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Media Minder

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Media Minder

Column Editor: **Linda F. Crismond** (Vice President for Public Relations, Professional Media Service Corp.)

Mixed media, multimedia, electronic publishing, and new media — what do these terms describe and how are they evolving? All one has to do is pick up any issue of *Publishers Weekly*, an inflight magazine, the local newspaper business and general interest sections, or *Forbes*, and you will see an article or ad emphasizing the new technology.

Mixed media packages put together material in more than one format. Although some, such as children's books and cassettes, have been around for a long time, more mixed packages are being marketed, such as computer magazines with discs, audio magazines with CD's, and videos with instruction books. Multimedia brings different media into one package — sound, still and text — mixed in a variety of ways such as showing illustrations, animation, and video clips, providing word definitions, geographic identification, and background essays, and including spoken and music sound recordings.

Multimedia is also used as a descriptor for software presentations and hardware configurations. Remember when we had to understand computer instructions to access a software program? Then came touch screens, voice-activated systems, and the icons of Windows. The latest development is the emergence of the multimedia workstation which adds speakers, sound cards, and CD-ROM readers, either as add ons to existing equipment or as options bundled within the system configuration. It appears that the biggest change on the horizon is the convergence of telephone, television/cable, and computer technologies to create the high resolution "smart" TV's and phones with screens that will be accessed through modems and telephone lines or cable hookups.

Games, beginning with Pong and Ms. Pac Man, intrigued the public's interest in interactive programs. Now, interactive videos let you decide how you want the story to end; multimedia presentations using a notebook computer are replacing overheads and slides; and electronic cook books allow modification of recipes to accommodate dietary requirements and update the nutrition and calorie counts.

Another term used is "new media" or "electronic publishing." All books and journals at some point in the publication process are converted to an electronic file. An electronic book usually refers to core material that is either published simultaneously with the print publication or only

in electronic format. The electronic version may contain more access points and different features. The product may or may not be multimedia and/or interactive. Currently, electronic books are mostly reference in nature with an increasing number of recreational, informational, and literary titles appearing, or are electronic versions of abstracts and indexes, or are electronic journals. They are published on CD-ROM or floppy disc with some available only online.

There are a number of proprietary systems playing their own media, usually on diskette. The most widely known is the Sony Data Discman which uses a 3" CD minidisc and offers travel, recreational, and reference books. Sony also makes the MMCD (Multimedia CD) which adds portable sound and graphics and runs on a 5" disc. Philips's CD-I (Compact Disc-Interactive) plugs into a TV and takes regular sound CD's, CD-I's and Kodak PhotoCD's. Its main focus is family/children's titles. Finally, Franklin Electronic Publishers' Digital Book System is a shirt pocket-sized device that plays mainly reference books.

All of these computer companies have developed the internal capability to create electronic publications for their devices. The problem is obvious in that there is no standard and no one system has captured the public's widespread acceptance.

Some electronic journals are not seeing the light of day at all. They are only published in machine-readable form and are available on-line through a data base provider or through the Internet.

Many publishers are establishing an electronic publishing unit and have experimented with a title or two, usually on CD-ROM. These appear to be the tip of the iceberg. For the first time, there are new players in the publishing arena. The software companies are getting into the act, like Microsoft's *Encarta* encyclopedia and their *Beethoven*. So are the hardware companies. Printers, service agencies, and library vendors are all participating with some examples being EBSCO, OCLC, and R. R. Donnelley.

We are in a time of transition where the early adopters are trying a variety of formats. Common CD-ROM and floppy discs have emerged but there is no standard for the portable players. The protocols to access information within an electronic publication differ and the search languages vary. On the other hand, we have moved from the unfriendly blinking cursor when



you turn on the computer to the more welcoming voice saying, "Hi, I'm the Information Navigator!" And, the self help programs do allow the user to access the systems without constantly reading the manual.

Just look at the evolution of the library catalog from cards to computer-output-microform (COM) based, to OPAC's, to the new multimedia catalog. As an example, VTLS describes its current scholar workstation as a multimedia front end to an OPAC. It supports high-resolution images, full motion video, CD-quality sound, full text, text-to-speech conversion, and natural language commands. Add to this access sophistication, for example, Silver Platter's discs, other library catalogs, and Information Access's databases and combine it with entry into the Internet and, now, the library user has an order of magnitude (or maybe two) more than they have ever had before.

The advantages of buying material in electronic form with a combination of media are many and should be outlined in the library's collection development policy. Here is my list: access to information is enhanced; information is more current; value-added services are available such as the ability to order on-line; information searching is more efficient and encompassing; new forms of information can be made available such as sound and video; physical storage is less a problem and more economical; new users can be self taught through system software; and access can be 24 hours a day from remote locations.

In evaluating a multimedia package, the following needs to be considered: minimal hardware configuration, ease of access, price and licensing requirements, content quality and comprehensiveness, user-friendliness, frequency of update as appropriate, availability of technical support and appropriate use of technology:

The uses of multimedia are broadening daily. A recent ad in *PC World* promoted a guided tour of multimedia on CD-ROM where the user could learn the potential of the new media — in over 20 hours for just \$39.95! It is clear that there are more topics for this column for next time.

A related discussion of Multimedia also appeared in the Innovations column of ATG for September, 1993, page 29. — Yr. Ed. ☞