The author is concerned that such a migration may have deleterious consequences, including the impairment of access to information and communications networks, of competition and of technical innovation. This concern is developed broadly in terms of the British movement from public access to the private enclosure of land starting in the middle ages.

The preface, Chapter I and II develop the rational for the book, the definition of basic terms, an overview of the international standardization organization and raises the basic questions to be addressed.

Chapter III provides an extensive review of existing literature and references in the social sciences and related fields.

Chapter IV provides a serious theoretical social science approach to standardization. Building on the ideas of Plato, Locke, Burke, Habermas and many others the author identifies standardization as one form of public discourse.

Chapter V continues to develop terminology (e.g., public, private, sector, open) that is important to any understanding of standardization. The author explores the different interpretations different cultures have of these words and how that effects standardization in the US and outside the US.

Chapter VI describes in detail the organization and operation of the ITU, IEC and ISO. This is an excellent description of these organizations with their strengths and weaknesses.

Chapter VII discusses standardization, the consortia or formal standardization arguments, and the advent of hybrid standardization organizations and develops these discussions in great depth. There are some oversights: The Cable Labs hybrid standardization approach; The commercial value of consortia to manage IPR and manage marketing/certification activities (which has been successful with WiFi, Zigbee and WiMAX to name a few).

Chapter VIII summarizes the authors conclusions and concerns. The major recommendations: the potential for hybrid standardization to be a better approach, recognize the limitations of the concept of a "public sector," greater support for standards and standardization education, research and awareness.

Following the constructs of public discourse, each chapter tends to go over and build on the ideas from the previous chapters. In the earlier chapters this may make for slow going. Much like any discourse, the later chapters develop the reader's understanding.

This work omits (overtly) discussion of legal (intellectual property, antitrust) and technical (succession of standards, evolutionary system) issues. Including these other views could alter the conclusions significantly. . But it is the best book describing the existing process of standardization that this reviewer has seen.

The appendixes (over 100 pages) include copies of reports from Sun Microsystems to the US House of Representatives available at:http://www.sun.com/software/standards/HouseWhitePaper_ver2_Final.pdf , from Delft University to the EC Director General and from the German institute for standardization (DIN) on standardization strategy. These reports offer some useful standardization background and case studies, but no new approaches. The table of contents does not describe the appendices and the book's index is limited.

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