

Reflections from the Past: A Guide to the Future

In the Beginning . . .

The articles of incorporation of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers stated that the object of the Society shall be . . . "Advancement in the theory and practice of motion picture engineering and the allied arts and sciences, the standardization of the mechanisms and practices employed therein, and the maintenance of a high professional standing among its members."

What is SMPTE?

The focus of the Society's work is the field of moving images, with an emphasis on interchange. Interchange implies the ability to capture moving images on one device and present it to audiences in many locations on a variety of devices. Interchange provides the means of reaching a mass audience using mechanisms that are ubiquitous. At one time, the distribution of those images was by the single medium of film. Later, electronic wireless broadcasting (television) became an important means of distribution of content. Still later, wired distribution (cablecasting and telephony) and recorded media (tape and disc) evolved, allowing consumers a greater choice of media.

Moving SMPE to SMPTE

Lawrence C. Porter (SMPE President 1922-23) noted in the early 1920s: "Today pictures are being transmitted by radio. It is but a step from the transmission of one picture to the transmission of a series of pictures, which joined together, make a moving picture. It is, therefore, not only possible, but probable, that we will show . . . motion pictures broadcast by radio." Mr. Porter saw radio broadcasting of motion pictures (later termed television) as part of the world of SMPE.

In 1937, when Zworykin published an account ("Iconoscopes and Kinescopes in Television") of the RCA high-definition electronic television system (441 lines) in the *Journal*, he was speaking to the members of the SMPE, not the SMPTE.

Loren Ryder (SMPE President 1947-48) believed that the scope of the Society activities included all phases of pictorial rendition of action.

In the January 1950 issue of the *Journal*, the Society's President, Earl Sponable, noted:

"This issue of the *Journal* marks several changes of sufficient importance to justify pausing to give them careful thought. It is the first issue in a new year — a year that



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begins the second half of the twentieth century. The years just past have witnessed the greatest growth in scientific achievement the world has ever known. We have all had some part in that growth. The years to come promise to outdo those gone, and we shall have our part in this future.

"One such achievement is the motion picture, now at a state of perfection not even dreamed of at the turn of the century. And what is its future? To me it seems that we are approaching another turning point in the art, just as we did some twenty years ago, when sound became a commercial reality. The imminence of this coming change is due in part at least to the rapid growth of a new method of presenting scenes and people in action, capable of bringing motion pictures directly into the home, as well as directly into the theater. I refer of course to television, with its important additional sense of immediacy. True, television pictures are perhaps crude when compared to today's professional motion pictures, but they will not always remain so, and just as your Society has been a leader in the coordination of the development of, and setting up standards for, motion pictures, so there is a similar job to be done in television. Your recent vote to include 'Television' in the name of your Society recognizes this need, as well as the fact that in certain regions the interests of television and motion picture engineers coincide. Each can learn much from the other.

"Beginning with this [January 1950] issue, the *Journal* will contain more and more articles of direct and immediate interest to television engineers; it is hoped that they will find their membership to be sufficiently rewarding so they will become energetic in their support of the Society and its aims.

"So in this — our new *Journal*, our new year, our new half-century — we have

opportunities to prove our worth."

Statements made by the Society's leaders over the quarter-century ending in 1950 show that the opening of SMPE to include electronic means of distribution was not an impulsive act, but the result of a careful study of the changing environment in the distribution of motion pictures. It came from leadership that recognized that to grow and succeed the Society must be inclusive in its approach to technology, not exclusive.

A Guide to the Future

SMPTE is firmly committed to the world of motion pictures and the motion imaging arts and sciences. As new mechanisms for motion image capture, production, storage, distribution, and display evolve, the Society seeks to investigate, incorporate, and standardize the technology so that the creative community can use these tools in their productions and in distribution of their creation to their audience, the consumers.

SMPTE began preparing for the transition from the world of analog technology to the world of digital technology over two decades ago. The early work in digital technology included the test demonstrations in San Francisco in 1981 and the SMPTE 4:2:2 component interface standard, the SMPTE composite interface standard, and digital tape standards to support both. The march forward has been steady and continuous. The technology involved covers all aspects of electronic imaging and is inclusive. Today, the work continues, developing technology that includes high-definition standards, progressive-scan formats, packetized data transports, and unique product identifiers.

Our role as a professional organization is the promotion of technical excellence in the industry. The definition of excellence must change as the technology employed by the industry changes and improves. Our role is to transform revolutionary change into evolutionary processes, so that new technology can be employed with minimum disruption and maximum benefit.

If there is a trend-line in our history . . . if there is a message for our future . . . it is that the Society's horizon is always expanding, and the Society will be successful only as long as it continues to expand to include new opportunities. That is the key to the changes the Society has introduced in the last few years. Earl Sponable's words in 1950 apply today, for truly, "The years to come promise to outdo those gone, and we shall have our part in this future."

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