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FEATURES

FOCUS ON EDITING

Jay Ankeney

The Impact of iNEWS Instinct in the Real World

Starting this month, editors will be presented with the most radical evolution in editing user interfaces since GUIs began to replace timecode-based EDLs back in the 1980s.

Sure change is good, and innovation is liberating, but the impact of this new method of working with an edit system may have influence the future of editing far beyond its user-friendly design implications.

This new age is coming with the first installation of the new Avid iNEWS Instinct system, which is getting its first real-world workout at WFTV-TV's newsroom in Orlando, Fla. But although Avid's initial target is the approximately 2,700 broadcasters worldwide with major newsrooms, once you digest the concepts behind iNEWS Instinct, it becomes obvious that iNEWS Instinct's way of working could affect many facets of what we call mainstream editing.

First, say goodbye to placing clips on horizontal timelines. Avid iNEWS Instinct is a script-based editing system that uses a combination of text, Sound on Tape soundbites (SOT), cover images (B-Roll) and narrative track (it's awkward to use the term voice-over, since in newsrooms, a V.O. is the video sequence played while the anchorperson reads live copy), to put together news packages that can be sent directly to air.

Currently, it's a cuts-only system, but you know that will quickly advance in subsequent updates. The point is that Avid's iNEWS Instinct earned its name from the reality that it takes less time to learn the system than it takes a reporter drink a cup of Starbucks.

There have been other tries at script-based edit systems in the past, most prominently the Ediflex, designed by post-production pioneer Adrian Ettlinger, The system won its manufacturer, Cinedco, an Emmy for "Design of Electronic Editing Systems" in 1986. But mainstream editors didn't take well to Ediflex's lack of engineering control over the editing pro-cess, and its requisite analog A/V signal parameters.

WFTV Producer Jason Balthazar creates a sequence and prepares to send it to the playback server using Avid iNEWS Instinct.

CRAFT EDITORS

Journalists, however, have no such prejudices to overcome, so in this day of digital ENG; iNEWS Instinct doesn't even include waveform monitors or audio meters. All of those concerns, if needed, can be left to what is being termed "craft editors," but more on that later.

For Avid, this is a new approach to an ongoing challenge.

"As we have been installing news systems for broadcasters in various markets, we discovered that there were a lot of people in the newsroom who had become disenfran-

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chised because there was no proper tool for them," said David Schleifer, vice president of broadcast and workgroups at Avid Technology. "iNEWS Instinct is a word processor, a video shot selector and an editor all rolled into one. Actually, it's a new class of product."

The iNEWS Instinct desktop screen presents a vertically oriented workspace, scrolling the journalist's copy from top to bottom on which the journalist selects SOT and B-roll to fit over and around the text. The system has previously been told the speed of that individual journalist's narration, a process called Dynamic Visual Timing, so it can help determine the pacing of the cover video even before the track has been recorded.

"I've had journalists who have never seen the system before sit down and start to cut video to their script within five minutes."

— Dave Sirak, WFTV

iNEWS Instinct is smart enough to dip the level of b.g. audio for on-camera soundbites or stand-ups, and video splits are created by simply dragging the head or tail video of an A/V shot over the preceding or subsequent audio. All of this can be performed with full resolution video from the newsroom's shared storage server instead of the low-res "browse" video other journalist desktop systems have suffered from.

OUT OF THE BOX

The system seems to be exceeding its promises down at WFTV, where they plan to install up to 15 iNEWS Instinct desktop systems. Dave Sirak WFTV's news operations manager for its Eyewitness News broadcasts, appreciates the fact that iNEWS Instinct, at around $4,000 per seat, is really a media manager, iNEWS client and edit system all rolled into one.

"We were able to boot up, connect to our central storage, cut a test story, and transfer it to the play-out server within an hour of taking iNEWS Instinct out of the box," Sirak described. "I've had journalists who have never seen the system before sit down and start to cut video to their script within five minutes."

But how will this affect the role of the traditional newsroom editor? "I don't see iNEWS Instinct having a negative impact on most editors," Sirak insisted. "Their skills are still unique and valuable. But it will give newsroom journalists a closer understanding of what the editing process requires and how to tell stories with good pictures."

One of WFTV's photographer/editors, Bruce Wiley, welcomes iNEWS Instinct's new capabilities.

"The producers will be able to access all of my video right at their desktop so they can select soundbites for teases and opens by themselves," Wiley said. "Specialist editors will only be required for the more intricate projects, and that's why we'll be calling them craft editors."

Pretty apparently, this distinction of craft editor" may be one of the byproducts of the advent of this new editing process. A craft editor has been defined by a person prominent in the iNEWS Instinct development as, "Somebody who is more focused on the pictures and sound than they are on the words and the storytelling."

But as opposed to the offline/online paradigm we have become accustomed to, the journalist at the iNEWS Instinct desktop has access to the same high-resolution video off the newsroom's shared-storage server as the craft editor will be using on a full-featured system such as Avid NewsCutter or Media Composer.

So that professional editing polisher with advanced engineering skills could be adding their tweaks and trims without necessarily understanding the context of the package or interfacing with the person behind its conception. Will that mean the skill set of technologically savvy editors for manipulating the quality of the audio/video building blocks will become divorced from the creative process itself?

EDITING FOR THE MASSES

Avid's Schleifer doesn't think that will happen.

"We brought editors into the process of designing iNEWS Instinct and quite frankly, most craft editors looked at it and said 'why would I ever want to use this?'" he said. "They realized Instinct is a tool designed for other users. What we are doing is getting better information to craft editors when it is needed, and letting other work go directly to air."

Schleifer is sensitive to the concerns some have voiced that this new system may result in fewer jobs for dedicated editors.

"We've found that most facilities aspire to improve their content," he said, "and the end result of putting our system into their newsrooms has been that people work harder with better tools to produce more and better product. Ultimately, with new distribution options such as the Internet, podcasting, or even cell phone video, this may result in more employment opportunities."

That may prove to be true in the newsroom environment where hitting deadlines sometimes trumps finesse. But consider how many other kinds of productions rely on the soundbite-to-B-roll structure of communication. Lots of producers making documentaries, training videos or even simple TV commercials will quickly appreciate the advantages of dumping NLE systems requiring weeks of training to adopt an approach as intuitive as the concepts behind Instinct.

We don't want to defend buggy whip-making Luddites standing in the path of digital progress here, but many young editors for whom newsrooms have served as a video boot camp may have to consider other entry-level avenues when anyone who can put pen to paper can cut a video package. They may even have to consider becoming journalists.

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