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Multimedia Tower of Babel or Lingua Franca?

Las Vegas, Monday 8 April 2002: Blue-ray. For those who don't know what it is, blue-ray is the next generation of optical discs that will be rewritable and able to store far more data than current DVDs. In addition, it *could* be an interchangeable disc, which is not the case today for recordable/rewritable DVDs. It is named after the blue-laser technology that is used to make them and is backed by nine of the leading manufacturers of DVD who, up until now, have offered competing industry standards for recordable/rewritable DVDs.

Technical Committee 100 of the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) is scheduled to begin setting the stage to start discussions on blue-ray discs. Talks begin in Tokyo, Japan, on 23 April 2002. Among others, TC 100 comprises experts from the principle manufacturers of DVDs.

TC 100 Chairman Mark Hyman, who is a staff engineer for the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers in White Plains, NY, says: "The IEC is working to ensure that its doors are always open to industry to determine whether suitable multimedia standards can be developed, and this applies to DVD. The IEC has a history of creating very successful international standards for the multimedia field, from audio cassette tapes in the 1970s, to CDs in the 1980s and minidiscs in the 1990s. It is for industry to decide what does and does not get standardized. The IEC provides the structure and the means to do the work."

The advantage for manufacturers of having an IEC International Standard for this new media is that it ensures a stable platform for them to produce for their markets, which reduces the risk of competitive failure in this key market. The greatest concern for manufacturers is spending a great deal of time and money tooling up manufacturing plants for a technology that the market ultimately rejects. An IEC International Standard for blue-ray discs will help to reduce this risk significantly.

The advantage for consumers is that it will help to stabilize the technology so that, like CDs that can be played anywhere, these new optical discs will have the same versatility, and include the ability to rewrite. At the same time, consumers will not see the same kind of market confusion they saw with videotape over VHS and Betamax and, consequently, they will not have to spend money on a system that may shortly become obsolete.

The IEC offers to industry different products for different needs. Because technology like blue-ray is developing very quickly, manufacturers could choose to create an IEC Publicly Available Specification (IEC-PAS) or an Industry Technical Agreement (ITA), either of which could be used in the market in a matter of months. These industry specifications can then be processed in parallel through the full-consensus process to result in an International Standard. IEC-PAS and ITAs represent an agreement among manufacturers about the basic parameters of a specific technology that need to be standardized.

The IEC is a partner with the World Trade Organization in helping to eliminate technical barriers to trade to the benefit of manufacturers, consumers and governments the world over. The WTO calls on its members to use IEC International Standards as the basis for national and/or regional standards.

Technical Committee 100 of the IEC prepares standards for audio, video and multimedia systems and equipment.

The blue-ray disc (sometimes also called blue laser) allows for recording, rewriting and playing back of up to 27 GB of data on a single-sided, single-layer 12 cm disc using a 405 nm blue-violet laser (in comparison, DVD-Video uses a 650 nm red laser). Blue-ray media can hold more than two hours of digital high definition video and more than 13 hours of standard TV broadcasting. The DVDs could also be used for PC data storage and high-definition pre-recorded video software.

The International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) is the global organization responsible for developing and publishing international standards and specifications for all electrical, electronic and related technologies. The membership consists of more than 60 participating countries, including all the world's major trading nations and a growing number of industrializing countries. Its standards are used in more than 100 countries as the basis for national rules and standards.

For more information, please contact:

Dennis Brougham
IEC Information Services Manager
Tel: +41 22 919 0260
Fax: +41 22 919 0300
Mobile: +41 79 785 2288 (to be used during NAB 2002
exclusively, 6-11 April 2002)
Email: db@iec.ch

Claire Marchand
IEC Information Services/Editor
Tel: +41 22 919 0259
Fax: +41 22 919 0300
Email: cma@iec.ch