Nobody asked me again, but it surely seems that the business of setting and adhering to standards in the audio industry has become a double-edged sword. Standards - called by some 'a universal agreement to disagree', represent the acceptance of a standard technological base by the various manufacturers within an industrial grouping, in this case - audio. Within the industry, the flexibility of each manufacturer to elaborate and articulate product from the base goes without saying. The classic example of a successful standard is the Philips analogue cassette. Originated as a rather lo-fi product in the 1970's, it has evolved today into a versatile family of products by which every single equipment maker profits.

The standard is adhered to as the basis of innovation which allows each manufacturer to customise and configure product based on that manufacturer's perception of the marketplace. Today, the Philips cassette exists as the most popular medium for the sale of music in millions of units sold worldwide. It is the basis for a forthcoming digital audio system, can provide virtual digital quality with Dolby S, is used by professional radio stations all over the world and is the basis of the portable audio revolution in the car and via the ubiquitous Walkman. A real success story - a win-win situation for all concerned.

Yet for all the financial and creative positives of the cassette and, of course, the compact disc, one cannot easily point to any other such 'success' stories within the audio industry. Especially of late, there has been a 'disagreement to agree' on virtually everything. Each camp of hardware manufacturers and in most cases their software allies have refused to consider the benefits of cooperation. Clearly, all of the various entities involved in the numerous 'turf battles' over technology in audio today do believe in standards. Each one wants their system to triumph over the competition and become the standard. Such a victory would, they argue, bring such a windfall of profits and licensing that it justifies the conundrum in consumer confidence, product compatibility, creative interchangeability and pricing advantages that inevitably suffer from a lack of standardisation. Let us observe the flip side, however, where a successful current standard has been compromised in the several sectors of the audio industry and how the repercussions have impact far beyond the original sphere of influence.

In the world of the law in the United States, there is a phrase that describes the unfortunate effects of legally seized evidence by law enforcement officials. It is known as 'the fruit of the poison tree.' The principle of this criminal evidence dictum is that there is a ripple effect in which any information gained illegally such as via an unauthorized wiretap, negates the effect of, say, a raid on a drug warehouse because the original information was tainted. Now, you ask, what has this to do with the audio business? Quite a bit really, because as we look at the burgeoning business of stereo television worldwide we see the impact of a 'poison tree' affecting first the US stereo television marketplace and, secondarily, the world stereo television production community. Here indeed, is the story of a standard gone bad or at the least badly compromised!

It seems that early in the 1980's, the United States conducted an inquiry to ascertain an appropriate standard for the inclusion of stereophonic sound into the broadcast signals of television programming. Since this was a mandated addition to the technical standards for TV stations licensed by the US Federal Communications Commission, a decision was made by executive fiat rather than to the widespread due to electronic industry inertia. A standard was chosen for multichannel television sound (MTS) that utilised the dbx noise reduction system. By 1984, the first broadcasts went on-the-air and the first stereo-compatible TV sets were offered to consumers. From 1984 until the end of 1991, in excess of 40 millions television sets equipped with the MTS stereo system and the dbx noise reduction scheme were sold - achieving an

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