

## AudiOpinion

### Report From the Front: APAC 2003

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Perhaps it's because the audiobook industry is still relatively young and has come of age in the era of the technosavvy consumer. But audio publishers and listener-consumers not only speak much the same language: They talk about many of the same issues.

This year's Audio Publishers Association Conference (APAC) in Los Angeles illustrated the consumer-industry overlap. Among the major sessions, a Consumer Electronics Association survey provided a fascinating look at how audiobook listener practices and preferences may help determine what audio devices you'll find in your next new car. APAC also illuminated the complex interrelationships that affect publishers' decisions about vital listener-as-consumer issues—notably format, cost, and availability.

Especially useful were twelve new roundtable discussions: a topically diverse conference session where attendees could take part in several industry debates and dialogues. And in one way or another, most roundtables touched on two major questions:

- How do the interests of publishers and listener-consumers intersect, diverge, or even conflict?
- How do we sort out and navigate the ever-increasing technology tangle?

The following highlights offer a few glimpses into problems that publishers and consumers share, as well as some of the creative thinking needed to find solutions.

In letters to *AudioFile* and in other listener forums, some of the most oft-heard concerns involve technology and formats: Why can't I bookmark my CDs? When are publishers going to embrace the MP3-CD? Why can't I download all my favorite titles? And why on earth would anyone want to give up cassettes in the first place?

At APAC, several roundtables examined the issues underlying "the next new

audiobook format." Consumers and publishers both yearn for a stable industry-wide consensus. But simple supply-and-demand economics seem long gone from today's decision-making process.

One major complicating factor, raised at the "Audio on the Net" roundtable, is that audiobook formats—including cassette, CD, MP3-CD, and download—are largely driven by the music industry. This heavyweight's influence generally leaves audio publishers in the position of reacting to and adapting music-player technologies rather than relying on appropriateness to the audiobook medium and audiobook listener preferences.

Manufacturing pros at the "Emerging Technologies" table have seen some audio publishers shift to a 50-50 ratio of cassettes to CDs, although this shift was slow to take hold. Listeners who'd traded their cassette machines for CD players wondered what the holdup was with audiobooks as publishers tried to gauge whether and how to adopt the new audiobook-resistant CD technology. Running with a new format—especially one known to have limited capacity and place-holding problems—can end up a pricey proposition. As it stands, CDs may well go the way of cassettes, which (per some voices at the "ET" table) will depart the scene in about five years.

Download and MP3-CD, among the newest format faces on the block, have their industry and consumer adherents and detractors. The "Audio on the Net" table reminded us that Audible.com is the only download company left in a field that recently included Salon.com Audio, MediaBay, and others. And though MP3-CDs offer encouraging answers to bookmarking and to storing long, unabridged audiobooks, fresher faces continue to offer themselves to techno-weary (and wary) publishers—faces like satellite radio, audio-publishing on-demand, and cell phone streaming.

Acknowledging recent court cases on

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copyright violations and music downloads, the “Audio on the Net” table nonetheless agreed that audiobook titles don’t present the same potential for piracy that individual song titles do. Some publishers, in fact, even welcome the advent of the Internet download as a boost to “growing the market” and adding a new, younger group to the audiobook audience. Still, concerns about the rights of publishers and authors to profit from their works hamper exploration of online distribution.

Rights issues also surfaced at the “Rental Market” table. Audio publishers want to safeguard their own rights and the author’s, whether titles are bought or rented. For listener-consumers, questions arise about how control of the rental market will affect pricing. The table considered the inevitable comparison with movie video rentals. An especially interesting scenario would

introduce a new element to audiobooks: a special “rental edition” with bonus material corresponding to the “making of” features in DVD versions of films.

So many elements of the growing audiobook industry are in flux. That means more problems and greater opportunities—for listeners and for publishers. Perhaps APAC’s experiment in interactivity will lead to more direct publisher-listener collaboration. I can imagine a stimulating listener-publisher APAC dialogue session or maybe an opportunity for listeners to audit an APAC session. After all, an auditor is essentially a listener. —*Judith West*

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