

TV Networks Find Viable Path To Meeting Multiscreen Goals

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Growing Numbers of Major Players Leverage Cloud Solution from Anvato

By Fred Dawson

July 28, 2014 – For TV networks caught in the squeeze between losing money on multiscreen initiatives and losing out in the Internet media stampede there's an increasingly urgent need to find technology solutions that will cut costs even as they pursue ever more aggressive expansion agendas.

While recent research shows some improvement in the rate of pay TV subscribers' engagement with TV Everywhere options, most OTT viewing of long-form video is taking place outside the live streaming and recent-release windows that are only available to authenticated pay TV subscribers. Yet the consensus among content suppliers is that they must make this high-value content available to pay TV subscribers' connected devices via live and on-demand streaming platforms that enhance the traditional viewing experience and open a path to new revenues through support for targeted advertising.

Judging by how some TV programmers are addressing this challenge, it appears that with minimal reliance on internal facilities they can tap cloud-based technology to meet the cost/benefit requirements without compromising aggressive expansion agendas. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the success Fox Sports has had with efforts to mount a next-generation multiscreen service that allows subscribers to access live as well as on-demand streams from Fox Sports 1 and 2 outlets and regional sports affiliates through a single portal.

Last year, Fox Sports' selection of the multiscreen media platform supplied by Silicon Valley-based Anvato offered strong support for the notion that a cloud-based software solution running in coordination with software-based transcoding performed on commodity servers in broadcasters' facilities could handle the complexities of doing everything related to orchestrating simultaneous live streaming of events from all over the country. Farther validation of this strategy came in February when Fox Sports used the Anvato Media Content Platform to stream Super Bowl XLVIII live with support for targeted advertising.

"Fox Sports had an ambitious goal of working with all their regional sports network affiliates to pull in thousands of events every year with a unique advertising model where national ad spots would be dynamically inserted by the national networks and local avails would be served by local affiliates," says Matt Smith, chief evangelist for Anvato. "It required a cloud infrastructure to tie together all those RSNs and to coordinate all those feeds for playback with enforcement of licensing policies tied to specific viewing locations, such as hotels versus households, or specific types of devices."

As Smith notes, mounting such a complex operation typically takes many months with integration of various components such as workflow systems, content management, client development and conditioning of streams for



Matt Smith, chief evangelist, Anvato

advertising from multiple vendors. “Most people don’t have the ability to meet all those requirements without designing, scripting and testing a lot of APIs,” he says. “In our case, they give us their EPG and live schedule, and we automate the rest.”

Such capabilities have drawn the engagement of a growing list of clients, including NBC Universal, Univision, Hearst Television and Gray Television, some using the full turnkey solution and others choosing certain elements from the modular Anvato portfolio. “We’re typically finding different staging groups will use different parts of the solution stack and then move to more of our solutions over time,” Smith says.

Some might start with HD capture and the Anvato file-sharing workflow. They might have an online video publisher in place and so want Anvato to push their assets into the OVP for playback. “We’ll win a piece of the business with live encoding, ad stitching or whatever, but eventually they realize we can make it possible for them to get rid of the swive chair,” Smith says.

Support for dynamic addressable advertising has been particularly important to broadcasters like Fox Sports who don’t want to get into multiscreen delivery unless they can derive new revenues from the effort. Another example is Hearst Television, which has deployed Anvato’s platform to equip more than 20 TV stations with broadcast-style advertising pods that allow them to use their existing digital ad servers for targeted advertising across a mix of local and national spots.

By leveraging Anvato’s VAST-compliant server-side integration with DoubleClick for Publishers (DFP) by Google, Hearst and its digital ad operations partner Internet Broadcasting are able to automatically replace original ads throughout the program stream with ads specific to each local market, notes Mike Rosellini, vice president of digital operations at Hearst Television. Making this possible brought into play many other requirements as well, Rosellini says.

“We wanted one integrated solution to deal with newscast video capture, proxy clipping, live streaming and ad pods,” he explains. “While there are a number of vendors that do bits and pieces, Anvato is special in that they solve a number of problems with one unified package.”

Rosellini emphasizes the importance of having a commodity server-based software encoding system. “We didn’t want to buy encoders or make a huge hardware investment,” he says. “Anvato simply gave us the flexibility that other encoding solutions couldn’t offer.”

Anvato recently introduced support for live transcoding in the cloud to allow event producers in the field to transfer a single stream to the cloud for multiscreen processing. But the company has found that, whenever possible, broadcasters want to do the initial encoding at their own locations.

“Most of our customers have baseband video, which can be captured for encoding at their origins and then ingested into the cloud for streaming and other processing,” Smith says. Anvato’s Live Video Capture platform also allows broadcasters to syndicate content to business partners in near real time.

“We’re working with a totally different model,” Smith says. “You don’t have to rack and stack new encoders. You don’t have to pick an online video producer, encoder supplier, ad management system, etc. and hope they all work together. With installation of our software on a one-rack unit in your facilities you can be up and running in sync seamlessly and flawlessly with our cloud platform in a few hours.”

Anvato has tightly integrated its software systems, including the encoding component, with Dell servers, although Smith makes clear it can integrate its software encoder onto other servers in client facilities to enable seamless coordination with the cloud-based servers. Anvato, he adds, has developed a universal player that cuts distribution costs by enabling use of one adaptive bitrate (ABR) streaming format, Apple’s HLS (HTTP Live Streaming), to reach

iOS, Android, PCs and other devices in compliance with rigorous QoS requirements.

One of the more recent additions to Anvato's customer lineup is Gray Television, the largest independent owner of CBS affiliates with additional affiliates tied to NBC, ABC and Fox, covering 31 television markets in all. Gray is using Anvato's MCP to manage all rich-media online content, from live capture ingestion to live encoding, editing, publishing and distribution, including live and on-demand video monetization, says Lisa Bishop, vice president of digital media at Gray.

"Anvato has a great reputation as an industry leader for digital video broadcast innovation and is the only company in the industry that boasts so many unique, broadcast-centric features," Bishop says. "We are capitalizing on all of these capabilities."

One of the key requirements broadcasters have set for live program streaming is that it be a TV-like experience but with social media and enhancements that exploit the capabilities of interactive IP technology. One TV experience that's essential is faster channel switching than one typically encounters online.

"This is exactly what Fox SportsGO does," Smith notes. "If you open the app you see every live stream in the channel lineup. You can switch to whatever you want to watch and begin streaming instantly."

Similarly, every ad break "must will look, smell and feel just like it does on a telecast." To make this happen with Fox Sports Anvato is working with the network to stitch and deliver the commercial payload at the server level in the cloud Smith says. "This means that a viewer in New York City will see a different set of ads than a viewer in Los Angeles."

But, he adds, the multiscreen experience "must be better than broadcast." Signal origin with digitization of the broadcast signals into streaming renditions is now the beginning of a complex workflow that involves a number of steps, including "adding or maintaining captions and subtitles, marking the content for ad breaks, creating and preserving meta tags, clip generation, social syndication, among many others," he says.

The fact that broadcasters are now able to cost effectively meet such requirements looks like a game changer in the fast-evolving TV business. Whether or not this turns out to be the case will depend on how these new strategies impact the trend line in TV Everywhere engagement.