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Media Minder

Multimedia Reviews

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At last fall's **Charleston Conference** [1994], a lunch time discussion focused on reviewing sources for CD-ROM's. It was clear from the number of people who attended that there was interest in finding quality reviews for multimedia materials.

The review sections for these materials are as new as is the medium itself. In a quick scan of the literature, however, there seems to be no shortage of coverage if you do not limit yourself to the library literature. There are dozens of computer magazines that have software, CD-ROM, digizines (CD-ROM magazines), and online services' reviews.

I asked several librarians their opinion on the best sources and come up with the following list. They can be grouped in three categories. First is **library literature** including, *Library Journal*, *Wilson Library Bulletin*, *Choice*, and *Publishers Weekly*. Second a number of the **general computer magazines** will include some reviews such as *PC Magazine*, *ComputerLife*, *Byte*, *The Magazine of Technology Integration*, and *Wired*. Third is the **media specialty magazines** that tend to have regular reviewing sections such as *CD-ROM Today*, *New Media*, and *CD-ROM Professional*. I enjoy reading **Jim Coates** column, "The Interactive Experience," syndicated from the *Chicago Tribune*, which appears irregularly and occasionally has reviews. Additionally, **Norman Desmarais** at Providence College recommends that you join the "CDROM-L" listserv for product discussions.

The review criteria are not always evident. Most of the computer magazines use a multi-star designation without explaining how the stars are applied. *CD-ROM Today*, for example, has four ratings: depth of information, interface, visuals, and audio. In reading a number of reviews, the areas usually covered are accuracy, depth of coverage, integration of formats, ease of use, medium appropriate for the sub-

ject and equipment required. One publisher, **W. H. Freeman**, asked that multimedia be judged on "high-quality sound, video, computer graphics and animation in an interactive fashion to enhance understanding of subjects, such as motion and changes over time, that cannot be easily conveyed by print alone." The multimedia merchandising manager of **Ingram** presented their philosophy to booksellers as: purposeful, relevant content, ease of installation, logical organization of content, a clear interface design, interactivity, and quality of execution.

It should come as no surprise that different reviewers reach different conclusions about the same title. Is it because they are reviewing for different audiences? Does the publisher's advertising practice influence the magazine editor? Certainly the entertainment value weighs more prominently in consumer magazines than it does in library publications. "**Leonardo the Inventor**" was positioned as the lead review (out of 45 rated titles) in *CD-ROM Today* (November, 1994). They thought it was a well-planned production and wished that "... other multimedia designers understood the possibilities of the medium so well." However, *ComputerLife* (November, 1994) gave it a low two-star saying, "It's no masterpiece. As a learning tool for curious 10- to 13-year-olds, it may work, but I want more." *Wired* (December, 1994) called Leonardo, "a vivid example of how not to do a CD."

In another example, *CD-ROM Today* (November, 1994) rated "Where in the World is **Carmen Sandiego**?" with their highest five stars as "one of the best computer learning experiences." But, *Wilson Library Bulletin* gave it less than their highest in the November, 1994 issue, reserving the five stars for *Contemporary Authors* on CD and the *McGraw-Hill Multimedia Encyclopedia of Science and Technology*. Further, the prices were different in that *CD-ROM Today* had "Sandiego" at \$50 while *Wilson* had the title at \$60. The first issue of a new monthly, *Computers@Home*, picked it as one of the best games for girls. They listed

the price as "between \$30 and \$60." *Wilson* had complete ordering information including the publisher's address while the other two, like most computer magazines, listed only a phone number.

Publishers Weekly reported in a supplement last Fall on multimedia publishers that technology and publishing professionals agree on why CD-ROMs become a bestseller. "The best-selling CD-ROMs, whether newly minted or rereleases, have a strong editorial 'voice,' a sense of story or expression of point of view that gives character to the title and draws users back time and again. To a large degree, it is the script that provides the 'voice,' acting as the glue that holds together the code and assets. But behind the script is someone who knows how to guide a writer and encourage a 'voice' — someone who has the skill of recognizing the nuances of language. Without the guidance and that 'voice' ringing through the script, a CD-ROM teeters on the edge of being just a souped-up database."

Reading reviews in non-library literature has the added benefit of gaining new knowledge and added insights not encountered otherwise. The cover story in the October 11, 1994 *PC Magazine* was a detailed article titled, "Making the Internet Connection." *CD-ROM Today's* lead story was on the "emerging category" of CD-ROMs featuring lead musicians including **David Bowie**, **Bob Dylan** and **John Lennon**. There is even a new screen saver from New York's rap trio the **Beastie Boys**, in case you are tired of watching flying toasters. In the "Net Notes" section, public television's "**Computer Chronicles**" is touted as the first TV show to be delivered via the Internet. Also, **Pizza Hut** announced the availability of **PizzaNet** to allow you to order pizza online. **PizzaNet** is being tested in Santa Cruz, California, but the company has high hopes that the idea will mushroom. ☘

Ed note: Hey, y'all, the pun here has got to be intended! — KS