

New trends in the newsroom environment

The newsroom is one of the most dynamically changing environments today. As a result, there are some key factors to consider when upgrading or constructing a new newsroom facility. *Digital Studio* reports.

The nature of news coverage and distribution has changed dramatically over recent years. It could be argued that the birth of CNN got the ball rolling, but many highlight the first Gulf War as a real turning point in the gathering and presentation of modern coverage. News is everywhere now and it is a highly competitive market.

In order to cater to this increased demand in terms of both quantity and time-to-air, news operations have had to introduce previously unseen levels of efficiency. The rise of IT integration is particularly evident in the newsroom environment where it can greatly assist in the quest for this speed and efficiency, if deployed correctly.

According to David Phillips, CEO of TSL, there are some key factors to consider when upgrading or constructing a new newsroom facility. For one, when looking at a newsroom installation, one needs to be aware of whether there is an incumbent newsroom system in place, says Phillips.

"Developed to control and integrate script management, running orders, wire services and so on, they have grown to reach far further into the newsroom operation. Due to their inherent complexity and importance, in non-greenfield sites it is often the case that the incumbent newsroom system will remain in place. Of course, this has a very real effect on related technological decisions," he explains.

The second core factor to look at is the workflow, says Phillips. "News production and presentation has some very clear requirements: fast turnaround; a high percentage of live presentation and reporting; and the need to be able to edit and re-edit material quickly to suit different length bulletins. How much are



News presenters today have to learn how to use desktop editing software, says David Phillips of TSL.

journalists going to be empowered at a given facility to produce complete stories ready to air and how many journalists are there in a given facility?" he asks.

In recent years, there has been a significant move towards desktop editing and empowering journalists to produce complete packages. Although this varies from broadcaster to broadcaster, there is a very clear trend, explains Phillips.

"For example, news presenters now often have to learn how to use desktop editing software and that is something that they simply have never had to do before," Phillips says. "They are used to sitting in front of a camera and an autocue, now they have to compile their own stories. It is a sea change right the way through the staff of the newsroom."

Once again, this decision has clear ramifications; with newsrooms now server-based, access and capacity issues have to be carefully judged. Even a compressed

file is going to be a large file, so the backbone of the system has to have enough capacity to cope.

With this increased level of IT within the broadcast environment, Phillips warns that are also certain challenges. "The newsroom is a fast turnaround and reactive environment. Many IT people do not fully understand that notion. While older broadcast systems may appear anachronistic, they are quick and built to complete specific tasks efficiently. More complex systems are being used in less space by fewer people and that requires a great deal of design expertise at the signal level, control level and IT level to get it right," he explains.

It is generally true to say that as video systems become simpler — as IT takes much of the work away — the control system becomes more complex and larger. Directly related to this increase in IT, and more specifically, desktop editing,



As newsrooms get more compact, it is becoming more crucial to pay attention to layout, says Phillips.

is the issue of training, or re-training. As broadcasters aim for ever greater efficiencies in the newsroom, so employees — be they technical or editorial — are being asked to perform a far greater range of tasks.

"This aspect has to be handled very carefully and TSL is involved in more and more of this," says Phillips. "With one recent project, we built the system in its new facility in the UK and then invited the international customer over to see it working. Super users were then also flown over, trained by us on the system and made comfortable using it. The installation was then carried out and other operators were then trained onsite by the super users," he adds.

Phillips goes on to say that when journalists are first presented with this new technology, there is a high level of apprehension. "As they start to learn it, they realise that it is not actually that hard," he explains.

One of the other areas that distinguish

newsroom installations are the issues of audio and comms. The key word again here when making news-based technology choices is "live". With audio and comms, the fundamentals haven't changed for perhaps the last thirty years; there are still very basic things that have to be achieved. For example, a signal from a microphone still needs to be passed through a mixing console and comms to and from the field still has to be delivered.

IT is having an effect on both of these areas. "Broadcasters have very different ideas about how to operate two-way comms. Increasingly, voice over IP (VoIP) is being considered and rolled out. TSL has also deployed a number of VoIP intercom systems. Of course, it does to a certain extent depend on where you are in the world as not all IP backbone infrastructures can provide the quality of service required," explains Phillips.

There is also an enormous difference between having an expanded intercom


system that connects your regional offices on a trunk network via the intercom system, to having just one or two sources in the newsroom. However, VoIP is here to stay. With journalists often now providing complete stories, they have to provide the audio. In modern newsrooms, that is often done at their office desk, rather than in a dedicated voiceover booth. This, of course, is not always ideal but given the workflows being deployed, is necessary.

This last fact above has to be very carefully taken into account when looking at the ergonomics of a new or upgraded newsroom, Phillips says.

"The practicalities of layout are crucial to the proper functioning of a modern newsroom. So the systems integrator needs to be involved at an early stage in the discussions between the customer and any architect or building contractor," he explains.

As everything becomes more compact — studios and galleries are much smaller now, there is less equipment on the desks and a greater number of screens with multiple displays — it has become increasingly important to give careful consideration to layout. One clear example is making sure the right people are located next to each other.

Newsroom environments are, of course, a hive of connections to the outside world and external connectivity has to also be carefully examined and planned. It is one of the first things that TSL has to understand when talking to a customer.

It is vital when looking at a newsroom project to do your homework. The workflow has to be planned to the very last detail to save both time and money and to end up with a desirable working environment. Lastly, the level of integration of the Enterprise IT network and broadcast network has to be examined carefully so that the system overall has the bandwidth and infrastructure to cope with the very large files being moved around, and making sure the programme material is transmitted exactly as scheduled. 

Digital Studio
10th October
2005