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The Digital-TV Disaster

The U.S. Government is on the verge of selling the public down the river to Japanese TV manufacturers—starting with Sony—regarding digital television standards. The situation has gotten so bad, a consortium of computer companies has been trying to

stop the approval of a ludicrous standard that would bring to the market a stupid technology—fallout from the expensive high-definition TV (HDTV) debacle of a few years back. If all goes according to plan, the American consumer will pay the bill for the mistakes made by overseas TV makers. Your tax dollars at work.

Because there is no serious effort to keep tabs on government idiocy, the computer industry found out about this digital-TV fiasco at the last minute. Apple, Compaq, Microsoft, and seven other companies formed the Computer Industry Coalition for Advanced Television Service (CICATS). They were soon joined by the American Society of Cinematographers and the Directors Guild of America. This coalition is countering the moronic proposals drafted by the Advisory Committee for Advanced Digital Television Service (ACATS).

For years, the lone voice of Apple has been trying to bend the FCC's ear regarding digital TV. But it seems the FCC is more sympathetic to Sony and other foreign TV makers—they must be better lunch partners. And oh yes, the Luddite American TV broadcasters who hate digital are going along with this nevertheless, for other reasons. The new digital TV standard was about to be approved when Bill Gates and Steven Spielberg went to Washington to get the process stopped long enough for CICATS to file some papers outlining everything wrong with it.

Here's the crux of what ACATS is proposing: First of all, the standard would consist of 18 different formats—all odd standards, resolutions, and frame rates. The reason for this many formats is so each money-wasting HDTV expense can somehow be recouped by incorporating every bad idea at once. Of all the different formats, not one feature would be computer-compatible, and the highest resolution (out of four possible resolutions) is interlaced *only*. In fact, the whole standard seems oriented toward archaic interlace technology. There are two screen ratios: 4:3 and the wacky 16:9, which doesn't really match anything Hollywood is doing. But the overseas TV makers have already invested millions in 16:9 and they

expect the FCC to kowtow to them. The rates for this standard can be 24, 30, or 60 frames per second, with some variation—but none match the typical 72-Hz computer monitor rates. Also, the idea of standard pixel ratios, such as 640-by-480 or 1,024-by-768 or even any fixed ratio, is not part

of the ACATS standard. Instead, the analog concept of vertical-resolution lines is maintained, which makes no sense at all. The idea of pixel addressing is lost on these folks. (Microsoft Graphics Fellow Alvy Ray Smith has a Web page that links to most of the documents regarding this, at www.research.microsoft.com/research/graphics/alvy.)

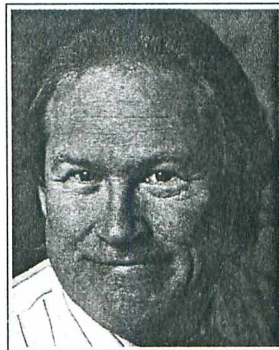
So here we have the world's most vibrant computer industry and instead of using it—if for no other reason than because it simply has better technology—the U.S. government is set to adopt bonehead Japanese standards of which even the Japanese are not particularly fond.

This kind of craziness is allowed to occur because the computer industry does not represent itself well in Washington. An FCC commissioner told me it was laughable that a company like Microsoft would brag about its lone registered lobbyist. An RBOC the size of Microsoft might have 100 to 200 people in Washington schmoozing, chatting, making friends. This is just the way it works. Grow up, folks.

What's particularly weird is how Microsoft never even thought to use its hundreds of PR people to get the word out. This issue has had zero coverage except for a single article in *Barron's*, by Jim McTague,

one of the last writers to still do his own research. Gates has been to Washington and executives such as Craig Mundie have been before Senate committees discussing digital TV. Still, little ink. Recently, the *PC Magazine* editorial staff spent a day at Microsoft, but this important issue was never mentioned. What kind of thinking is that?

Just like when the Communications Decency Act was passed, look for a lot of whining after this turkey of a standard gets approved. Maybe someday our industry will learn how to play like the big boys. In the meantime, the public suffers.



TUNED OUT
This craziness occurs because the computer industry does not represent itself well in Washington.