

2014 - The tapeless revolution consolidated

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Theme 5 -
Articulation of, and Barriers to, Creativity, Freedom
and Choice in Media Practices

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One of the most fundamental changes to the UK broadcast sector during 2014 will be the final transition to a purely tapeless form of delivery and the implications this will have on working practices and media convergence.

Over a period of nearly 2 decades the roles within media production have become redefined and the rules slowly rewritten to accommodate and adapt to the change to tapeless. As technology become faster more complex and most fundamental of all cheaper, the speed of change has accelerated.

By the late 90's 'digital' was the buzzword in the media industry and the related technologies were being utilized in all areas of media production from cameras and sound recording through to post production. Cards and storage disks were slowly replacing tape as the primary means of capture, recording and storage.

The broadcast and media sectors are now on the cusp of evolving and witnessing fundamental changes driven by a combination of technological advances, new and emerging delivery platforms and new methods of distribution in an increasingly global market place. The final stage of the move from analogue to tapeless file based delivery is the culmination of over 15 years of change in production and working practices within the UK media sector.

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The 1st of October 2014 was a landmark in UK broadcasting with the BBC changing to a fully tapeless delivery of all programmes. This landmark event was one of the major projects promoted and administered by the Digital Production Partnership and is the final implementation of the cross over from analogue to a purely digital file based delivery of broadcast production and distribution.

Formed in 2010 The Digital Production Partnership (DPP) is an organization funded and led by the BBC, ITV and Channel 4 with representation from Sky, Channel 5 and BT Sport with the aim and responsibly to promote and maximize the potential of digital technologies within the broadcast sector.

The DPP has produced three in depth reports, The Reluctant Revolution (2011) The Bloodless Revolution (2012) and The Creative Revolution (2013) that address some of the issues and raise a great many questions about how the nature and scale of these changes will be defined and structured in the coming decades.

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One of the key finding in the 2011 Reluctant Revolution report was

'The digital revolution has democratised programme making in lowering the

technical and financial costs of making content. If one stops for a moment and thinks back just ten years, the degree of power and flexibility we now have in everyday tools is a world away from what we had then.'

The Mediacity hub consists of a combination of small, medium and large media companies working on a diverse range of productions making it an ideal environment to analyse these changes to both job descriptions and working practices. Although there are a great many questions that are raised by the changes the one I would like to focus on is the redefinition of job roles.

A redefinition of working practices and job roles

Although many traditional roles within the media industry have on the whole remained unchanged, the gradual transition and change to tapeless file based delivery has introduced a wide range of new roles and responsibilities that merge, computing, information technology, internet and network infrastructures.

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Conventional media practice has in many ways defined the production process into distinct and definable stages. Standard texts and references show clear definition of roles within the media sector and Skillset, the government body that links with and works with the creative industries, identifies and defines a range of roles and posts within the media sector. Each stage of production has a number of defined roles and on the whole there was little interchanging between stages, although a holistic understanding of the process and the roles they played within the production process was required. A camera operator was a camera operator and an editor an editor.

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With the introduction of tapeless workflows new words and phrases such as metadata, pipelines and multiskilling were the key phrases of the media industry. Producers, directors and post-production houses were having to rethinking and consider the management and impact of file based digital productions. As the 2012 Bloodless Revolution highlights

'The only reason we find ourselves now having to describe the production process in such detail is because it has fundamentally changed. And those changes, for so long as they are poorly understood, threaten to constrain the very creativity they are intended to release.'

This raises a number of key questions to be addressed and defined.

Given the complexity of equipment would a more holistic, end to end understanding of the process be an advantage?

How would the huge amounts of material and data be stored, and accessed?

How to manage and identify flexible and integrated workflows that are suitable for individual projects and productions?

What measure would need to be identified to ensure that creative skills are recognized as fundamental, if not more important, than technical?

In order to gain an indepth technical and aesthetic understanding of a range of software, their function and integration with other software what training and quality controls would need to be established?

Is the ability to share, access and disseminate the information to a potential large team of production personnel one of the major factors in a production?

How can teams deliver and distribute to a diverse range of platforms?

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Blending and being able to deal with the complexities of these factors calls for a diverse range of skills and talent and employers are increasingly looking for talent that can truly multiskill and multitask. Tapeless workflows almost demand a multiskilling approach that blends IT, management, creative and technical skills.

Multiskilling has become of the key phrases in the media industry but its precise meaning has relatively unclear and ambiguous in use. An understanding of the integration and management of content from a diverse variety of sources is arguably the most flexible of the many definitions of multiskilling. If this is the case how is this manifested in current roles? It is difficult at times to be precise about defining roles and descriptions as individual companies have their own needs and requirements.

Data wrangler

One role that is relatively new role that has started to emerge in the last five years is that of the data wrangler. Although the description is fairly broad covering animation, VFXs and post production a fairly typical job description would require the following -

A highly motivated and extremely organized individual able to undertake ingest duties, data management and manipulation in combination with assisting the editors and producers with postproduction.

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Duties and key skills will include –

junior editing, file/data organisation, delivery preparations, runner service, file conversions, data wrangling and ingesting. Additional tasks might include junior editing assignments and assisting on film shoots.

Practical application and daily duties

Bringing data and material from a shot
Ingesting the material into a storage system
Labelling and working with the metadata to organize files for post production, graphics and VFXs

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The BBC natural history unit was one of the first to utilize a tapeless workflow in the 2011 production of Frozen Planet. The range of diverse and complex data, with multiple crews shooting on a range of locations, included not only standard metadata about dates and times but also GPS metadata to identify locations. This information combined with additional information about species and environments was invaluable in ensuring a smooth workflow and the role of data wranglers was crucial in managing the huge volume of data and material.

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Large scale drama productions such as Game of Thrones use similar workflows and working methodologies but are in many ways far more complex. In addition to have multiple crew shooting over several countries the post production, unlike Frozen Planet which was predominately based in Bristol, is spread over several countries and has the added complexity of utilizing graphics and VFXs, produced in locations such as Los Angeles and London.

Data wrangler is just one specific example of one of many new job roles that have emerged with the advent and increasing use of tapeless file based delivery. Therefore it could be argued that Multi-skilling capability is one of the most important attributes to foster and attain in an increasingly complex broadcast industry.

Articulation of, and Barriers to, Creativity, Freedom & Choice in Media Practices

Digital production and broadcast has been the catalyst for many new and diverse changes in the media industry. Some would argue the complexity of digital technologies is a barrier that inhibits and stifles creative freedom but this is certainly not a view held by the majority of industry specialists.

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The 2013 The Creative Revolution report by the DPP has some interesting conclusions

'Our research confirmed that creativity is a messy business. Giving

permission to the unorthodox, disruptive and non-standard is giving permission to creativity. Tidy it up, and you may close creativity down.

What this research has demonstrated is that the 'creative revolution' isn't so much a revolution in creativity itself as in the delivery and consumption of creativity. Digital technology may be changing TV production. But it's the way it's changing TV consumption that looks set to be far more profound.'

Tapeless delivery is only one aspect of the complex digital jigsaw that constitutes media production and the one consistent element with tapeless delivery is that it will continue to shape, develop and change the media industry for many decades to come.

These developments will almost certainly open up wider question about the nature of change in the media industry and with it the potential to open up new area of research. Many new questions can be raised such as –

1 How is the tapeless revolution changing broadcast productions?

2 What will be the nature and form of convergent media practices in a tapeless environment?

3 Will these changes restrict or have the potential to expand the creative process?

Although each question can be considered individually, each is interwoven and interchangeable with the next. This is a potentially rich area for research and one that I am sure we will be discussing at this conference for many years to come.

Although the complexities of new technologies, networks and tapeless file based delivery appears to liberate creative freedom, the danger is that there is the possibility that mainstream TV/Film will end up the privileged provenance of the Technogeek and electronic specialist?

The overall view from both the DPP and Skillset is that this will not be the case as production companies cannot afford, both financially and creatively, to allow this to happen. There is a strong argument for developing both innovation and creativity within the industry and embracing the new working practices.