



## A World of Standards

Nils Brunsson and Bengt Jacobsson

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### CHAPTER

## 12 The Pros and Cons of Standardization — An Epilogue

Nils Brunsson, Bengt Jacobsson

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### Abstract

There is no lack of standardizers in the world, and there are plenty of people who know what is best for everyone else by invoking their expertise. Some arguments used to support standards are that they represent an effective means of information dissemination, they result in better coordination of activities, lead to simplification, and bring advantages in the form of large-scale production. Many of the objections to standards and standardization are similar to those raised against rules and regulations in general. One criticism is that standards are an unwelcome, unnecessary, and harmful intrusion into a world of free, distinct individuals and organizations who are wise enough to decide for themselves, or into the world of civil society or free markets.

**Keywords:** [standardization](#), [standards](#), [simplification](#), [large-scale production](#), [coordination](#), [information dissemination](#), [intrusion](#)

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Standards are attractive. And, as we have seen in the previous chapters, there is no lack of standardizers in the world. There are plenty of people who know what is best for everyone else, often claiming their own expertise. A lot of standardization goes on, but how should it be evaluated? Is standardization useful or even essential, or is it harmful and unnecessary? Will all this standardization lead to too much conformity, or is it a way to achieve co-ordination in situations where other rules are less likely to work? Let us first look at what standardizers say themselves.

## Why standards?

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Standards and standardization tend to be justified on much the same grounds as rules and regulation in general. One argument is that, just like other rules, standards represent an effective way of transmitting information. If we know that someone is complying with a standard with which we ourselves are familiar, this provides us with a good deal of information, obviating the need to ask questions in every individual case. Alternatively, we may not know very much about the content of a standard, but simply assume that it is desirable. The amount of information we need is then even less than in the first case. If we know that a ship has been classified as conforming to certain safety standards, we are perfectly happy to sail on it, often without knowing anything about the exact content of the standards concerned. If we know that a company is certified according to the ISO standard 14001 for environmental management systems, we are supposed to know that its production is as environmentally sound as possible. If the information-conveying role of a standard is to be fulfilled, it is often necessary that a third party should certify that the standard is being followed. We even tend to have more faith in the certifier than in the certified—more in the ship-classifying organization than in the shipowner.

Another argument in favour of using standards is that they have an important coordinating function. Standards are often created with a view to making certain products mutually compatible, so that a plug will fit into a socket, for example. The actions of different actors can also be co-ordinated: if we know that another person is complying with a particular standard, it is easier for us to adjust our actions accordingly. Again this can reduce the amount of information needed. Knowing that the standard exists, and that the other party accepts it, is sufficient: there is no need for the two sides to discuss the details of their actions or products with each other. Often, in fact, we will simply have expected that the other person is going to comply with the standard, which allows us to adjust our action to those of the other party beforehand. Again we recognize the advantages of rules in general.

Standards also result in simplification. They reduce the number of possibilities we have to consider. This can make it easier to get information and to co-ordinate actions. It can also be of value in itself: a chaotic world becomes more ordered, making it easier to orientate ourselves and to understand 'how things are'. This is indicated in official definitions of standards as aiming at the achievement of the 'optimum degree of order' (see Chapter 1).

Standards are also often drawn up on the grounds that they provide the best solution to a problem (or at least a very good solution), perhaps by indicating the form of organization that is most effective or most democratic, or the telephone technology that is best. The implication is that there is no reason not to adhere to the standard, since it is the best to be had. A great many standardizers rely almost exclusively on such arguments, not least all the INGOs that want to improve the world, or the management experts who know 'best' how to improve organizations. The 'best possible solution' argument is also used with the other arguments mentioned above. For instance, there may be several standards that would promote coordination, but why not choose the one that provides the best solution?

The argument that standards have a strong tendency to make everyone alike is one that standardizers rarely use. Instead, they tend to emphasize that using standards can actually favour variation. In the computer industry, for instance, it is argued that agreement on certain standards makes it easier to direct efforts at finding new and innovative solutions to problems for which no standards as yet exist. In the same vein many management books offer standards for ways in which companies should improve their competitiveness—standards that are obviously intended to increase variation, although this may be difficult to achieve if many companies all decide to follow the standards.

Another argument, rather similar to the one about standardization producing similarity, is that standardization brings advantages in the shape of large-scale production. This was an argument that

flourished in the early days of product standardization, when it was claimed that the production of identical goods was a prerequisite of industrialization. Using standardized sizes for clothing, for example, makes things much easier for the clothing industry, just as the adoption of standard dimensions for bolts is of great benefit to the engineering industry.

All of these arguments—about the more effective use of information, better co-ordination of activities, simplification, and the advantages of large-scale production—can be used to show that a certain amount of international standardization is good for international trade and thus for the achievement of prosperity generally. This is certainly one of the main reasons why standardization issues enjoy such high priority in the European Union.

p. 171 As we discussed at the beginning of this book, standards may be especially attractive since they offer some order in a potentially chaotic world. Standards are often regarded as highly legitimate rules, even if they are produced by experts who are somewhat divorced from any democratic procedures. Standards and standardization make it possible to achieve co-ordination without a legal centre of authority (that is, a nation-state or a world state). Such tendencies could be seen in the EU, with its increasing use of product standards and 'soft law' as a means to further integration. Standardization is considered an attractive way of bringing about necessary regulation, avoiding both market solutions and the intervention of states.

## Arguments against standards and standardization

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If people are to believe what the standardizers say, they must be convinced that standards do have all sorts of positive effects. All the same, these effects can be—and indeed have been—questioned on several counts. One might wonder whether the goals ascribed to standardization are desirable, whether standardization does lead to the realization of these goals, and whether there might not be better ways of achieving the goals than by standardization.

Many of the objections to standards and standardization are similar to the objections to rules and regulation in general. Standardization is often seen as an unwelcome, unnecessary, and harmful intrusion into a world of free, distinct individuals and organizations who are wise enough to decide for themselves, or into the world of civil society or free markets. Standardization, it is felt, will mean regulation from outside, whereby actors, things, and conditions are now to be shaped in a uniform manner.

Becoming more alike is often seen as something undesirable, with many present-day actors—organizations or individuals—preferring to be different from one another rather than alike. As described in other chapters, a high degree of similarity produced by standards runs up against theories and conceptions that such actors have about their autonomy and their distinctiveness: states feel they should be steered democratically by their own people, companies that they should be steered by innovation, and individuals that they should be driven by their striving for self-realization—and all of them thus feeling that they should be different.

Standards are also criticized for going too far in stabilizing the world. If everyone does the same thing, what room is there for innovation? If all companies or states are organized in the same way, how can they learn better ways from each other? If all the technical details of a telephone are standardized except for the outer form, will we have anything to expect apart from endless variations in superficial details—telephones looking like bananas, teddy bears, Mickey Mouse, or whatever—without any fundamental innovations in their technical functioning, their quality, or their effectiveness?

Also, can we trust the expertise and goodwill of those who set the rules? How can we know that the standardizers know best what is right for us? If large international corporations play a leading role in

p. 172 standardization, how can we know that ↪ their solutions are best for their consumers or employees, rather than simply for the managers or technicians involved or for the company's shareholders? Similarly, in the case of standardizes who develop standards to be used exclusively by others, how can we determine that their standards are really good for us? If the know-alls in the business field who tell others how large corporations should be managed, were as good as they imply they are, why aren't they doing it themselves?

It is easy to find examples of standardization leading to poor solutions, particularly in the case of product standardization. In terms of safety, for instance, traffic lights based on the red-green colour combination are not a particularly good choice, since these two colours are specially difficult for the colour-blind to distinguish. Or again, a standard height of 440 mm. above ground level for car bumpers may be good for cars, but it is less desirable for human beings since this is the average height above the ground of people's kneecaps. The order of letters on a keyboard, qwerty, which became standard for keyboards is yet another example. The order was originally devised to reduce typing speeds, which was an important consideration at the time in order to prevent the typebars from jamming (David 1986). Although the problem no longer exists, the standard is still with us. We fear that many standards as bad as this still lurk in other areas, although they may be more difficult to demonstrate.

Many critics of regulation and standardization prefer markets to standards. Why not let the market decide how products and services should be designed? Buyers can determine this through the purchases they choose to make. Sometimes, however, it may be the critics of regulation who support standardization, seeing it as a promise of greater freedom and less uniformity in areas that have previously been heavily controlled by directives. If the choice is between national law and standards, or between binding international agreements and standards, many critics of regulation can be expected to prefer standards.

But standardization can also be criticized from the opposite angle, as representing too weak a form of regulation, for its weak links with formal organization, and for its inferiority compared with directives. Critics who take this approach may call for more formal organization. They regard standardization as being too important to world development to be relegated to a bunch of private organizations whose status is unclear and whose democratic roots are weak. Critics of this kind can be expected to call for a return to strong nation-states, perhaps some form of world state, or at least for more state intervention. They would argue that it is better to let a democratically elected body than a private organization determine our rules.

## Standardization and the procrustean heritage

p. 173 We have no answer to the question of whether we need more or less standardization. Whatever line one opts for, some convincing arguments are always available. Standardization deserves to be paid a good deal more attention than it has received up to now. As we noted in Chapter 3, standards are very much a reflection of a modern world that began to emerge as long ago as Descartes, a world informed ↪ with a strong belief in general, abstract, and timeless ideas, in experts and the knowledge possessed by experts. Going even further back in history, we may have something to learn from the old Greek myths.

In a way, standardizing is the art of constructing a procrustean bed. Procrustes was a legendary bandit in Greek mythology, a bandit who placed his victims on a specially constructed bed. The bed was a pattern and a yardstick intended to create conformity. Any captive who was not tall enough was stretched until he reached the right length, while those who were taller than the bed was long had their protruding limbs lopped off. Procrustes had a very clear idea of what other people should look like, and in that sense he was very like the 'modern bandits' whom we have called 'standardizers' in this book.

There are differences between modern standardizers and this legendary bandit. Modern standardizers are often active in a large—sometimes a global—market where they have to compete against other

standardizers. The marauding that occurred in the Theseus myth, to which Procrustes belongs, was limited in regional terms. The standardization imposed in this Greek legend demanded that someone either sought out the bandit or just happened to pass by where he lay in wait, as Theseus did on his way to Athens. This is not the case today, when modern standardizers instead take active steps to disseminate their rules.

The procrustean bed was not made to measure for its own creator. The standard was meant to be imposed not on him but on others. This proved fatal to Procrustes in his meeting with Theseus, who impudently decided to test the standard on the bandit himself. Nor is it unusual for modern standardizers to exclude themselves from the rules that they produce and distribute to others.

In modern societies, procrustean beds are everywhere. Standardizers jostle with one another as they compete for supremacy. As we saw in the earlier chapters in this book, standardizers come in a variety of guises: as management gurus, consultants, academic researchers, organizations formed with the purpose of information exchange, standard-based organizations, or international governmental or nongovernmental organizations. All these individuals or organizations produce rules intended for others. The whole subject of standards—their production, distribution, and adoption—is of central importance in society today and should also be so in the social sciences. ↵