Message from the Engineering Vice-President

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SMPTE—An International Standards Body

When SMPE, the Society of Motion Picture Engineers, was formed in 1926, the greatest interest in the work of the Society came from individuals and companies in the North American motion picture industry. In those days it might have been reasonable to think of SMPE as an American, or North American organization.

This changed quite soon; SMPE acquired members from other countries and SMPE Standards for motion pictures came to be adopted across the world.

The "T" for television was added in 1950, and as the world proceeded to adopt diverse standards for television, SMPTE concentrated on North American standards. In fact, there was a division of labor—SMPTE handled standards for NTSC and related systems; EBU, the European Broadcasting Union, published standards for 50 Hz systems. Despite this focus, some SMPTE television standards became internationally recognized; the best example is SMPTE time code—probably the most widely used standard in the media industries.

SMPTE's role on the international arena rapidly became more important in the digital era. SMPTE and EBU worked jointly to develop the digital component standard for both 50 Hz and 60 Hz environments. The 13.5 MHz sampling rate was agreed, and this and the 4:2:2 sampling structure verified during joint SMPTE/EBU tests in San Francisco in 1981. The resulting standard, SMPTE 125, was subsequently adopted by CCIR (now ITU-R) as Recommendation 601.

Cooperation with the EBU continued to flourish, and eventually EBU decided to stop publishing standards, and to ask SMPTE to document 50 Hz systems. This cooperation has benefited both organizations, and the industry as a whole. Now standards are developed for 50 Hz and 60 Hz environments simultaneously, resulting in much improved equipment compatibility, and lower costs for all users. Cooperative efforts extended into planning for future systems. The Joint EBU/SMPTE Task Force for Harmonized Standards for the Exchange of Program Material as Bit Streams produced reports in 1997 and 1998, defining requirements and guidelines for an environment that is still a work-in-progress even today.

Today, SMPTE is truly an international organization, with members in nearly 100 countries. The Society's 14 Technology Committees cover a host of topics related to motion imagery and related information and have participants from many parts of the world. This presents both opportunities and challenges. Much of the business of the committees is conducted by e-mail and the electronic exchange of documents, but the physical meetings still play an important role. In fact, these meetings are often the key to resolving conflicting viewpoints. More than that, they provide the venue for a level of interaction or networking that increases everyone's knowledge and understanding.

The majority of the physical meetings are in North America. This is obviously convenient for the many participants from the U.S. and Canada. It is also a good compromise for many others, in that a North American venue represents almost "equal pain" for members traveling from Europe and Asia. However, SMPTE has recognized the need to be more accessible to members in other countries, and a significant number of meetings are now held in other countries.

For some years now, one of the four meeting cycles each year has been held in Europe, generally immediately after the International Broadcasting Convention in September. Our friends at EBU are frequent hosts in Geneva, but we have also had two meeting cycles in England, as guests of the BBC and Sony. In September 2005 we return to England, as guests of the International Association of Broadcast Manufacturers (IABM) and Snell and Wilcox.

We have also held meetings in Osaka, Japan, as guests of Panasonic, and this year we take another step. The July 2005 meetings will be held near Sydney, Australia, in facilities kindly provided by the Australian Film, Television and Radio School, and with considerable assistance from the local SMPTE Section. The time and venue are chosen to be adjacent to the SMPTE 2005 Conference & Exhibition in Sydney.

Why do we do this? It is not likely that we will get regular attendance at other meeting cycles from Australians and New Zealanders—much as they would be welcome. The benefit we hope to achieve is a greater awareness of the work being conducted, and of the SMPTE process. We will start the week with an orientation session, intended to familiarize local participants with the activities of the various committees, and how the organization works. We hope that, given the opportunity to observe and participate, and to meet many of the "regulars," more engineers will be aware of the relevance of the work, and feel able to participate by electronic means, even if they cannot generally attend the physical meetings.

In this, like all things, we must strive for balance. In the 21st century, SMPTE would be failing in its duty to the industry, if it did not permit participation in the standards development process by electronic means, largely removing the barriers of time and distance. However, SMPTE recognizes the continued value of physical meetings, and the important role they play in the work of the Society. I hope that the meetings in Australia will help to bridge this gap and give those who must participate remotely, a greater sense of connection to the process.