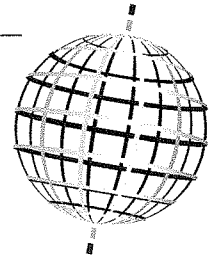


NILS BRUNSSON & BENGT JACOBSSON

(2000)

A World of Standards

Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK, 188 p.



There has been little serious discussion on the importance of standards to global business. Leading an argument about standardization as a form of co-operation and co-ordination in society, this book is opportune in its approach to an important topic. Edited by Nils Brunsson and Bengt Jacobsson — leading scholars of public management and policy — the book bears the stamp of their extensive work in the area of transnational organizations and globalization. In this work the authors attempt to reconcile important issues of organizations doing business in the global arena. The book fares well with audiences of management, sociology and public administration, as the theory of standardization advanced is interdisciplinary in nature. Through its original approach to organizations in the modern world, this text is among the notable contributions to institutional theory literature. It opens new avenues for research aimed at understanding institutional issues of global business.

Gathering contributions from other respected researchers, the book is at times informative and reflective. In parts I and II the focus is on understanding how standards develop and function, and on identifying the important actors who interact in the world of standards. Part III takes on a critical perspective, questioning the existence and future of standardization, and its relevance to society. Data collected from organizations such as the ISO and the OECD informs the reader on the complexity of standardization and strengthens the authors' arguments. Given the access to data, it might have been tempting to approach standardization only from the point of view of standardizers. I was pleased to discover that through the three parts the authors encourage the reader to view standardization from three perspectives: regulator, producer and distributor of standards, and adopter of standards.

The first and the second parts of the book serve as informative incursions into the world of standards and of the organizations that produce and distribute them. In the first part, Brunsson, Jacobsson, along with co-authors G. Ahrne and C. Garsten, establish that standards are a form of regulation. They conceptually distinguish standards from organizations, markets, and normative communities. Furthermore, they argue that society has been using standards to store expert, abstract knowledge, de-contextualized in space and time, and as a way of regulating in situations where a legal center of authority is lacking. What distinguishes standards from other forms of regulation is their voluntary nature.

In the second part S. Furusten, K.T. Hallström, K. Sahlin-Andersson, and R. Henning each contribute chapters that take us within the organizations that produce and distribute standards. This part is quite possibly the most instructive and detached of the three. The authors report on and interpret data collected from the ISO and its subcommittee, TC 176, and from PUMA—a committee of the OECD. In these texts they describe the mechanics of standardization, from knowledge base, the organizing process, to problems faced in selling standards. The authors approach these four chapters candidly but impartially. Standardizers are not shapeless entities, but social organisms that face similar issues as any institutions. The most engaging is the chapter 'Arenas as Standardizers,' (Chapter 7) in which Sahlin-Andersson shows how an international organization, set up as discussion forum (PUMA), coincidentally started to draw its legitimacy from activities in standardization.

The third part is perhaps the most reflective and theoretical of the book. In it, Brunsson and Jacobsson discuss the impact of standards on society. They pose important questions and challenge assumptions made in the previous two sections. For instance, why would anyone follow standards and how voluntary are standards? Brunsson further discusses uniformity and fashion trends as parallels to standardization (Chapters 10 and 11), and maps out possible avenues for standards in the future. The book wraps up with an inspired chapter on the pros and cons of standardization. The arguments for standardization are strong, and overall the benefits outweigh the losses. However, the authors movingly warn that the effectiveness of standardization rests upon the expertise and good will of those who set the rules.

Thoughtfully written, the book assembles some outstanding reflections on a very timely topic. This work in its entirety would benefit academics interested directly or tangentially in understanding standards and their impact on global business. This work may also appeal to practitioners involved in consulting firms and transnational organizations who routinely face issues of standardization ■

Catalin RATIU
 Department of Management
 John Molson School of Business,
 Concordia University, Canada