

# File-based workflows for the digital age

by Laurie Kennedy



The headline for this article speaks to the issue's popularity at many conferences and expert panel sessions. One such session was staged at Corus Quay in Toronto by Signiant and Applied Electronics.

The panel included representation from broadcast, media and entertainment companies. Since hosted by two vendors, I thought there would be more of a vendor slant but I didn't see one. What I did notice were many common trends and challenges.

The panel, moderated by Robert Browne, Signiant's founder and vice president of business development, included:

- Chris Bell, Astral Television Networks<sup>1</sup>
- Rob Adams, Rogers Media<sup>2</sup>
- Neal Bilow, Corus Entertainment<sup>3</sup>
- Jamsheed Ahmed, Rogers Communications<sup>4</sup>
- Julie Dutrisac, National Film Board<sup>5</sup>
- Greg Hull, Deluxe Postproduction<sup>6</sup>
- Tim Napoleon, AllDigital

Though not explicitly identified, it is worthy to note that all their “workflows” are not the same. Overall, the challenges were similar, however their priorities varied depending on their businesses.

**Acquisition**—endless incoming formats, content aggregators

**Production/Post Production**—need to be content centric, ingest once, seamlessly move to any production platform

**Archive/Storage**—easy access, old archives valuable, preservation, storage management and costs

**Distribution/Delivery**—ongoing new platforms/formats outgoing; standardize services, immediate access to viewer/consumer

**Operational Effectiveness**—reduce operational costs, provide high quality control

**Resources**—new skill sets are required, hard to find; no college course today.

## Tape Still Exists!

All panelists were advocates of file-based workflows and have such systems in place to support operations.

Julie Dutrisac of the National Film Board said NFB was mostly file-based though it does have some tape. It expects to be fully digital, including historical, within five-to-seven years. She also noted that there has been a big change with cinema, with over 80% now asking for content in digital formats.

Neal Bilow of Corus Entertainment said his company is still 90% tape-based in terms of distribution around the world. Corus, he said, needs to work within client limitations. Latin America is still mainly BETA SP.

Astral Media moved to digital in the '90s, though it still handles a large amount of tape from their distributors. Chris Bell says he's hoping Astral won't have to work with any tape within the next year or so.

Jamsheed Ahmed said Rogers On Demand Online (RODO) is 100% digital in receiving content from distributors.

## Tape Huggers

Management is certainly on the bandwagon for digital but there are others who aren't as keen. Many producers still largely love tape. They want to touch, feel and walk around with their video. This desire seemed to come largely from the post world, but it also exists in broadcast.

Clients of post production companies are not keen to pay to upgrade to file-based facilities. The tape shortage from Japan has had an impact in moving towards digital storage sooner, rather than later.

## Standard File Formats Are Not Standard

One of the key issues faced by all is in managing file formats. Format is a general term and is often used to describe the medium, file codec, file wrapper, PAL, NTSC, etc.

The most popular file wrapper is MXF. One clear standard, not so! Each software vendor and manufacturer has their own interpretation of what MXF is. This is also the case with the different codecs.

It will help if one standardizes on internal system formats though the main challenge remains; the volume of variations with the incoming and outgoing media files. Astral's Chris Bell says the company has to employ full-time programmers to keep up with all the variations.

Another consideration with file-based formats is the storage technology. LTO file-based tape is the choice for long-term archives.

The current standard is LTO5 tapes. And, in a couple of years, there will be new standards, e.g. LTO6 and then LTO7, and so on.

Though each new generation brings benefits such as storage capacity, it also brings compatibility issues depending on how many older versions you have. Once you have a file-based archive platform, you will need to plan and budget for ongoing expansion and migration to new tape formats.

## Media Consumption Choices

The panel discussion moved into current trends and future impact. Does the younger generation believe a television is a must have? Many opt not have a TV in their university/college dorms, instead satisfying their needs with streaming video on their laptops.

Though there is fragmentation in media consumption, the online experience does not appear to have cannibalized traditional television. The National Film Board has a free viewing/check out site and Julie Dutrisac doesn't believe it has hurt their core business.

Also, comments from the younger generation confirm that while they do enjoy "user-generated content" on Facebook and YouTube-type sites, they don't see them as "real TV or movies". Rob Adams of Rogers Media thinks such responses support the theory that younger demos still enjoy and want good story telling.

## What the Future Holds

Revenue models will continue to change and the advertising community needs to be educated to optimize the change. Cost-per-viewer may decrease but more focused marketing with direct commercial insertion based on geography will occur.

With the challenges in multiple formats, storage and rights management, the belief is that there will be one central location to house and manage program content and distribute it quickly and easily to store-fronts and aggregators such as RODO. (Hmmm, sounds like UV!)

Final thoughts included: You cannot eliminate all human aspects to the workflow; Quality control is very important; There will still be national borders and copyright considerations; And, broadcasters will continue to be the gatekeepers ... for now.



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