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Innovations Affecting Us — RIAA Opposition to Digital Publishing May Soon Crumble

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Please note — We are looking for a second column editor for Innovations Affecting Us. If any of you out there are interested, please contact Katina <strachik@cofc.edu> or Norm <normd@ PROVIDENCE.EDU> — KS

In an earlier column (ATG, February, 1999, Restrains to Electronic Publishing on the Horizon?, p.78, 80.,) we mentioned that the RIAA (Recording Industry Association of America) staunchly opposes the introduction of new media and new formats and that it could adopt an unremovable watermarking technology to control access to digital music. That opposition may begin to crumble in the not too distant future. On March 3, 1999, ASCAP (American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers) announced a pilot project to watermark International Standard Work Codes (ISWC) with ARIS Technologies’ Musicode audio watermarking system.

David E. Leibowitz, President of ARIS Technologies, Inc. (Cambridge, MA) said, “The ISWC is the musical work’s license plate as the work travels in broadcasts and along the information superhighway. We are proud to be working with ASCAP to assure that ISWC codes remain secure and, through the use of Musicode, are able to deliver comprehensive, automated, and accurate information of vital importance to its members.”

ASCAP, established in 1914, comprises over 80,000 composers, lyricists, and music publishers. It is the world’s largest performing rights organization, committed to protecting the rights of its members by licensing and collecting royalties for the public performance of their copyrighted works and then distributing these fees to members based on performances. ARIS Technologies focuses on the varied copyright protection, royalty distribution, marketing, market research, and product distribution needs of the music industry. Its Musicode system was recently honored by Discover magazine as the “Technology of the Year” in the Sound Category.

The pilot project between ASCAP and ARIS Technologies is the result of more than a year of testing of the ARIS Musicode watermarking technology identifying nonfeature and other musical performances. ASCAP will begin issuing the unique codes in predetermined amounts so that the ISWC numbers can be embedded into recorded music via ARIS’s Musicode. ASCAP wants to establish the ISWC as the standard numbering system for audio watermarking by its members.

Al Wallace, ASCAP’s Chief Operating Officer said, “The ISWC, already recognized as the world standard for numbering musical works, is a critical ingredient for the success of audio watermarking in the next millennium. With this pilot project, we solidify the ISWC’s ongoing role, as well as offering ASCAP’s writers and publishers a choice in their selection of watermarking technologies.”

ASCAP, in cooperation with ARIS, will soon finalize the list of ASCAP members who will participate in the pilot project which extends ASCAP’s recently announced strategy of working closely with a core group of qualified audio watermarking providers to best serve members in monitoring music use in analog and digital media. This arrangement is non-exclusive. ASCAP announced that it will work with ARIS, as well as other watermark, security, and information services companies to develop the key components of audio watermarking. And ARIS will continue to work closely with other musical rights societies and others in the music, recording, advertising, programming, and broadcast industries, both domestically and internationally.

If this pilot project is successful, as expected, we can soon anticipate the abatement of the music industry’s opposition to digital publishing and distribution. This turn of events could result in the appearance of new music formats and new distribution agreements that could prove equally beneficial to publishers and performers.