

Sandra Rühr:

**Is there an audio book boom? The present situation of audio books within the German book trade.**

Although the idea of audio books is over 100 years old audio books were not well known until the *Hörverlag* started publishing audio books in 1993. Now the *Hörverlag* is the market leader in German audio book business. More and more audio book publishing houses and publishing houses with audio book segments have been founded respectively enterprises like newspapers and theatres have started to produce audio books. As well as the audio book titles the reporting about them is increasing. Booksellers are recognising that audio books are an important part in book trading and that their distribution possibly increases the turnover of their business.

This expanding interest is demanding an exact definition of the audio book and its historical development. Knowledge in these areas is important, because in 2002 only one out of ten persons knew audio books while in October 2003 an interview with 3699 visitors of the Frankfurt Book fair showed that nine out of ten persons did know something about this medium. The rate of spreading knowledge and interest is therefore remarkable and needs further examination.

This publication is focusing on the German book market and analyses the present participants in audio book publishing. Therefore it was necessary to find a definition describing the various forms of audio books. Characteristically spoken words dominate music or sound effects. Fiction and poetry, non-fiction, audio books for children and teenagers, language courses or audio books that give their listeners special advice are presented in radio plays or features respectively they are read by one or more persons or give impression of originally spoken texts concerning special topics.

The first part of this publication is discussing basic subjects like production, copyright, development of different sound carriers such as record, tape, compact disc or digital audio books and their advantages and disadvantages for their users. It also points out the history of audio books which is showing the influence of radio technology and contents on audio books and their development as continuation of an oral tradition, especially the read aloud. The users in present time are not longer only blind and old people or children, but persons who prefer the possibility to double their time by doing other things while listening to audio books.

The second part is focusing its interest on ten years of audio book trade, from 1993 when the *Hörverlag* was founded to July 2003. To get impressions of the recent changes regarding audio books in general book trade journals such as *Börsenblatt* and *Buchmarkt* were surveyed. Foundations, concepts, sales statistics and predictions lay out the structure of the audio book market. Furthermore contents, users' expectations and methods of announcing the audio book like special publishers' activities and honours are discussed. The analysis of 158 brochures of publishing houses is showing what kind of audio book providers are members of the present market.

Content, form and advertisement-methods are as important details as the relationship between author and speaker on the one hand and book and audio book on the other. So is the relationship between content and sound carrier. The affinity between certain content and specific sound carriers is examined, as is the recent preference of different sound carriers in general.

The results are showing that only ten publishing houses are the leading participants in audio book business. Most audio book publishers are offering only few titles. Especially small publishers do not have the possibility to produce costly audio books. Publishers often utilise book bestseller to be successful. This is leading to assumptions that the customer's interests are not necessarily realised so far. Surveys show that they are mostly interested in non-fiction audio books. Co operations with radio stations are offering possibilities to publish high-quality but less independent products.

The appendix of this publication is presenting 260 audio book publishers. They are tabulated in two different parts. The first one is listing them by name, including information about year of foundation respectively year of starting with its audio book segment, slogan, objectives, target audience and range and volume of titles. A second part is describing the different presentation forms such as radio play, feature or reading, presented contents, sound carriers and advertisement methods. Further the appendix is informing about the publishers' image which is targeting a certain kind of audience with special forms of advertisement.

Although audio book publishers and titles are still increasing, there is need of more information about this medium. It is not clear if people are realising marketing activities. In the United States the audio book is an everyday medium used when driving whereas in Germany the situation is different. The consumption of literature is an important part of education. The so called double your time effect is less important than the simple use of audio books as entertainment.

The *Arbeitskreis Hörbuchverlage* is comparable to the *Audio Publishers Association (APA)* in the United States and protects the publishers' interests. Bookstores however have to deal with several problems in presenting audio books. They must know their customers' interests, they need the necessary space, money and know how. Although in Germany the book trade is leading in selling audio books other places, such as petrol stations or mail order may play an important role in future. More and more enterprises which are not members of the book trade are involved in publishing audio books to reach specifically interested persons.

The audio book boom must be questioned. The number of publishers and titles is increasing and the medium becomes more and more popular. But in comparison to the United States the audio book is less successful and gains less turnover. It is the publishers' duty to further promote the role of the speaker and to offer interesting and topical acoustic literature.