Standards and standardisation on the eve of a new century

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Post-fordism vs fordism

• flexibility versus rigidity
• adaptive and evolutionary versus planned and fixed relations with the environment
• variety and differentiation versus standardisation and homogeneity

*Symbols of fordism: Model T; assembly line; long hierarchies*
Two forces are at work in creating a post-fordist society

- changes in consumers’ behaviour
- applications of ICT to production processes
The main questions (and my answer)

Is post-fordism a paradigm that is in sharp contrast with standardisation?

A response to the demand for variety, for rapid innovation and so on, requires to reduce the use of standards and norms as a co-ordination device?

My view: Post fordism needs standardisation, but in a different way than in the past
Standardisation in a post-fordist industrial organisation

• is realised at a *level higher* than before
• the heart of standards is not in physical, but in computer connectivity
• the need of connectivity spreads over the boundaries of single organisations: *social nature* of standards
New problems with post-fordist standardisation

– Standardisation helps co-ordination among different firms, enabling them to exchange information, services and components at a lower cost

– But on the other hand, to obtain standardisation it is necessary to solve a co-ordination problem:

شرع the value of standards depends not only from its intrinsic “goodness”, but also an the fact that other people make an identical choice
How to solve the co-ordination problem implicit in the standardisation process?

- Fordism: authority
- Post-fordism: due to the inter-organisational nature of the process, non authoritative ways to define and diffuse standards are more important.

Two new problems about:
- standard definition
- standard diffusion
Problems with social diffusion of standards

- excess of inertia or excess of momentum
- unpredictability
- path dependence
- strategic use of external effects (strategies of announcement, tie-ins contracts... )
Problems with social definition of standards

- Open standards: problems of production of a public good
  - Committees:
    - how to cope with asymmetries and coalition?
    - Problems with the way committees work
  - Proprietary standards: risks of monopoly due to the network effects
Some new directions for a new standard policy

• Public administration: from a “best judge” role, to an accompanying role, tending to reinforce compatibility and to preserve variety

• Committees: flexible rule and attention to users; pre-competitive actions

• Effort towards compatibility: clever use of antitrust policies; creation of a common base of accepted frames and high level standards, in order to give a common ground for evolving technologies

• Right timing