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Overcoming the burden of VOD Integrating "traditional" linear television and VOD file publishing workflows

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WHITE PAPER

For many broadcast engineers and operations managers, the number one headache right now is generating on-demand content. It takes up lots of their time, while generating low revenue streams in comparison to traditional, linear television. Evidently, this is not a viable long-term option, and this has prompted considerable interest in speeding the creation of nonlinear content, as well as improving the associated revenues.

Dealing with Multiple Formats

The low efficiency of on-demand content generation is often partly due to the fact that nonlinear content has a very separate workflow from traditional television. Typically, many broadcasters have operated their Playout and New Media operations independently, with the latter being responsible for generating all on-demand content. This approach worked just fine some years back when there were only a few media platforms. However, the volume of on-demand content has grown dramatically, with the upsurge of new formats, including cable and satellite VOD distribution, owned and syndicated web delivery, mobile device services and DTO/DTR (Download to Own/Rent) media portals. Many broadcasters have embraced this VOD growth wholeheartedly with their TV Everywhere/Anywhere/Anytime/Catch-Up TV initiatives. These ventures have sought to retain viewers, and maintain revenues, by allowing their audiences to watch their favorite programs through their preferred medium, and at a time that best suits them. Unfortunately, the net result of all this growth in VOD content is a serious overloading of broadcasters' existing on-demand content generation processes.

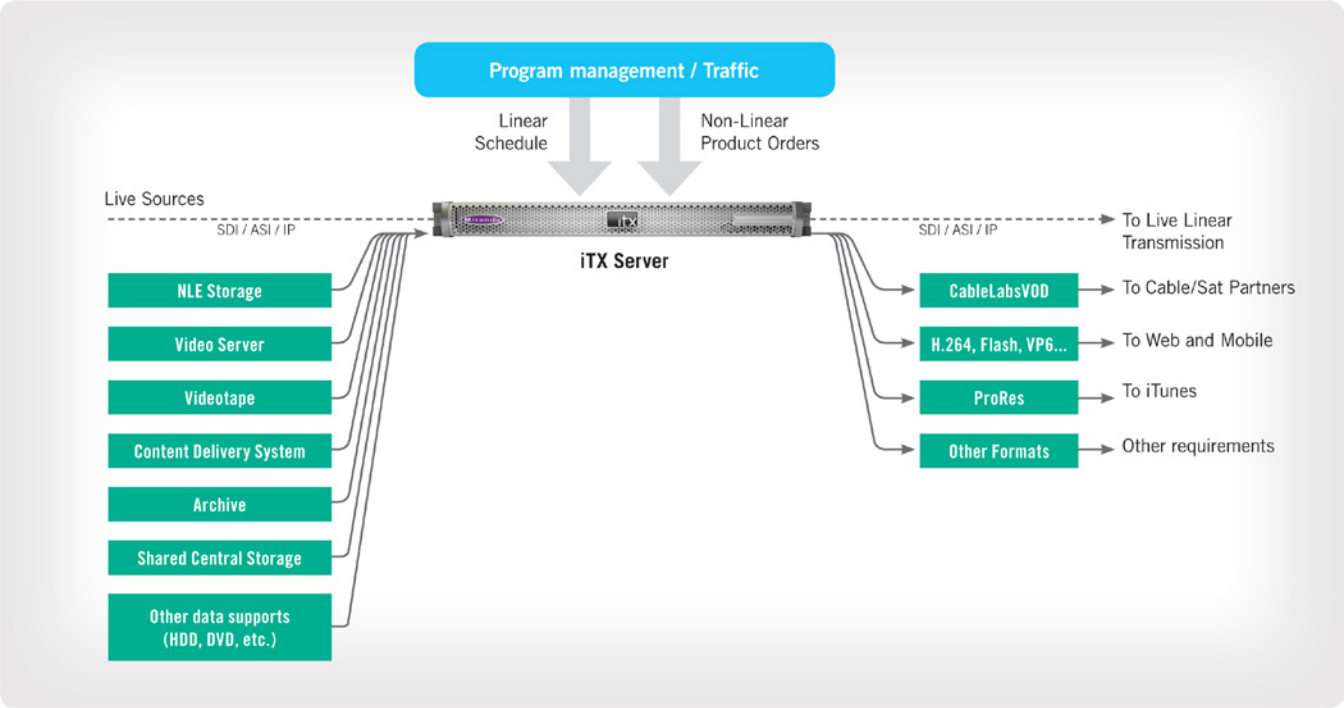
This heavy burden of VOD has forced a rethink of broadcasters' operations in order to reduce the latency between the release of their 'just aired' VOD content and the actual playout of their schedule. In essence, this has changed the focus of VOD operations from back-catalog publishing, to schedule content publishing, which calls for a much closer collaboration between Playout and New Media operations. This is especially true now that many broadcasters have contractual agreements with advertisers to include original advertisements in some VOD deliverables, such as Nielsen-measured C3 cable VOD in the U.S. market. This type of development could very well hit Europe in the near future.

Monetizing VOD Content

The monetization of VOD content in order to offset the related operational costs is a very hot topic right now, with an active debate between the advocates of pay-per-view, subscription-based and advertising-supported business models. For the moment, most broadcasters need to produce separate content to support each of these approaches. In addition, within the advertising-supported camps, opinions are split between the merits of mass advertising versus targeted advertising, which leads to further requirements to embed advertising in VOD products, and/or to provide ad insertion instructions (XML, SCTE, EBIF) for targeted advertising. Naturally, each of these various VOD products must be customized to meet individual distribution contract agreements, and this often results in dozens of extra versions.

A further way to generate revenue is for broadcasters to integrate promotional graphics into their VOD content. Not only can this achieve cross-channel, linear broadcast schedule promotion, but it can also extend broadcasters' brands with promos for different products and services, such as websites, mobile apps and social media, etc. Most often, these different graphics elements will need to be packaged manually on NLE systems, which introduces additional latency and costs to the VOD operations. Furthermore, since most program content is the same across versions, the transcoding systems used to encode VOD files typically end up spending the majority of their time reprocessing the same content. Again, this introduces further, unnecessary latency and cost.

In addition to these various operational challenges inherent with VOD, there is also an array of complex, associated commercial and legal requirements which impact production. For instance, in order to justify advertising rates, a growing number of broadcasters need to watermark their VOD content for audience measurement, using Nielsen, Arbitron or Civolution, and this can be challenging to perform in the file domain. Many broadcasters are also faced with additional obligations to offer the same content in multiple languages, add captions and subtitles, control audio loudness, add AFD and SCTE triggers insertion etc. All these elements contribute to the complexity of creating VOD products, and have led to some very convoluted, overly manual workflows.



Better Integrated VOD Workflows

To address all these demanding VOD issues, there is a requirement for much smarter, file-based VOD publishing workflows, and a higher level of process automation. Broadcasters need systems that are designed for effective scaling of VOD production, with faster than real-time production. These concepts are at the heart of Grass Valley's new iTX VOD file publishing solution. It allows broadcasters to use the same schedule and sources as their traditional playout operation to quickly and efficiently produce VOD deliverables with all the correct metadata. In fact, these processes can be performed at a significantly faster rate than with traditional, real-time VOD generation. This new system can work in standalone configuration, or it can be added to an existing iTX automation and playout infrastructure for easy sharing of schedules and content. This allows VOD publishing to be fully integrated with program management and traffic systems (with support for BXF). It enables sources for VOD generation to be automatically fetched from generic storage, video servers, NLE systems, archiving systems, content delivery systems, data or video tapes, as well as from live video sources.

To address issues associated with promotional graphics on VOD content, there is also a tight integration with automated channel branding tools, which allows the insertion of rich branding graphics into VOD files using automated versioning. This unique capability allows broadcasters to strengthen their brand promotion across multiple platforms. For instance, they can drive audiences to linear channels where their revenue is generally concentrated.

By using a much more streamlined workflow, this new model for VOD publishing is set to revolutionize the way on-demand content is created. Broadcasters will be able to quickly repurpose their playout schedule and content to create all of their VOD deliverables, including CableLabs and H.264 files, as well as high quality masters for premium portals, such as iTunes, Hulu and Netflix. It's an altogether much better integrated workflow, and it's going to mean one less major headache for broadcasters.