

## Confusion, Standards and OpenXML

I hesitate to respond to Andy Updegrave's essay on my point that OpenXML has improved in moving from a closed to a more open environment. It was hardly a clarion call for approval of OpenXML but merely an observation that anti-Microsoft zealots were not giving credit where credit was due. I object to honesty being the first casualty in discussions that involve Microsoft, on the pro/con or government sides.

I also hesitate to respond because Andy has so deeply mis-stated the nature of the debate that a response will take me far afield from the technical aspects of markup, which are a legitimate subject of discussion on markup standards. Consider for example his apparent wish to make OpenDocument, what I consider to be a superior markup vocabulary to OpenXML, the standard bearer for freedom and democracy in the world of information technology.<sup>1</sup> Oh, I grant that Andy is skilled enough with his rhetoric to never make that claim explicitly but it is clear which contender, OpenDocument or Open XML he thinks fits the following criteria:

We are entering an era in which IT technology is to society as earlier very different modalities were to human rights, from freedom of expression and free access to information (the unfettered use of the printing press), to civil rights (the abolition of separate schools and separate seats on buses for people of color in the US), to freedom of religion (the ability to openly practice one's religion in houses of worship).<sup>2</sup>

It is of course Andy's right to believe that if he likes but characterizing approval of OpenXML as leading to the wholesale loss of human rights is just as unjust as making OpenDocument the bearer of all that is goodness and light. Neither claim is true and neither one advances the current debate about OpenXML.

At its core, I think Andy's essay (and much of the argument in this area) fails to recognize one very fundamental fact about markup vocabularies, a fact that both OpenDocument and OpenXML share. Both are semantic claims about the representation of documents and as such, neither one is either true or false but at best can be claimed to be useful for some purpose. That has been recognized since the earliest days of markup, even though Andy would have us wrapping ourselves in them like the flags of nationalistic fanaticism.<sup>3</sup>

I have not, yet, advocated approval or disapproval of DIS 29500. I have tried to point out some things that I think calm discussion of that issue should include. Which extended to considering what would it look like if we had a common place for discussing the future co-evolution of OpenDocument and OpenXML. Since Andy has offered his parade of horrors concerning the virtual fall of civilization should OpenXML be approved, let me offer an alternative view of what disapproval would mean (noting that I still haven't offered an opinion on approval or disapproval).

So, what happens with disapproval? Well, and the point of my co-evolution essay, is that we will have

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1 I do not apologize for my view of OpenDocument as being superior to OpenXML but do recognize that supporters of OpenXML legitimately have a different view of those two standards. It is possible, as I have advocated elsewhere, for us to put aside our public "booster" roles and have productive discussions about how we face the future together.

2 <http://www.consortiuminfo.org/standardsblog/article.php?story=20080224143425160>

3 See for example the Text Encoding Initiative, P2, section 2.4 (1993), "There is no single DTD which encompasses any kind of absolute truth about a text, although it may be convenient to privilege some DTDs above others for particular types of analysis."

lost an important opportunity to have an environment where at least two of the major markup vocabularies are at the same table. Perhaps not singing the same song, which is perhaps not even possible but they have no place to even talk to each other at present. And, it would give Microsoft developers, many of who are members of national bodies, an important forum where Microsoft has been shown to listen and respond to their concerns. Just as a side note, wouldn't you become a member of a national body after having been treated like a mushroom for decades?<sup>4</sup>

An ISO committee is an environment composed of national bodies, which realistically are the only bodies that can command the attention of a Microsoft or IBM. Yes, yes, all the bloggers, user groups and others can carp and whine, perhaps even make it onto the Jon Stewart show, if not the New York Times above the fold but that is just noise. Over the years the ISO context has proven itself an effective forum, if not always the most open one, for the development of standards to which all vendors in particular areas adhere.

I am not simply being coy about not calling for approval or disapproval of DIS 29500. That call can only be made after the conclusion of the BRM and a full consideration of all the discussions at that meeting. Any other approach really does take away the essential "consensus" driven nature of the ISO process and makes it merely a matter of "snout counting."<sup>5</sup>

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4 Noting that mushrooms are kept in the dark and fed manure. An ISO context for DIS 29500 gives Microsoft developers (and the rest of us) an effective and international forum to express needs and wants for a Microsoft format. I think that is a significant development in and of itself. Granted, developers will need to learn the ropes of international standards work but that will come with time.

5 The ISO process is defined as being consensus driven, see the JTC 1 Directives, Section 1.2, where it reads: "These Directives are inspired by the principle that the objective in the development of International Standards should be the achievement of consensus between those concerned rather than a decision based on counting votes." The term "snout counting" occurs in an alternative history series by Harry Turtledove to describe the American system of government.