

Unlocking India's right to its digital information

The freedom of digital information in India faces a deadline. Before September 2, 2007, Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS), on behalf of a country of 1 billion, must decide whether India will contribute to global polarization of information in a particular electronic document format, and whether India herself will keep alive an alternative to having its digital information permanently locked in a particular electronic document format. The decision in question refers to BIS casting a 'yes' or 'no' vote to the ballot process to determine the approval of OOXML (Office Open XML) as an ISO standard; a format for producing electronic documents. For a developing country like India eager to use computerization and digitization of information to fuel its growth, the ramifications of the decision by BIS will be huge.

Today, an overwhelming majority of world's electronic documents reside in a format owned by a single IT vendor, Microsoft, simply because a vast majority of the world's computers run Microsoft's office productivity suite. Although there are alternative office suites available in the market, they store documents in a format different from Microsoft's. Consequently, there is lack of interoperability between Microsoft and other office suites, as documents created with one suite are often not accessible or alterable by the other. Since this format-interoperability is best avoided by preferring Microsoft office suite to the various alternatives, it compromises the freedom of access to their information for the world's computer users.

To challenge this phenomenon, a new free and independent document format standard was proposed and backed by many large IT companies, termed Open Document Format (ODF) standard, which could be adopted by all developers of office productivity suites to create applications that in turn produce documents that are readable and alterable by any application that supports this standard. Today, Star Office, Open Office and Google Docs and Spreadsheets are some of the applications that support ODF. A document created in Star Office for example is freely readable or alterable in Open Office or Google Docs and Spreadsheets, and vice versa.

ISO ratified Open Document Format (ODF) as an international standard for document (for example memos, letters, spreadsheets and presentations) creation by various office productivity suites in May 2006.

Microsoft did not participate in the development of ODF. Instead, the company has proposed its own open-source document format standard called Office Open XML (OOXML), which is claimed to be a better format to migrate the legacy information stored in Microsoft's proprietary format. The standard has been approved by ECMA (European Computer Manufacturers Association), and it is currently under the process of fast-track approval by ISO.

Under the fast-track process, ISO allows a 30-day review process of the standard by National Standardizing Bodies (NB) [Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) for India]. During this period, NBs can raise objections to the standard (OOXML) or its contradictions with any other approved standards. If such a contradiction is alleged, a five-month ballot period immediately commences where NBs can vote 'Yes' or 'No' to the standard.

Following allegations of contradictions, the ballot period for OOXML approval commenced on 2 April 2007 and will end on 2 Sep 2007. Within this period, various

NBs including BIS from India are to vote on the ballot. At the end of this period, NBs can raise issues at a meeting of 'ballot resolution group'. During this meeting, points of contention may be resolved by alteration of the text, by ECMA providing satisfactory explanatory comments, by withdrawal of an objection, or by otherwise reaching agreement. According to these procedures a vote is passed if:

- At least two-thirds of the participating members voting shall have approved
- Not more than one-quarter of the total number of votes cast are negative

If this meeting fails to agree on the final text, the fast-tracking of OOXML fails and the procedure is terminated: if the meeting does agree a text, any required changes are applied by the editor and OOXML is passed for publication as an ISO standard.

However, the critics of OOXML say that the standard, despite its claims of interoperability and open source, still relies extensively on many components that are proprietary to Microsoft. Besides, at 6000 pages long and full of many inconsistencies, OOXML is also criticized as a standard that only Microsoft can implement, and that which no other application developer will be able to implement. The critics say that in effect OOXML would still be a proprietary standard.

As a basic truism, the world does not need two standards that duplicate each other and exist for the same purpose. ODF is an ISO standard and has been adopted by many organizations and countries and by various office productivity suites. OOXML seeks to provide an alternative that is neither complete nor superior to ODF.

The adoption of OOXML could deliver a deathblow to the open source movement in India. It could restrain the adoption of Linux and force governments and organizations to remain tied down with proprietary software. At stake is not just a massive financial consideration, but the very right of a country to access, alter and share its digital information.