June 1992

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Recommended Citation

Paul, Sandra K. (1992) "Chaos/ Multimedia Chaos," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 4: Iss. 3, Article 24.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.1238>

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Multimedia Chaos

By Sandra K. Paul, President (SKP Associates)

A headline reading "MPC Show Tried to Bring Order to Multimedia Chaos" has to catch the eye of the author of this column. Surprisingly, that article appeared in the April 27, 1992 issue of *Publishers Weekly*, not in some technical journal. This column will look at the multimedia formats and give you two people's view of why they should be of concern and interest to publishers, wholesalers and librarians.

Remember the announcement about CD-ROM? It was certain to replace not only print-on-paper publications, but most of the online services as well. For the first time, consideration was given to standards in advance of release — no VHS/Beta Max situation this time! Philips and Sony worked together to produce hardware that played the same CDs. A national Information Standards Organization (NISO) Standards Committee capitalized on the work of the informal "High Sierra Group" to develop an ANSI and international standard for where critical indicative information should be placed on CD-ROM.

At that time, Philips muddled the waters a bit by announcing that they would be producing, in the future, a home entertainment product called CD-I (Compact Disk Interactive). Well, the future and interactivity (or multimedia, as it is more commonly being called) is here. Philips' CD-I player is now available; the hardware sells for \$1,000 and it plays disks based on different standards than those found on CD-ROM. Philips also developed the CD-XA format, for hardware which can play BOTH the CD-ROM and CD-I diskettes. (One example of hardware based on the CD-XA format is the much-publicized Sony Data Diskman, also known as the Bookman.)

Tandy and nine other companies are offering IBM PC-compatible players designed to a Microsoft MPC (Multimedia PC) standard at about \$2,600 per unit. Commodore Computer Company is offering CD-I hardware which works with your

television set; called CATV, it sells for only \$799. There are ways to convert your Macintosh to play CD-I and other existing hardware, resulting in as many as 10 different standards. And, Kaleida is the Apple/IBM joint venture established to develop a multimedia computer in the future — certain to be based on standards different than any of the above.

So, what is *PW* telling its readers will solve all of this multimedia chaos? They cite, primarily, the creation of the Interactive Multimedia Association's cross-platform compatibility project, aimed at "developing programming interfaces, common file formats and data exchange services to make products useful no matter what computer they are run on." The steering committee for this project includes Apple, IBM, Sony, Intel, Kodak, Microsoft, 3M and Lotus.

Although *PW* did not say so, in addition, and possibly even more importantly, Sony has announced that the software created for its Bookman will run on a traditional MS-DOS platform — i.e. a standard IBM PC or compatible. This leads my friend Peter Mollman (newly appointed to work on Multimedia Publications for Microsoft and formerly of Random House and World Book) to believe that there will be "a major confluence between the thrust from consumer electronics on the low end and MS-DOS high powered machines at the upper end." Within the next two years there will be enormous publicity and press about multimedia and it will be "well deserved."

The creation of standards for compatibility, I believe, will result in some very innovative and very exciting new products available to the student, the researcher, the homebody, the scholar and the business professional. Traditional publishers will join the band wagon at the creative end; book wholesalers may consider offering these products to their library and bookstore customers; and librarians are certain to be asked to have the facilities to play them and loan them to their users. ☞

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