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Seamless Integration—the Panacea?

Dave Hughes talks to Hardware International

Seamless integration between traffic systems and automation playout has always been the panacea for broadcasters, a solution to remove the chances of incorrect media being transmitted, to ensure timings are correct, to cater for late changes in schedules. Dave Hughes, commercial director of Broadcast Traffic Systems questions whether this might be an over-simplification.

The objective of a seamless integrated system is to ensure that information in a traffic system reflects the physical material in the playout system. The advent of the videoserver coupled with improved software functionality in both automation and traffic products has made seamless solutions a reality – so have all the old problems now been removed or have they been replaced by a new set of dangers.

The early computer based systems consisted of separate playout and traffic functions, many broadcast professionals will remember the days when tape numbers were keyed into a schedule which was then used to produce a picklist for the playout process, sometimes requesting tapes that did not exist because the numbers had been entered incorrectly – or even worse, requesting a completely incorrect tape. Workflow processes were reliant on handwritten forms which passed between schedulers, programme makers, tape library and playout engineers. No wonder that schedulers were in constant fear of the transmission of an out of sequence episode, an incorrect commercial or the worst crime of all, a programme containing adult material being shown during children's broadcasting hours.

The advent of playout systems with computer controlled libraries of bar-coded cassettes was a massive improvement, this type of system ensures that media is automatically selected for transmission using electronic playlists transferred directly from a traffic system. A large number of operational systems, possibly the majority of broadcast systems currently in operation use this technology. There is still a reliance on human intervention with such systems, in some systems timecodes must be entered separately in both automation and traffic databases so any errors in this process can, and do, lead to an incorrect transmission. The use of barcodes to identify tapes and the direct capture and transfer of timecodes from VTR to computer database reduces the double entry of data processes but the two systems are mostly based on separate, non-integrated databases. As a consequence it is possible for schedules to contain incorrect information so systems are reliant on exception reports and system warning that must be continually checked to ensure errors are trapped.

Videoserver playout systems provide the technology to support a fully integrated, even seamless, workflow and offer the chance of increases in productivity and reduction in the risk of errors, not to mention faster editing of material and easier multi-channel broadcasting. Traffic to automation workflow processes are vastly improved, the ingest procedure can be triggered by the traffic system which can send ingest requests directly to an automation control system as soon as material is inserted into a schedule. Details of timecodes for material can be entered in either the automation or traffic system and the two databases automatically synchronised. Ingest operators can immediately see what material

needs to be prepared and when it needs to be available and the two way integration allows automation operators to be sure that the traffic database contains correct information, similarly schedulers are able to check whether material is available and as a consequence can make late changes to the schedule. There is also a commercial benefit to the process when it supports the ability to accept late changes to advertising, however, once all broadcasters have the same capability these benefits will quickly disappear. Another benefit of the full integration is the ability of schedulers to quickly check the visual content of material before transmission without leaving their desks using low resolution copies of material that can be made available over an office network.

However, blind reliance on automatic seamless transfer of information can lead to errors just as serious as those encountered in previous generations of the process. One problem with automatic transfer of is that an incorrect edit of material on a video server can be passed to the traffic system database and then automatically changed in schedules. For example, when material has to be trimmed or a scene removed, perhaps for censor reasons, it is necessary for the revised duration to be reflected in the traffic system and is then available for placement in future schedules, this is an essential feature of a seamless integrated environment. However, what if the edit process is handled incorrectly? perhaps 10 minutes being removed from an event instead of 1 minute due to careless editing, the result would be an automatic update of the traffic database with erroneous data and, more seriously, the transmission of an incorrectly edited item. The automatic updating of information between traffic and automation will bypass the in-built checks of the older less integrated solutions where each system had to provide warnings of discrepancies in media and operator intervention and re-keying of information brought about a natural validation of data. The solution to this problem is some old fashioned exception notifications or printed reports warning of potential problems, these are seen everyday in commercial software with messages such as 'do you want to save changes?'

Most computer systems, whether commercial or technical, need in-built checks to avoid a simple error becoming a disaster, the answer in fully integrated automation and traffic systems is for software to be programmed to provide checks and balances which warn operators of potential problems. This can be as simple as a warning to schedulers of all changes to material durations of more than, say, 20 seconds or perhaps a warning based on a percentage parameter to show a warning if a duration is changed by more than 10% of its original value. This simple exception check can significantly reduce the risk of error and can also reduce the effort needed to double check the duration of material in schedules. The result of such as process should allow changes to be made and handled automatically provided they do not break pre-set rules. If the parameters are broken then system users are informed and corrective action can be quickly made to rectify the mistake.

For Further Information
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