

A person in a long coat is walking away from the viewer towards a destroyed city in a hazy, orange atmosphere. The city features tall, jagged buildings and a bridge with many missing pillars. In the foreground, there is a damaged vehicle with a license plate that reads '99821' and '09-883'.

# What's the Deal with Human Rights and Technical Standards?

Dan Appelquist  
Open Source Strategist, Samsung  
W3C Advisory Board Co-Chair

# Intro: Daniel Appelquist

Open Source & Open Standards Strategist at Samsung

ex-of Snyk, UK Government Digital Service, Vodafone, Telefónica (and former “dot-com CTO”)

Co-Chair W3C Advisory Board - previously co-chair of the W3C Technical Architecture Group for 12 years

Co-founder of Open Web Docs

Co-Chair of the OpenSSF Global Cybersecurity Policy working group, OpenSSF TAC Alumni

Immigrant and US/UK dual national

**SAMSUNG**

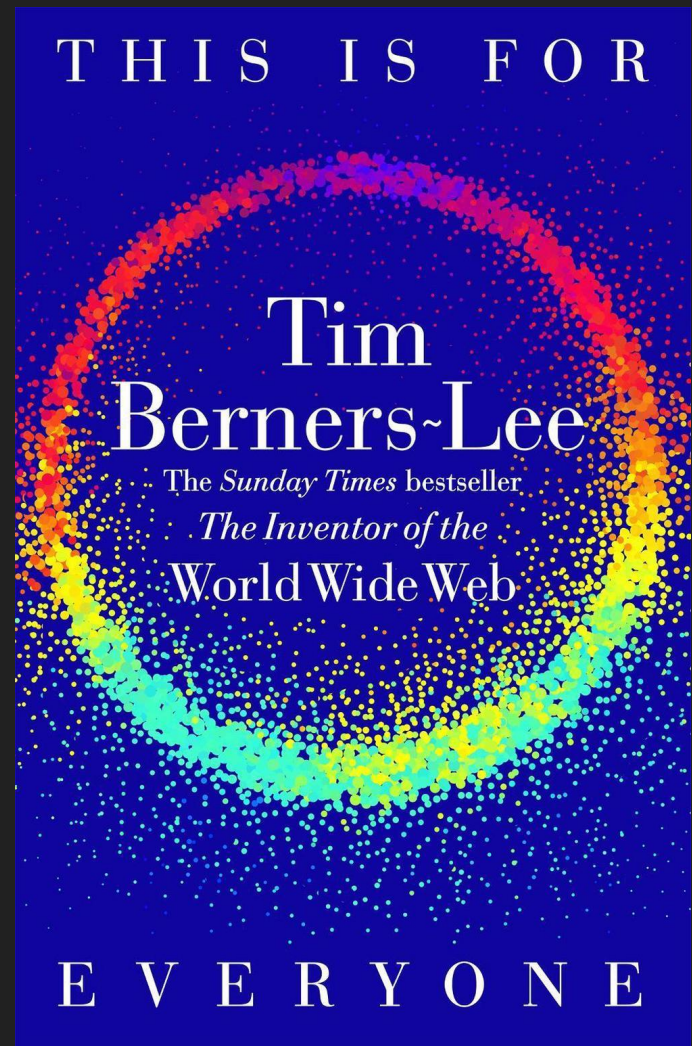


What future are we **building**?



“Technology should always serve the **human being**, not the other way around.”

“You [have] to develop technology and society together. You [have] to fight, in a principled and continuous way, for human rights.”



Standards are **architecture**  
...that we use to build the future.

Standards require **wide review**...

# What facilitates wide review?

Open access

Inclusive culture

Transparency

Willingness to listen

Public comment

Royalty-free licensing

Connections

Published values

# W3C Horizontal Review

Accessibility (A11Y)

Internationalization (I18N)

Privacy

Security

Architecture & Design

Sustainability (coming soon)

# Special review groups

Accessible Platform Architectures

Internationalization Interest Group

Privacy Working Group

Security Interest Group

Technical Architecture Group (TAG)

**“User needs** come before the needs of **web page authors**, which come before the needs of **user agent implementors**, which come before the needs of **specification writers**, which come before **theoretical purity.**”

Web Platform Design Principles:  
<https://www.w3.org/TR/design-principles/>  
c.f. RFC 8890

ORGANISATION EUROPEENNE POUR LA RECHERCHE NUCLEAIRE  
**CERN** EUROPEAN ORGANIZATION FOR NUCLEAR RESEARCH

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STATEMENT CONCERNING CERN W3 SOFTWARE RELEASE INTO PUBLIC  
DOMAIN

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

**Introduction**

The World Wide Web, hereafter referred to as W3, is a global computer networked information system.

The W3 project provides a collaborative information system independent of hardware and software platform, and physical location. The project spans technical design notes, documentation, news, discussion, educational material, personal notes, publicity, bulletin boards, live status information and numerical data as a uniform continuum, seamlessly intergated with similar information in other disciplines.

The information is presented to the user as a web of interlinked documents .

Access to information through W3 is:

- via a hypertext model;
- network based, world wide;
- information format independent;
- highly platform/operating system independent;
- scalable from local notes to distributed data bases.

Webs can be independent, subsets or supersets of each other. They can be local, regional or worldwide. The documents available on a web may reside on any computer supported by that web.

1993: CERN puts the web  
browser and server code  
into the **public domain**

# Ethical Principles for the Web

Core principles on top of which we can build actionable advice.

“Put internationally recognized human rights at the core of the web platform.”

Ethical Web Principles Statement:

<https://www.w3.org/TR/ethical-web-principles/>

A person in a long coat is walking away from a damaged, futuristic car in a dystopian city. The car's trunk is open, and the license plate reads '99821' and '09-883'. The background shows a city with tall buildings and a bridge, all under a hazy, orange sky. The text 'Technology without ethics makes social inequality worse.' is overlaid on the image.

Technology without ethics makes social inequality worse.

“But we’re not ethicists!”

This is all our responsibility.

# What do Open Standards have to do with Human Rights?

Technical standards are rules that tell **systems** what they can and can't do; therefore they can tell **people** what they can and cannot do, and what can be done to them.

We can build standards that accommodate the needs of the people **outside of the mainstream** of society, or we can choose to ignore those needs.

We can build standards that resist **surveillance** or we can build them to accommodate it.

“But technology is **neutral!**”

Turns out, **no**.

All human endeavours are **political**.

# Case Study: **Securing** the Web (2014)

- TAG, IAB, other groups, identified a problem: **pervasive monitoring**.
- OK, Snowden identified the problem.
- RFC 7258: "pervasive monitoring is an **attack**".
- TAG issued a finding: "Securing the Web".
- We worked together to put together workshop ("STRINT").
- Many actions by many people.
- Now, majority of the web is encrypted.
- Pervasive monitoring is (still) not illegal.



<https://www.w3.org/2014/strint/>

# United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights recommended technical standards orgs:

- “... support the inclusion of human rights **due diligence**.”
- “...development of procedural mechanisms that allow for human rights to be addressed at multiple points throughout the standardization lifecycle”
- “...ensure that standards development processes rest on multi-stakeholder principles and are as transparent, open and inclusive as possible.”

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/tools-and-resources/tech-and-human-rights-study-making-technical-standards-work-humanity>





# THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF Human Rights

**WHEREAS** recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,

**WHEREAS** disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people,

**WHEREAS** it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law,

**WHEREAS** it is essential to promote the development of friendly relations among nations,

**WHEREAS** the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women and have

determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,

**WHEREAS** Member States have pledged themselves to achieve, in co-operation with the United Nations, the promotion of universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms,

**WHEREAS** a common understanding of these rights and freedoms is of the greatest importance for the full realisation of this pledge,

**NOW THEREFORE** THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

PROCLAIMS this Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.

# Human Rights Due Diligence

Ask:

- Who is excluded?
- Who can be harmed?
- Who benefits?
- What power imbalances is this exacerbating?
- How does this impact people's quality of life?

Engage with:

- Accessibility and privacy experts

# Multi-Stakeholder Principles (e.g. OpenStand)

- **Respectful Cooperation** – Standards organizations respect each other's autonomy, integrity, and processes.
- **Adherence to Principles** – Ensures decisions are made fairly, with transparency and opportunities for appeal.
- **Broad Consensus** – All views are considered in the decision-making process to achieve agreement across interests.
- **Collective Empowerment** – Standards are defined based on technical merit and aim for global interoperability and innovation.
- **Voluntary Adoption** – Standards are adopted voluntarily, with success determined by market acceptance.

# Transparent and Open

Open standards already value:

- Transparency
- Participation
- Collaboration

...and must expand to:

- Power awareness
- Inclusion beyond developers
- Explicit rights framing
- Dissent documentation

# Diversity Equity, and Inclusion

Strong **code of conduct** addresses **power imbalance**

Standards groups also must be positive work environments

Minimise: dismissive language & tone, coded language, trollishness, cliques

Emphasize: collaboration, healthy respect for differing opinion, listening

Establish systems that encourage diverse participation

Culture of enforcement

Real consequences: kick out that “indispensable” yet problematic person

These principles are now enshrined in  
the **Vision for W3C**.

Draft Statement: <https://www.w3.org/TR/w3c-vision/>

# Making a place for **civil society**

If only well-funded Western companies and governments show up, that's not multistakeholder — that's capture.

What non governmental organizations are involved in the work you do?

How are those groups supported?

How are their voices emphasized?

How can we make more space for these types of organizations in our work?

Vetting process

Case study: Center for Democracy & Technology in W3C

Case study: WITNESS in C2PA

# Consideration for Threats & Harms

Establish societal impact assessment criteria

Write threat scenarios for standards

Mitigate against these threats and harms in the standard itself

# Case Study: C2PA

Dedicated Threats & Harms Task Force

Participation by civil society groups - including WITNESS

Developing abuse scenarios grounded in real concerns

e.g. how certificate authority capture could lead to a government control point for truth

Scenarios subject to peer review within the C2PA organization

Culture of consideration

[https://spec.c2pa.org/specifications/specifications/2.4/security/Harms\\_Modelling.html](https://spec.c2pa.org/specifications/specifications/2.4/security/Harms_Modelling.html)

# Case study: identifying risks in Digital Credentials

- Digital credentials introduce systemic risk to privacy, autonomy, and participation on the web
- Lower friction = more data sharing, expanding surveillance by both governments and companies
- Overuse is inevitable once infrastructure exists (e.g. login, personalization, age checks)
- Exclusion is built in: many people cannot, should not, or will not present credentials
  - Creates a permanent digital underclass?
- Centralization of trust and control threatens the open, global nature of the web
- Accountability is weak or absent — users cannot realistically audit or challenge misuse
- Real world examples where these issues have played out, e.g. India's Aadhaar scheme
- Key principle: the web must not require identity documents for ordinary use
- Call to action: design systems around human rights, not just technical capability
- Credentials should be exceptional, minimal, and user-controlled

See <https://www.w3.org/2001/tag/doc/prevent-credential-abuse/>

# Case study: IAB/W3C Workshop on **Age-Based Restrictions** on Content

Explicit recognition that age-gating is adjacent to censorship

Considered impacts on vulnerable groups, such as LGBTQ+ community

Included multidisciplinary participation

Discussed privacy-preserving alternatives

Recognized that “privacy-preserving” systems can still produce coercion, chilling effects, and normalization of identity checks

Framed standards work as requiring threat modelling for societal harms, not just security threats

<https://datatracker.ietf.org/group/agews/about/>

Process informed by ethics & human rights, contributes to a better **future**.

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W3C Wide Review: <https://www.w3.org/guide/documentreview/>

Ethical Web Principles: <https://www.w3.org/TR/ethical-web-principles/>

Privacy Principles: <https://www.w3.org/TR/privacy-principles/>

Vision for W3C: <https://www.w3.org/TR/w3c-vision/>