

## Open Access to Working Group Documents

### A Personal View (Miles Ellis, Convenor of SC22/WG5)

At a meeting of WG5 in Dresden, 22-26 July 1996, we discussed the recent ISO documents on this topic and passed the following resolution (D2) unanimously:

"That WG5 believes that ISO copyright should not apply to its working documents before the DIS stage."

Many of those present would have preferred something stronger, but were prepared to accept the present position, although we generally believe that ISO's claim to the copyright of a DIS would not stand up in court, if tested.

The use of electronic document transfer has revolutionised our processing, and that of many other WGs, as it allows members of working groups, *and other interested parties*, to discuss issues, resolve problems, and generally get on with the business of developing standards without the need to meet face-to-face. ISO Directives require WGs to work by correspondence wherever possible, and this is the only practical way of doing this. Moreover, electronic distribution is both faster and cheaper than paper distribution (especially if pdf files are used, as these allow interested parties to see the document properly formatted before deciding whether to print it all, to print only a part of it, or simply to preserve it in readable electronic form).

However, since any member of any (P or O) national member body is clearly entitled to access documents, the use of password protection is virtually useless as there will be hundreds of people all over the world entitled to know the username/password combination. Indeed, I have heard it suggested that if such a bureaucratic complication were REQUIRED then the top-level directory should contain just a single READ.ME file which contains the user name and password required to access the lower level directories!

WG5's work is also considerably assisted by email contributions from people who are not members of WG5 itself. Very often they raise issues that have not been identified by members of the Working Group itself, and these are subsequently picked up and acted on by members of the WG. In addition to the "official" SC22WG5 list server, Fortran issues are discussed on various national Fortran Technical Committee lists, notably that relating to the "primary development body" for Fortran (ANSI/X3J3), and a general Fortran discussion list operated by the UK's Mailbase service. Frequently messages are sent to several of these lists to ensure that they get the widest distribution. Indeed, several countries are only

represented on the official SC22WG5 list by reference to their national list. Although this does result in some duplication, it does ensure that anyone who is, in any way, interested/involved in the language gets the opportunity to be involved. *It has also led, on occasion, to new members for the Working Group itself.*

Any suggestion that only Working Group members should be allowed to submit messages to Working Group email lists is, therefore, totally undesirable, as it would simply drive technical discussion away from the official Working Group list, to the detriment of those WG members who are not also members of other email lists..

As an author, I am well aware of the problems of unlimited electronic access to documents that I would prefer to keep to myself, but standards are meant to be for the benefit of the majority, and it would dramatically reduce the effectiveness of electronic communications if the ideas proposed by ISO were to be adopted. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that it might be impossible to continue working under such restrictive conditions and it might then be better to go back to national standards development (with international input), based on those countries which do not impose such absurd restrictions on their working documents.

Finally, I must admit that some of the reasoning behind some of the ISO proposals does not seem unacceptable. However it appears to have been drafted by people who are out of touch with the way that the world really is (a common fault of politicians and bureaucrats ;-).

The ease with which electronic documents can be distributed, and possibly modified, means that new steps must be introduced to control things. However, technology itself is coming to our aid here. For example, if documents were only to be available in PostScript and Acrobat formats (or even just Acrobat!) then they could be freely printed or displayed, but it would be very difficult to modify them. (Theoretically it would be impossible, but it would be foolhardy to say that!). Moreover, Acrobat documents can be searched for words or phrases just like a text file, and can even include hypertext links within the document or to external (World Wide Web) documents. Other systems, no doubt, could offer similar facilities.

In my view we should concentrate on making working documents as freely available as possible, but should make them available in a way which ensures that they can only easily be used for the purpose for which they are intended. The use of electronic communication and distribution has so much to offer that it would be very shortsighted to cripple its use, and possibly the whole standards development process, for lack of taking a wider, and more far-reaching, perspective.