Letters
continued from p. 2

Change the approach of MicroStandards?

To the Editor:

In response to Michael Smolin’s solicitation of opinion in the December MicroStandards column, I agree that publication of an entire draft standard in IEEE Micro is not a good use of space and is not warranted. For that matter, publication of adopted standards is likewise usually not practical due to their length.

On the other hand, I feel coverage in IEEE Micro of standards in progress has been inadequate and unbalanced. We have received endless discussions of bus issues, including six pages of cartoons in the August 1986 issue, and very little else. I hope they don’t start on the 1-bus; now that would be a charade.

Coincidentally, I was recently considering writing to Dr. Smolin on a standards issue which confronted me recently: transferring files of data between systems. Here is a problem with many solutions, most of which are proprietary (secret) or expensive, often both. If you want something public and simple enough to implement yourself in your spare time, use XMODEM. It’s rude and crude, but it’s public and easy and will do the job. What we need in this area is a standard protocol with similar capabilities (byte-oriented, error-checked, eight-bit transmission) without the obvious weaknesses of the XMODEM protocol and which fits comfortably into the OSI environment without burdening the microcomputer user with excessive complexity.

In researching this problem, I reviewed my back issues of Micro (I have a complete set) and discovered something called STD-949, Media Independent Information Transfer. Is this what I was looking for? I don’t yet know, because I have just now ordered my copy. This rather important standard is discussed only twice in Micro, as far as I can determine: In May 1982 there is a one-line announcement of the formation of the working group; in June 1985 there is an announcement of approval and a brief summary of the contents.

I am left wondering how this standards process works. Apparently a small group of active participants can originate a standards topic, write a standard, and adopt it, without any significant public (i.e., CS membership) review. An official standard of the Computer Society evidently does not require a vote of adoption by the membership (perhaps only associate members are excluded).

My ignorance is no doubt my own fault, as I do not own the IEEE Stan-
dards Manual. Nevertheless, I feel I could have been better informed by the MicroStandards column without resorting to full publication of draft standards. I recommend that the following approach be taken by MicroStandards:

1. When a standards working group is formed, publish the objective; i.e., define the problem the standard is meant to solve. This requires more than one sentence and less than one page.
2. When controversial issues arise during the formulation of a standard, discuss the controversy in the column. This may not help bring resolution, but it will help maintain interest.
3. When a draft standard reaches a point when meaningful comment could be made by a nonparticipant, summarize the draft in the column in one page or less, and offer a complete draft to members at nominal cost for comments. I am not concerned at all that someone might apply it prematurely. Caveat emptor applies in this case.
4. Provide a mechanism (i.e., a ballot) which requires a formal consensus to adopt a standard. It seems to me that adoption of a standard is a more serious business than election of officers. If any group that wants to define a standard can do so by choosing the subgroup within which they need achieve consensus, the process is cheapened. It is as important to legitimacy of the process to reject frivolous standards as to adopt necessary ones.

Thank you for this opportunity to express my views. I wish Michael Smolin well in his role as editor of MicroStandards, and hope I can look forward to increased balance and substance in this column.

Gary A. Hill
Mendota Heights, MN

(See MicroStandards in this issue for Michael Smolin’s response to Hill’s letter; he plans to reply to Buckley’s letter in the April issue.—Ed.)

Reader Interest Survey

Indicate your interest in this department by circling the appropriate number on the Reader Interest Card.

High 195 Medium 196 Low 197