EtherPad As an Alternative to Google Docs for Scribing Meeting Notes
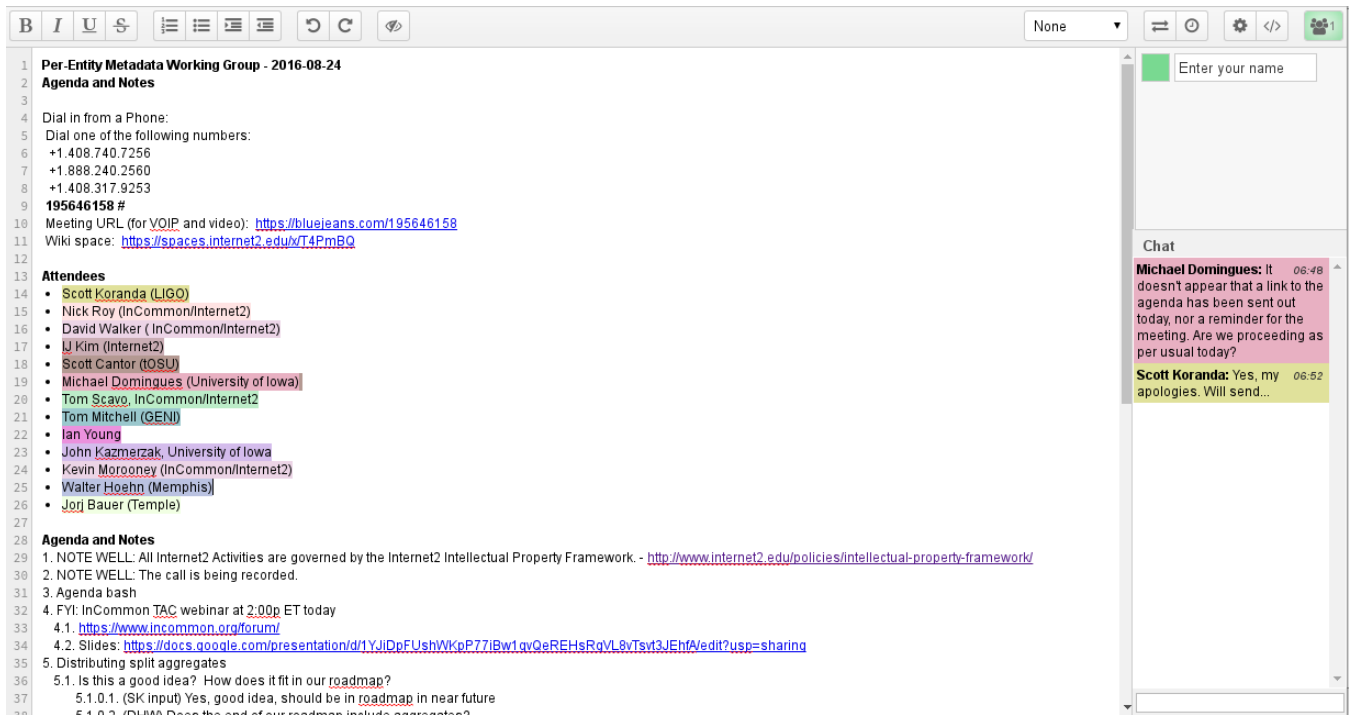
The Per-Entity Metadata Working Group used EtherPad (as hosted by the Mozilla Foundation), as opposed to Google Docs, for live-scribing of its meeting notes. Here are some brief observations of that experience.

- The initial motivation for using EtherPad was to avoid Google's subscription requirements, particularly since we were encouraging significant participation from non-US institutions.
- The Mozilla Foundation's EtherPad service allows anyone to create a Pad (a shared note-taking document) anonymously. The tool encourages participants to enter their names, but it is not required.
- During a call, each participant is assigned a color that is used to highlight their edits. These colors are also used in a chat window, and current participants' names are listed with their colors in the upper right. (The following screen shot was taken from a Pad archive, so there are no current participants. During the call, attendees were asked to type their names and affiliations, however, as shown below.)

- The resulting Pad not only represents the final version of the notes, but can also be "replayed" to any point in its history by using a slider.
- The Mozilla Foundation retains Pads for a few days, so Pads were created a couple of days before each call. After a call, the notes were saved in two ways. First, the notes were copied and pasted into a wiki page. The wiki page does not have the participants' colors or the ability to be replayed, so the notes were also exported in EtherPad's native format and attached to the wiki page. The exported Pad can be uploaded to an EtherPad server at a later date for the additional functionality.

Pros of EtherPad

- The color highlighting makes it easier to see who is contributing to notes during a call, as does the ability to replay the editing process.
- The Mozilla Foundation is probably more acceptable than Google to privacy-minded working group participants. In addition, anyone can host an EtherPad service; the software is open source.
- If meeting notes are to be retained after the lifetime of a working group, EtherPad encourages (well, forces) better long-term information management of the notes than Google Docs (*e.g.*, by converting notes to the wiki after each call).

Cons of EtherPad

- Because of the short retention period for Pads (by the Mozilla Foundation, at least), a few minutes are required after each call to export the call's notes to the wiki. It should be noted, though, that Google also makes no promises about document retention, so it should not be relied upon for long-term retention after the lifetime of a working group, if long-term retention of meeting notes is desired.
- EtherPad does not have the formatting capabilities to produce documents suitable for publication; it's really a tool for note taking. Google Docs is the superior tool for collaborative authorship of published documents.