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Managing media assets is critical in digital broadcasting

By Paul Divall

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The evolution of video capture technology from tape-based to file-based, and the increasing affordability of sophisticated recording equipment, has opened up the broadcasting market dramatically over the years.

Video has become much cheaper to create and broadcast, and as a result, the volume of footage generated has increased exponentially, and continues to do so.

Pros and cons

While file-based video has many advantages, the volume of footage generated also presents a number of challenges. These include not only the ability to store large amounts of data, but also track this footage and make it easily accessible. In a fast-paced environment like broadcasting, it is critical that specific files can be located and accessed quickly.

Media Asset Management (MAM) has therefore become a vital tool as it assists with indexing of footage and metadata search functionality, which ensures that users can access the files they need easily and in good time.

Digital broadcasting, recording and archiving offers a number of benefits over traditional tape-based media, including the fact that stored footage is no longer subject to the degradation of physical tape, which means that it can be kept indefinitely.

The physical space taken up by storage is also reduced, since powerful storage servers take up far less room than tape libraries. Large digital files can also be sent easily over IP, so live sporting events for example can be broadcast anywhere in the world, and HD movies can be sent quickly and easily rather than having to load masses of tapes onto an aeroplane for courier.

Digital files can also be copied much more cheaply, as creating duplicates is simple compared to the process of making another set of tapes for another location to broadcast footage.

However, one of the major challenges that has arisen as a result of the proliferation of digital footage is the problem of locating specific files. This process has become somewhat akin to searching for a specific piece of hay in a haystack - there is simply too much data, and there is not enough information to tell the files apart.

Labelling correctly

To use an easy-to-understand example, when taking photographs on a digital camera, they are often created with a file

name consisting of letters and numbers. When these are copied to a PC, finding a specific photograph can be difficult, unless the file names are changed to something meaningful, such as what the photograph represents.

The same phenomenon occurs with digital film footage. If files are not named properly, they become virtually impossible to locate, a problem that is exacerbated by the sheer volume of video generated by a typical broadcaster on any given day. Add to this the volumes of tape-based footage that have been converted to file, with similar naming problems, and the scope of the issue is massive.

In the broadcasting space, time is money. When an editor is on a tight deadline, the inability to locate a specific clip or sound bite can mean the difference between a story airing and being discarded. This ability relies entirely on the reliability of the media database. Given the continued growth in data volumes, and the rate at which video file data is growing, this problem is only going to get worse.

Improving reliability

MAM tools are critical in improving the reliability of the media database. These tools ensure that files are named for easy accessibility, that policies and procedures are put into place for on-going cataloguing, and that metadata tags can be added easily to files for more accurate indexing and search functionality.

Metadata tags are added in order to more effectively index the contents of footage for efficient search capability. These tags may include information on the contents of the footage, the date it was captured, the GPS location at which the footage was filmed, the time of day, the people in the footage and their actions, and even the permissions and rights of who has access to and can broadcast this footage.

The metadata can be made as granular as is necessary to ensure that should a user search, for example, for "Tendai Mtawarira tries rugby 2012", all of the relevant footage can be located, and can be crossed reference. This adds value to the video archives, and ensures that media can actually become an asset, rather than just a mass of stored data.

Efficient archiving

MAM solutions provide an easy to use portal that allows for searching and browsing of the library. These tools also ensure that the metadata is married correctly to the footage, so that the metadata process needs to be completed only once for footage to remain indexed and accessible now and in the future.

Media asset management is one of the biggest challenges currently facing broadcasters and media houses, and ignoring this problem will not make it go away.

Using MAM tools to put cataloguing policies in place for current and future file storage, ensuring metadata tags are always put in place and files are named appropriately, and allowing for archived footage to be addressed in the same way, are critical steps in ensuring that media becomes the asset it should be, and archived footage can be accessed quickly and easily for future use.

ABOUT PAUL DIVALL

Paul holds a B.Sc in Electronic Engineering from the University of Natal and a Masters in Business Administration (MBA) from the University of Pretoria, as well as completing the Programme in Business Communication from the University of South Africa Centre for Business Management. He has more than two decades of experience in the telecommunications and technology space.

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