

ON (Österreichisches Normungsinsitut) -
Democratic or not

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with the field of standards and regulations. It states that these standards decisions are not merely technical but political ones. Political decisions can be made democratic or not. The paper uses the case study of OOXML to investigate the ON (Austrian Standard Institute). After looking at its organizational form and behavior it is compared with the democracy theory of Vilmar Fritz. After taking the facts about the ON into account the author states that the organization is not democratic in its way its produces standards and regulations.

1 Introduction

The motivation of this paper is driven of the fact that technical decisions in the are of IT are often seen as purely technical and apolitical. Most people are not aware how this decisions can influence our environment but technical decisions can change the way we work, live and organize our daily life.

So they don't think there is no room, space or need for politics in technical issues. In the eyes of most this decisions are made only with pure technical arguments in mind.

But there are a lot of fields in IT where politics play an important rule. Take a look at the patent system (which is seen to be broken[1]), the discussion about copy right and digital rights management. Observe the struggle of Free Software against the proprietary one.

There is another field which is interesting. This is the field of Standardization. Standardization is strongly influenced by politics because of the great amount of conflicting parties involved with it[8]. Having a system or product standardized has a lot of advantages. Governments and companies are more likely to use (and pay) for standardized products or systems. And when money is involved there are lobbyists to represent various groups.

But why should anyone care about standardization? Standardization plays a big role in our daily life's. Imagine a world with not only *one* kind of power socket. But two, three or more variants. This would bring a lot of problems and would reduce the ease of use.

But there are some decisions which are even more important. We are all living in a society where information is getting more and more important. But information is not floating around in the ether. It is represented in a file on a harddisk. Imagine how inconvenient and even dangerous for us it would be to be dependent only one company to provide the technical means to read and write to this files. A company which has no interest in sharing the way it does the information saving. Which even changes the way it does it from time to time to make it harder to access this data and information with programs not provided by it.

Sadly this is not a thing which has to be imagined. This is real life and has been since the domination of Microsoft Office. Years after years data and information is saved in files which can't be used by people which don't use the Microsoft products. But why is this a problem? Why should there be people without this MS products. First at all this products don't come for free. So being short on money means an exclusion of this data. Another reason is that people on other operating systems platforms than Microsoft Windows are not

able to install Office. And there is also a group of people not trusting proprietary software after seeing the abuse of software monopoly.

So for years informations were not freely exchanged. Information were jailed in a file format which was not accessible for everyone. In the year 2006 the *International Standard Organization* approved an open standard document format called ODF (OpenDocumentFormat)[5]. This format is open and accessible for everybody [21]. There is no single company which has control over the management of information.

One year later Microsoft tried to standardize their document format OOXML (OpenOfficeXML) at the ISO too [15]. Despite a lot criticism (technical shortcomings, patent problems, ...) there were a lot of countries which supported the standard. At the end it was rejected for this time[6]. After this a lot of irregularities were discovered in countries supporting the standard. From rumors about buying votes in Sweden[16] over voting irregularities in the netherlands.[13]

Austria was one of the countries voting yes for the Microsoft Standard. This voting was done by the ON (Oesterreichisches Normungsinsitut) which is partly financed by the Austrian state.[QUOTE] I tried to get information about which representatives where in the OOXML committee of the ON. But I had to learn that there is no right for an Austrian citizen to get information about standardization matters. There is no transparency and citizens are not able to inform themselves. So there is no way to criticize the ON for their decision because of the lack of information.

So the goal of this paper is to research if this ON is behaving like a democratic organization.

2 Approach and methodology

This section will describe what I want to show with my study, what my hypothesis is and how I will try to prove it's correctness.

2.1 Hypothesis

My hypothesis is that standard setting bodies decide more likely in favor of the interests of big companies than in the favor of the public interest if they restrict the participation of the civil society and if they don't embrace transparency. In short, the hypothesis is that *standard setting bodies which are not constituted and designed to act democratically decide in favor of the interest of some rather than the interest of all.*

So the goal of this study is to investigate the correlation of the external behavior of standard setting bodies and their decisions on important standards.

2.2 Methodology

A ideal study would take the case of an important decision which is seen a controversial by a lot of people. The next step would be the investigation of the decisions of all involved standard setting bodies. But the scope of this article is limited and investigating all institutions can be very time consuming.

Taking this arguments into account I decided to use a case study. I will investigate the case of the OpenOfficeXML ISO fast track ballot which was

decided by 91 countries. The focus of this study lies on the decision of the Austrian standard setting body, the Österreichisches Normungsinstitut (ON).

The question arises how to decide if a organisation like the ON is organized in a way that democratic influence is possible. There is a clearly a need for a theory of democracy which can be used as a model. We then take this model and find its characteristics and requirements. With this information we can look at the ON and decide if it is democratic or not.

2.3 The theory behind

The theory of democracy I will take the model from is one from the political scientist Fritz Vilmar. In his book *Strategien der Demokratisierung Band I: Theorie der Praxis* he explains what characteristics organisations must have to be called democratic ([23], p.118.)

In his theory, organizations are democratic if it allows all relevant people to participate in decisions. He also points out that relevant people do not only include people working in an organization but also people who are affected by decisions this organization make.

He organizes decisions in a set of 5 categories.

Marginal decisions which involve decisions which are concerned with interpersonal rules, human relations, ... Decisions which are not essential to the work to be done.

Policy decisions which influence how work is done. Which technologies or methods to use.

Personal decisions that are concerned with what people to hire, what people earn and if a person is removed from the organization. Also the methods of deciding these actions.

Production decisions about what should be produced.

System decisions are concerned with the overall design of the organization.

Having democratic structures inside an organization means that these decisions are also taken by everyone in it.

But there is another group of people which should have influence on this decisions. As Vilmar notes ([23], p. 121) the output of an organization (or more broadly a subsystem) concerns more than the people inside. He continues with the claim that often this concerned people outside the organization/subsystem are forgotten. So they also have the right and the need to participate in these decisions.

Vilmar states that by not having the chance to participate on issues which concern people they loose their dignity

2.4 Applying the theory

Taking the theory described above we can check if an organization is democratic or not. As the study is concerned with the output of an organization we will verify if people outside can have influence over this output.

3 Case study OOXML

In this section I will give an overview about my case study. It will cover the history of the standardization trials of microsoft, their reasons why to do this and the role of the Austrian standardization body ON in this.

3.1 The role of Microsoft Office

Microsoft Office is an important product for Microsoft. They introduced their product in the year 1990[17] and sold it since then. It gained more and more market share and reached the status of a de-facto industrial standard. This means that nearly every company in need for word processing or spread sheet programs are buying Microsoft office. A reason for the monopoly of this product lies in the behavior of Microsoft. They are not publishing the specifications of the file format for their products, making it difficult for other companies to produce compatible products, To make matters worse, they are changing the secret specifications in every new version of their software, in thus giving competitors practically no chance for getting a significant market share for themselves.

A look at the statistics of Microsoft's income shows how important the office suite is for them.

In the year 2007 Microsoft had revenues off 11 billion dollar for their Windows Servers, 15 billion dollars for their desktop products and 16 billion dollar from their office sales [12]. This shows that nearly a third of their income is from the sales of the office suite. Making this are of their business worth defending in any way.

3.2 OpenOffice.org

The history of OpenOffice.org starts with the acquisition of an office suite by Sun in the year 1999. Sun decided to release this office suite under the name OpenOffice.org under a Free Software license (which means everybody can copy the product, study it's source code, change the source code, ...) in the year 2000.

After some development OpenOffice.org became more and more used in large companies (14% in the year 2004 [19]) and small to medium business (19% in the year 2005 [20]). Beside this respectably market share it is worth noting that Microsoft Office is holding a share of 95% in revenue [25].

But the open nature of the product has convinced official bodies of several states ([3],[2], [14]). They are attracted by the possibility of gaining independence of one single company and having control of the software for themselves.

3.3 OpenDocument

As a result of the growing importance of OpenOffice.org the need for an open independent document file format was seen. This led to the development of a file format based on the OpenOffice.org file format which was standardized in the year 2006 under the name OpenDocument [7]. This specification allows various companies and organizations to develop software which are compatible by default. This has the effect of prohibiting a company to tie clients in to a specific software.

3.4 OpenOfficeXML

As OpenOffice.org gains more market share and OpenDocument, a open and patent free file format specification was created, Microsoft decided to take action. They decided to create a specification themselves, called OpenOfficeXML which is based on the current file format of MS Office 2007.

The OpenOfficeXML format was standardized by Ecma in the year 2006 [11]. The next goal was to get the standard approved by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) [15]. The first effort for approval was not successful[6]. but the ISO will decide on the OOXML approval again in February 2008.

3.5 Role of national standard setting bodies

As all ISO standards are international ones, national standard setting bodies can vote for or against standards. As these bodies reside in different countries, thus have different laws to obey, different organizational structures and are different in size and financial power, they are not homogeneous.

Naturally small standard setting bodies with no substantial decision transparency and scarce personell are vulnerable for lobbying of big companies like Microsoft.

4 About the ON

The ON (Oesterreichisches Normungsinstitut / Austrian Standards Institute) is the standard setting body in Austria[10].

4.1 Goals and aims

It's goals are to be a neutral platform for the creation of standards and rules. In details this contains [22]

- The creation of so called ÖNORM's and rules and the organizational basis for this.
- Participation it the process of creating standards in local and international standard setting bodies.
- Collaboration with national, international and regional standard setting bodies and organizations which share similar goals and aims or are concerned with similar topics.

- Publication of ÖNORM's and national and international standards and rules.
- Adoption of regional and international standards into Austrian body of rules and regulations.
- Advertising and marketing for the implementation of rules and their conclusions.
- Providing information and service in the field of standards and regulations.
- Support of activities to achieve the adoptions of standards and regulations.
- Organizing summits for training in the field of standards and regulations.
- Performing the duties and responsibilities specified in the Normengesetz (Austrian law of standards).

4.2 Short history

The short investigation of the ON's history can be found at their homepage [9].

- 1920: The ON is founded under the name Ö.N.I.G. (Austrian Standards Institute for Industry and Commerce).
- 1946: The ON was a founder member of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO).
- 1954: The ON was integrated in the Austrian state by a law about standardization.
- 1961: The ON was a founder member of the European Committee for Standardization (CEN)[4].
- 2006: The ON takes care about more than 18.000 documents.

4.3 Organizational structure

To understand the behavior of an organization one must know the organizational structure of it.

The ON is a non-governmental non-profit organization. It consists of 180 committees and over 350 sub committess. There are 5.000 experts from companies, ministries, science, consumers and experts from standard setting bodies.

The organization is headed executive board of two. The director (Ing. Mag. Dr. Gerhard Hartmann) and his proxy (DDr. Elisabeth Stampfl-Blaha). There is also a executive board of 6 people. Some of them are involved in big companies and the others in ministries. [18]

There is a member ship fee for persons interested in working in the committees. This member ship costs 185 Euro a year.

4.4 Finances

The organization finances itself through different sources. More than 80% of their income is from selling products and supply of services. 2% to 3% of the money if from membership fee and the rest is coming from the Austrian state. (Informations from personal contact with the ON.)

4.5 Integration in Austrian Law

The ON is integrated in the Austrian state by the Normengesetz (1971) [24]. This law allows the ON to act as an agent for Austria in international and regional organization and processes. The law gives the ON the right to create Austrian standards and to validate or invalidate certificates for companies.

4.6 ON and the civil society

Another characteristic is how organizations respond to interested people from the civil society. A organization could publish its activities, respond to emails and invite interested people to committee meetings for example.

In this section I will describe the behavior of the ON to an interested person (in this case myself). My first action was to send the ON a mail asking about the OOXML ballot and the status. I got no answer. E - Mails from popular free mail services (gmail, hotmail, yahoo, ...) are automatically treated like Spam.

The next step was to call the ON. After some discussion I got the appropriate person to talk to. There was no official information he could give me. No information on the homepage about the OOXML ballot and how the ON decided. The person gave me some information about how they decided and a little bit about the composition of the responsible committee. But this was no information I could get written and in an official way.

The ON created no protocols of committee meetings nor did they publish information about the ongoing standardization of the OOXML. There was no written document to study why the organization voted in favor of the OOXML standard. Requests for short and cut down protocols were dismissed with the argument of data privacy.

After some more calls it was possible to arrange a meeting with the ON with another activist. It was possible because of the “justified interest“ the ON saw. So there is no guarantee that people can meet them.

5 Analysis and results

The task in this section is to look at the requirements for an organization to be called democratic and the facts and behavior of the ON.

As we are only interested in the output of the organization and the democratic instruments activists and people outside of the organization can have, we will not study all requirements.

So to influence the output it is necessary to have influence in the *production decisions*. The question arises how this could be made. The band width is going from inviting activists to give away information to the public to allow it to organize public pressure with this data.

In the ON it is possible to be integrated into committees. But this means to pay an considerable annual fee and a lot of time is needed to join the committee meetings. So this is no reasonable way for activists to participate in the production.

The other method, lobbying and public pressure, is in need of a lot of public information. But information is something the ON is not giving away. There is no way an activist can get information about OOXML on their homepage. They do not answer E-Mails from private persons. Contacting them on the telephone

or meeting them in person provides unofficial information which is not useful in creating public pressure with facts.

As there is no way to influence the production decisions, as there is no way to criticize them, as there is no way to get information why they decided this way, I conclude that the Oesterreichisches Normungsinstitut / Austrian Standards Institute has no democratic organizational form.

5.1 Further research

Further research could be the comparison of the ON with other Austrian organizations and to look if there are differences in their democratic structure and if these differences mean different outputs. Another possible field of research would be to look at foreign standard setting bodies and comparing them with the ON. It would be also interesting to have another case study and to investigate the ON behavior.

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