

SMPTE Controversy: Debate or Decision

By Harold J. Eady

Every industry, whether it be transportation, food, building, motion pictures and television, or other, has its organizations and societies dedicated to bringing about the standards needed for successful commerce. And, were there no such standards governing the technical aspects of these industries, chaos or monopoly could result. Bringing about these standards involves legal, economic, and ethical issues. Those who take on this responsibility, who are charged with staving off technical incompatibility, have undertaken no easy task, but rather one that offers little thanks and probable ridicule. Too many divergent interests are at stake to ever hope for total unanimity without dissent.

The Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers does not purport to be a dictating society with authority to choose and enforce standards, but rather a conciliatory body made up of a diverse group of people banding together to provide a forum for scientific discussion. Their goal is to bring about voluntary standardization through in-depth examination and consensus.

The goals of these proceedings, the outcome of the deliberations staged in this arena provided by the SMPTE, are standards and practices that are technically excellent, while being commercially viable. In this arena, compromise is preferred over capitulation.

Those who would accuse this Society of inaction and reticence; those who would decry the SMPTE for not forcing decisions before full debate, are often the very ones who would abhor and withdraw support of an overly authoritative dictating group.

Those who do not agree with the charter of the SMPTE; those who would prefer decision without debate rather than debate with possibly no decision, should realize that to do so would alter the original and sustaining purpose of the SMPTE. It should also be kept in mind that any



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dictating of standards or coercing of parties involved would have serious legal ramifications.

Much of the recent controversy concerning the SMPTE stems from a lack of knowledge of that original and sustaining purpose, and of the operating procedures set forth by the governing body that has been elected by a membership representing every phase of the motion-picture and television industries.

Let us examine that charter as it pertains to the recent controversies, and it will become abundantly clear that there were no choices in the road taken.

Sixty-nine years ago a handful of motion-picture engineers formed an organization to help create order during the technical development of a fledgling industry. Their overall purpose was to exchange ideas, disseminate technical information, and *help bring about voluntary standards* for equipment and practices related to their industry. In 1950, this group enlarged the scope of their work to include the television industry.

Although the original purpose has not changed, the SMPTE has grown to over 8000 members in 60 countries who exchange ideas at local and national conferences, disseminate information through a prestigious

monthly journal and annual technical exhibits, and help bring about voluntary industry standards by recruiting over 500 specialists in their fields to serve on 8 technical committees and 55 subgroups. These subgroups, many of which are working groups for standardization, concern themselves with narrow segments of the overall industry. It is at this level that standardization usually begins. The volunteers that serve on the standardization committees follow a carefully established procedure designed to ensure that due process is maintained. They must work within definite legal constraints and self-imposed ethical guidelines, such as limiting the number of representatives from one faction.

Also, the SMPTE is prohibited from undertaking comparative studies or ratings of competitive systems or products. Basically, this means that the committees cannot choose one technically adequate system over another technically adequate system, but can only document both. For example, it cannot choose one format over another.

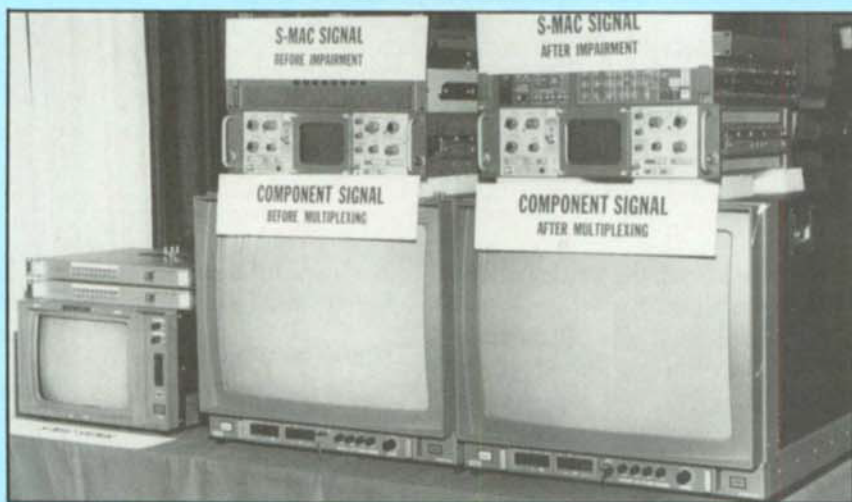
A proposal for a standard is developed through a series of formal meetings where tests and demonstrations may be presented. During this time, all interested parties can offer their arguments and technical evidence. A consensus must be reached before a recommendation is made.

In addition to the consensus principle, the following criteria are carefully considered during the development stages:

1. All substantially concerned parties shall have had an opportunity to express their views, and an objective effort shall have been made to resolve all dissenting viewpoints.

2. There shall be evidence of national use or potential national use of a proposed standard or recommended practice.

3. Before a proposal is approved, any recognized significant conflict with an American National Standard



A result of committee work was the compact television demonstration at the 19th Annual Television Conference in San Francisco, February 1985.

shall have been resolved.

4. Due consideration shall have been given to the existence of other standards having national or international acceptance in the given field.

5. There is no evidence that the standard is contrary to public interest.

6. There is no evidence that the proposal contains unfair provisions.

7. There is no evidence of technical inadequacy.

If these criteria are met and an agreement is reached by the working group, a draft is presented to the technical committee under whose auspices the working group is conducting their business. If accepted there, the document is then examined by the Standards Committee, consisting of the chairmen of all eight technical committees. The intention of the SMPTE standards program is to produce American National Standards and therefore the procedures of due process of the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) must be followed. Unlike the national law-type standards of Europe, the American National Standard is intended as a guide to aid, not compel, the manufacturer, the consumer, or the general public. The establishing of an American National Standard or an SMPTE Recommended Practice in no respect precludes anyone from manufacturing, marketing, or purchasing articles not conforming to the standard. The

process is entirely voluntary, and the usage of standards is dependent completely upon the consumer.

It is clearly evident that the SMPTE standardization procedure is a structured democratic process with all the inherent merits and limitations of such a process. Furthermore, it intentionally lacks the authority to enact its recommendations into law. It is up to the individual manufacturers and users involved to comply with the recommendations.

Although the SMPTE has successfully developed over 200 standards dealing with every aspect of cinema and television operation, recent attention has been focused on a few unresolved proposals that have overshadowed the many successes.

Whenever diverse factions assemble in an attempt to reach an agreement on matters affecting

present development efforts and future marketing plans, there are myriad technical and financial implications that complicate the proceedings. In recent years, the number of interested parties in each emerging technology has grown to include participants from diverse cultures with different languages, technical training, and manners of proceeding. These matters are further complicated by the enormous financial implications of the standard's outcome. It is not surprising that stalemates sometimes result. It is, in fact, surprising that an attempt to standardize is even made in some situations. But, it is the charge of the SMPTE to bring these sundry parties into an open forum of discussion with the hope of finding some mutually beneficial and acceptable avenue to standardization. Failures are inevitable, but failure to attempt negotiation because of possible public censure if unsuccessful, would be unthinkable.

Those who criticize this group for not forcing parties to agree are asking the members of the SMPTE to overstep their authority, to violate the democratic procedure and the very essence of their charter. It is up to those who would be affected by the standards to see the benefits of such standardization and enter the arena provided by the SMPTE with full intention of ultimate agreement in a timely fashion. Perhaps focusing attention on this aspect will yield greater results than censuring the SMPTE, whose function is more to host debate rather than to impose decision.



A typical engineering meeting. This is the Laboratory Services Technology Committee, chaired by Si Becker.