

The IETF's Standards Setting Process – Is It Still Up to the Job?

(Abstract)

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The Internet will continue to be the major pillar of the Information Society. For over 20 years now, the standards that define its functionality have been produced by what eventually became the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF) in 1986. This body has developed all the Internet's core technical specifications.

Despite this obvious success, the IETF process has recently been criticised, from both within and outside. Among other issues, problems 'officially' identified by IETF 'members' include [1]:

- The IETF has difficulty handling large and/or complex problems,
- The IETF management structure is not matched to the current size and complexity of the IETF.

Along similar lines, problems identified in [2] (largely based on a survey of participants of several IETF WGs) include, for example:

- the conflict between (the theoretical) 'individual participation' and (the frequently very real) 'organisational representation' of members,
- the process' dependence on the availability of 'right people' to do the work, and the resulting risk that they will dominate the process,
- the strictly technically oriented environment may well prove to be a major obstacle in an environment influenced by politics.

Especially the latter is crucial. These days, the technical characteristics of a standard – and even the very existence – may make a huge difference to companies and perhaps to a whole industry sector. Literally, billions may be at stake.

In addition, the ongoing development towards the 'Internet of Things', with its unprecedented impact on everyone's daily lives, will give rise to questions relating to the democratic legitimacy of the process. Against this background, the title of this paper is an obvious question to be asked.

The paper will first outline the IETF's standards setting process. Subsequently, the various points of criticism will be discussed, as will be the IETF's reaction to the issues they themselves had identified. Subsequently, the issue of legitimacy will be discussed. Some proposals for potential improvements of the process will be made and analysed, respectively.

References

[1]: Davies, E.: IETF Problem Statement. Request for Comments: 3774, 2004.
<http://www.ietf.org/rfc/rfc3774.txt?number=3774>.

[2]: Jakobs, K.: A Closer Look at the Internet's Standards Setting Process. Proceedings IADIS International Conference WWW/Internet, 2003.