



Télévision Suisse

A broadcaster's part relocation and part temporary rehousing has given it the clear opportunity, that all would want, to take the leap to tapeless. ZENON SCHOEPE visits Geneva to see how the audio contingent has managed.

THE URGE TO GO tapeless is a strong one among broadcasters but like getting married or having children there is rarely a best time to do it. The upheaval and expense not to mention the mountains of forward planning for what are living 24-hour operations is enough to demoralise even the most vocal endorsee of the cause and encourage them to postpone the inevitable switchover.

In an ideal world most broadcasters would want to have a completely new set of facilities built right alongside their old existing ones allowing for staff to flit between the two to follow progress and train and then finally to turn up for work at the new building when all is complete and working beautifully. Failing that you could just have the whole decision forced upon you so you just have to do it.

Télévision Suisse's headquarters in Geneva features a large tower that housed a good proportion of its facilities and offices. Trouble was it had been built with a lot of asbestos in it.

Fortunately there are other adjoining buildings and enough other real estate in the city for things, departments and people to be moved around while the tower is being cleaned out, floor by floor, but the upheaval has been immense.

The work that has started will last possibly four years and will eventually see all the office staff able to return to the tower. At the same time it was the opportunity to rethink the whole broadcast infrastructure because all departments were effected by the disruption in one way or another. Télévision Suisse is going tapeless.

The broadcaster had its audio postproduction department in the tower in among the admin and programme production departments that were housed there. Former office space in a newer building alongside was allocated to the new sound editing and mixing facilities which naturally enough were built to be integrated with other departments by sitting on a



large cross-disciplinary network.

The postproduction department now houses the largest Merging Technologies installation of its type in broadcast and rings all the bells that have been hung on the Pyramix DAW for the last few years in preparation for just such an application. Two Luxor servers, ten Pyramix DAWs and ten VCubes nonlinear video systems link through their own network and employ Merging's Virtual Transport control when appropriate.

Designed by WSDG with PMC IB2 monitoring, the department has six sound design rooms and two multipurpose rooms that can be used for mixing or sound editing. There are also two large Studer Vista 7-equipped mixing rooms.

The update was needed. The broadcaster's live production areas with their four studios and SSL Aysis consoles were recently refurbished and a plan of replacement was underway in video editing and graphics. The old audio post rooms had run for some 15 years and had become something of a Dyaxis power-user, with six systems for sound editing plus Pro Tools stronghold, mixing. It was not the most efficient of arrangements as the Dyaxis was strapped for tracks and project transfers could involve a lot of Beta. The DAW choice was a crucial one, according to Thierry Bonvin, head of audio postproduction.

'When we started the project we looked at the market and selected three editors and saw them all. The Pyramix was very well rated and accepted by the sound designers, a little less so by the mixers. There was also the consideration of connection as we could use MADI on Pyramix — not on Pro Tools — and that saves money and we were on a tight budget,' he says. 'There were also considerations about openness to different formats. When we started looking, MXF was not proposed by Digidesign. Avid was being looked at for the video editing so we were looking at the solution that Avid and Digidesign proposed but we were not keen on that. To go to MXF was part of the whole project so that's another reason why we chose Pyramix.'

While individual departments will have their own local networks for their own workflows they will all sit on a larger network and the objective is to be able to place an MXF file on the system that can be used for playout. While the audio department is up and running with its network and server, the first phase of the installation of the main server should happen by the end of this year and permit communication



Patrick and Thierry.

between audio post, video editing and graphics. The final integration of the studios and the heavy postproduction should be completed by the end of next year.

Télévision Suisse's audio engineers move around according to the job and could be mixing in a multipurpose room one day, sound designing the next and mixing on a Vista the day after. You get the impression that variety is encouraged and it's one of the reasons why the standardisation on Pyramix makes sense. The sound design rooms can perform the digitisation of the video into VCube and this can then travel with the project around the network. Similarly, audio editing can be continued into the mix -- Pyramix is not just being used as a playback device here.

There's also a 40,000 CD library of sound effects with dedicated staff to manage and distribute it. While there is a search engine of the effects titles and their location, the discs still have to be retrieved manually. There are plans to place a select sound library on the Luxor and make it available for everyone across the department.

It's a massive investment for a broadcaster that serves a small percentage of a small country. Technical manager Patrick Boehm believes the approach is

cautious but sensible. 'A point that's worth mentioning is that we didn't really invest in video tape machines and it's why we are still using Beta SPs that are more than ten years old,' he says. 'We didn't make the transition to Beta D. This is finally the opportunity for us to throw away those machines!'

It's a modification of the approach that many have adhered to in the past — stick with a technology that is adequate for the job for as long as possible, work it to death and then throw it away when you jump a generation. Patrick adds that the lack of a common file format has consistently hampered progress in audio and that MXF promises a degree of compatibility across disciplines that will make a real difference to a broadcaster's operation.

The full integration of all the constituent parts is still some way off and is dependent, to an extent, upon the building work that is going on. Local network sections are happening but switching over and phasing in the integration looks daunting.

What is clear is that the openness of digital systems is now a crucial factor in progress. It's interesting to remember that in the early days of DAWs, being proprietary was a real advantage because it allowed you to control your users and your market. With



the DAW becoming central to what goes on in any studio, its degree of openness helps it to maintain and protect that position. Closed audio systems tend to look unappealing in the context of very much bigger broadcast infrastructures.

The last words go to Thierry who says that other than the arrival of bigger drives and faster processors it is hard to imagine what the DAW could do next. 'What I do know is that it would have been much harder to make these sorts of decisions ten years ago because anything we would have chosen would have been an intermediate step,' he says. ■



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