

INTEROPERABILITY

It's Time to Let ANSI Know What the Real World Thinks

Posting standards on-line is such a basic proposition that it amazes me when people argue against it.

The standards establishment's usual argument is that people don't care if standards are on the network and available for free.

They say that serious users can easily afford a few dozen dollars for a piece of paper.

Standards are laws, and laws have to be known to be observed. Standards also are a key educational tool. Educational institutions cannot buy them if they cost lots of money.

That means the next generation of students and young professionals will miss important training. The net result is that we won't get public domain implementations, and we won't learn how to make the standards real.

It can take weeks to get paper copies of

key standards. How can you possibly bang out code when it takes six to eight weeks every time you discover the need for a new document? How can you possibly develop new products when paper versions of the standards are the only way to search for relevant pages? How can you cut and paste protocol definitions into your editor when you only have paper?

This all seems so obvious that when I attend technical conferences engineers often call me aside and, with a puzzled look, ask me why in the world nothing has happened to change the antiquated, elitist documentation

policies of the public standards cartel.

What seems obvious to me is obvious to the rest of the technical community. It is time that we let the American National Standards Institute know our views. With the recent study by the Office of Technology

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Assessment advocating changes in the policies for the distribution of standards, the time is ripe to let policymakers in Washington know there is an issue.

Working with others in the community, I've started a petition drive to demonstrate the depth of feeling about this crucial issue. I posted a copy of the petition on the Internet Engineering Task Force mailing list, and two days later I had hundreds of responses from engineers representing every major computer and telecommunications company, every national laboratory, most major universities, and most government groups that make extensive use of networking.

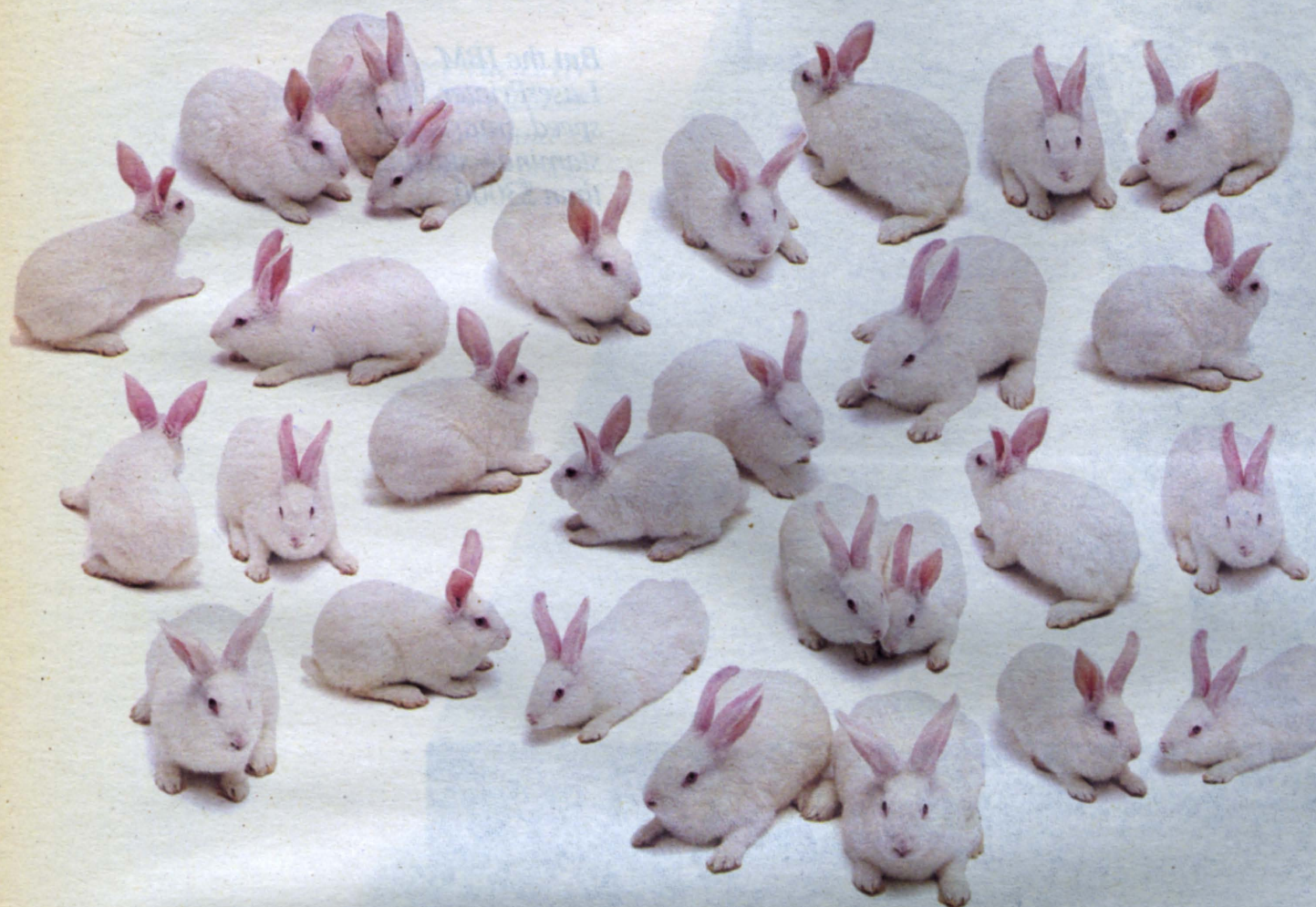
In addition, signatures have come in from all sorts of places. Mitch Kapor of the Electronic Freedom Frontier signed, as did David Buerger, editor in chief of *Communications Week*, and Bob Metcalfe, the publisher of *InfoWorld*.

You too can express your views. The petition is quite simple. It states:

We, the undersigned, believe that all technical standards documents should be freely available in electronic form. Open, on-line access to technical standards documents is an important factor in the success of my organization, is a key component to increased productivity in the U.S. computer and communications industries, and is vital for the initial and continued training of scientists, engineers, and other professionals.

You can send your response by electronic mail to carl@malamud.com or by fax to 516-562-5055. Sign today!

CARL MALAMUD is writing *Exploring the Internet: A Technical Travelogue*, a book that will be featured as *The Interop Book* at Interop Fall. The opinions expressed are his own.



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