CAN POST BE MORE EFFICIENT?

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On the 30th June, *Televisual* gathered many of the UK's post technical leaders at the Soho Hotel to discuss topics ranging from workflow efficiency and security to the enduring value of post. The lively discussion started at 6.00pm and continued beyond 10.30pm with a three-course dinner and wine served midway through the discussion. Following the event, the panellists were invited to reflect and comment on the themes raised over dinner. Highlights from their commentary follow. *Televisual* thanks all those who contributed and Sohonet for making the evening possible.

Post is being asked to do more, sometimes much more, within a production environment that is simultaneously more connected and more distributed, while security and expenditure are more closely scrutinised. Around the table, there was little, if any, appetite for a simplistic choice between cloud and on-premise infrastructure. The discussion was instead about where meaningful efficiencies can still be found, how to connect securely and how post can continue to invest as established workflows and commercial models are pulled apart.

ITN'S **ED BENGOA** summarises the post perspective neatly: "Post production has always absorbed pressure – technical, creative, financial - but the pace of change right now is genuinely different, and it was clear in our discussion, that everyone is feeling it. Requirements are shifting faster, infrastructure is more distributed, and the expectation from all our clients, is that it all works seamlessly."

The Roundtable Panel

ADAM DOWNEY director of post production, Sky
ANDY HOWARD head of technology, The Flying Colour Company
CHRIS SPEARMAN operations director, Suite Post Production
CHUCK PARKER chief executive officer, Sohonet
DONNA MULVEY-JONES director of post production, Banijay
ED BENGOA director of post production, ITN
JENNIFER ERIKSSON director of post production, Creativity Media / Fulwell Entertainment
MARK MALTBY chief technology officer, The Look
MAT TROUGHTON head of post tech & workflow, production, Creativity Media / Fulwell Entertainment
OLLY STROUS chief technology officer, Zinc Media
ROBERT LE MERLE head of production technology (non-scripted), ITV Studios
SAM HARDY head of post operations, ITN
TOM MITCHELL chief technology officer, Mission
ZEB CHADFIELD cvo and founder, The Finish Line
CHAIR **JAMES BENNETT** managing director, *Televisual*

> "Whilst many chase a single transformative 'fix', real gains can be found in granularity."
>
> **MARK MALTBY**
> THE LOOK

The search for efficiencies

With production budgets tightening, more efficient workflows are seen as one of the few remaining places in which meaningful savings can be found. Around the table, all were very aware of that pressure. However, the current search for efficiency was less about a single technological leap than the accumulated effect of removing bottlenecks, repetition and unused capacity.

ITV STUDIOS' **ROBERT LE MERLE:** "The pressure on production budgets has never been greater. Post-production teams are being asked to deliver more content, more versions and faster turnarounds with fewer resources. The temptation is always to look for transformational technology. In reality, the biggest gains often come from removing hundreds of tiny inefficiencies. Saving two or three minutes every time media is transferred."

ZINC MEDIA'S **OLLY STROUS:** "I don't think the need has ever been greater. The challenge is that the gains are increasingly incremental. It's rarely one transformational change anymore. Instead, it's lots of small improvements that, together, have a significant impact.

"A good example is the way we now rely on moving huge video files through cloud services. Upgrading connectivity to 10Gbps across our two core production hubs has had a genuinely profound effect on productivity. On paper it's a technical infrastructure upgrade, but in practice it's removed countless small delays that add up over the course of a project."

ROBERT LE MERLE is also looking at the collective upsides of a more granular approach: "Automatically generating metadata instead of asking an assistant editor to type it manually. Allowing editors to access media immediately rather than waiting for overnight copies. Nothing revolutionary. But across a returning series with thousands of assets and hundreds of hours of media, those incremental improvements compound into substantial savings."

THE FLYING COLOUR COMPANY'S **ANDY HOWARD** takes a holistic approach, thinking both machine utilisation and best business practice: "The need for efficiency in a post environment is more important than ever given the challenging rates and fast turnarounds.

"Optimising resource usage to reduce costs, turning all CPUs in the building to rendering overnight. There are no longer dedicated machines. Workstations have become a generic resource along with VMs and containers and can be what you need them to be on the day; Flame, Nuke, Houdini or processing nodes. So, where a project starts 3D heavy and ends compositing heavy you can scale to the requirements of your Production team very quickly whilst controlling costs.

"We use automation systems to shut down machines when not in use and bring them back on demand which saves on energy costs and adds to our green policy."

THE LOOK'S **MARK MALTBY** concludes: "Post has always run on thin margins, but the current squeeze feels different. Budgets have flat-lined, but the technical surface area continues to expand. Whilst many chase a single transformative 'fix', real gains can be found in granularity."

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>
> **CHRIS SPEARMAN**
> SUITE POST PRODUCTION

The future has always been hybrid

No single infrastructure model fits every production. Standardisation simply doesn't yet exist within post and in many respects the requirements are becoming more, rather than less, complex. The only common requirement is the ability to scale securely around the specific workload, the turnaround and the location of the media.

SUITE POST PRODUCTION'S **CHRIS SPEARMAN:** "At the start of this year we had seven fast turnaround projects all happening up against TX, and in some cases five delivering in one day. For that kind of work, it is hard to get away from an on-prem Avid infrastructure and the right people in the right place. That needs to be bulletproof.

"At the same time, we were working on a streamer job with a big portion of the workflow existing in the public cloud, utilising virtual resources in a bring-tools-to-the-media model. We would love to do more of that, but a lot of it depends on where the media is and how it's presented to us. As a post vendor, we don't have ownership of the native media – it's just visiting. It could come to us on an S3 bucket, or on a transport drive."

FULWELL ENTERTAINMENT'S **MAT TROUGHTON:** "As the range of formats and markets we work across continues to broaden, the need to right-size capability and cost has become much more important. Cloud and hybrid approaches give us the flexibility to scale around those needs, rather than making big, fixed bets on infrastructure. They let us build tailored workflows around the opportunity in front of us, in a consumption-led model that can respond to volatile markets and shifting client demands."

FULWELL ENTERTAINMENT'S **JENNIFER ERIKSSON** also points to the need for a more "flexible operating model". Eriksson says, "Rather than automatically replacing large capital investments, we're using cloud services where they genuinely add value, allowing us to scale with demand instead of carrying the same overheads regardless of workload." ▶

BANIJAY'S **DONNA MULVEY-JONES** is hopeful that the current technology curve will force positive change, "If we were starting from a blank sheet of paper today, we'd design production very differently than what technology allowed us in the past - connecting people, media and tools from the outset rather than handing work between separate phases. The building blocks exist to achieve this now - with cloud, automation and AI ready to be used where it makes sense. The work now is transitioning our established workflows to take advantage of the new opportunities.

"The goal is creating secure, connected environments where the right people can access the right content at the right time. Connected and cloud-based workflows are making collaboration far more seamless regardless of geography, while advances in metadata, including AI-generated indexing, are making content far more discoverable. There will inevitably be pain points as we transition, but the long-term gain is simpler and faster workflows that benefit everyone involved in programme making."

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>
> **OLLY STROUS**
> ZINC MEDIA

A connected world

Connected production changes not only the infrastructure but also what clients expect to receive, and which parts of the traditional post bundle remain visible and chargeable.

OLLY STROUS: "As SVOD platforms increasingly require producers to use their infrastructure as a service, it's becoming clear that post-production pricing models also need to evolve. Overheads continue to rise, while market rates have often hidden the true cost of running a facility by rolling everything into familiar line items. I compare it to the shift in mobile networks from selling bundles of minutes to selling data, with unlimited calls included. The technology changed, so the commercial model had to change with it. I think post-production is approaching a similar moment."

MARK MALTBY: "Historically, dozens of smaller, operational tasks were bundled into two or three billing line items, which worked well until that bundle moved. When a client shifts Storage or Conform onto their own infrastructure, the headline revenue leaves, but much of the work remains. We still have to download EXRs, conform them, check them and then render them into the working resolution. But those tasks are orphaned, and with no invoice line of their own they risk being completed 'gratis'.

"So we had to start focusing on de-embedding; breaking post into atomic, individually costed tasks, so that when the ground shifts, we can see what remains billable. For example, connecting our colourist into our client's own cloud environment to complete the grade. This is the MovieLabs 2030 vision in practice; those who decouple can plug into it; those who can't risk being disintermediated."

DONNA MULVEY-JONES summarises the issue succinctly: "The answer to lower budgets can't continue to be lower rates or deeper discounts against rising operational costs."

Secure by design

Security was once closely associated with locking everything away in physical vaults and encrypted drives. The discussion instead framed secure connectivity as a design problem and manual data sharing, duplicated storage and poorly maintained systems as risks in their own right.

ROBERT LE MERLE: "For years, our industry has equated security with isolation. The safest environment was considered to be one disconnected from everything else. Whilst that approach undoubtedly reduced certain risks, it also introduced significant operational inefficiencies. Every transfer became manual, every collaboration required duplication, and valuable time was spent moving media rather than creating programmes. Today the challenge isn't deciding between siloed or internet-facing infrastructure. It's about designing systems that are secure by design while remaining connected by default."

SKY'S **ADAM DOWNEY** agrees: "Cloud-based workflows can strengthen security but only when implemented correctly. Rather than relying on copies of media being distributed across multiple devices and locations, cloud and virtual workstation environments allow content to remain securely within controlled infrastructure, with granular permissions, multi-factor authentication and comprehensive audit trails. In many cases, the content never needs to leave the protected environment at all.

"There is, however, a balance to strike. The increasing compliance burden can be challenging, particularly for smaller companies."

MAT TROUGHTON also observes the risks within a connected world: "Security in this new dynamic remains difficult. The door is either locked or it is not. Higher-profile content may make someone more likely to try the handle, but any breach can be existential. AI is helping us in this area by surfacing vulnerabilities that might otherwise only be found by those looking to exploit them. The irony is that same AI is the one trying the handle now!"

MISSION'S **TOM MITCHELL** sees further risks to security within the new vogue for DIY vibe coding: "Vibe coding is genuinely useful at the edges. Spin up a custom dashboard over tools you already own, shape something to your own workflow, solve a small problem in an afternoon. Where it turns dangerous is when people reach for it to build the big, complex systems the business actually runs on.

"When you work with a software company, the software is only the front window. Behind it sit the layers that matter: constant security patching, day-in day-out maintenance, and a person to call when it doesn't go to plan. Vibe coding makes all of that look like it disappears, especially if you can't read code. What you are left with is a noodle soup nobody can maintain, and the day the person who built it walks out, you're relying on a tool with the lights off and no idea where to start."

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> ITV STUDIOS

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> **SAM HARDY**
> ITN

The value of post

Whether an extension of a production company, broadcaster studio or third-party facility, if infrastructure is becoming more distributed, post's value is increasingly its ability to join the parts together, at an early (planned) stage to prevent avoidable cost, and reliably enough that production can concentrate on the creative.

ADAM DOWNEY: "The biggest gains rarely come from asking post teams to work faster, they come from involving post earlier. When post production is treated as an integral part of the production lifecycle rather than an endpoint, teams can make better decisions around workflows, crafts, deliverables and schedules before unnecessary costs are locked in.

"Ultimately, post isn't a separate business function, it's one stage in a continuous production workflow. By collaborating from the outset, production and post can remove duplication, avoid expensive rework and make smarter use of technology, all without compromising creative ambition."

ITN'S **SAM HARDY:** "While technology and workflows continue to evolve, the real differentiator remains the ability of post teams to design, manage and support complex workflows that work reliably for productions. Ultimately, post-production's role is not just to provide technology, but to ensure that producers can focus on the creative rather than the processes that sit behind it."

What technology cannot replace

As infrastructure becomes more flexible, distributed and interchangeable, its ownership becomes less important than the expertise wrapped around it. The evening's discussion returned repeatedly to people and talent: those able to shape workflows, support productions and make creative decisions for which there is no machine-verifiable definition of "right".

THE FINISH LINE'S **ZEB CHADFIELD:** "Our costs aren't in infrastructure, they're in people. Whether the storage and compute is on our cloud or a client's, hosted here or hosted there, that's not connected to our margin. What we're billing for is creative, technical, management and support time, the actual work. The infrastructure gets factored in and provided as part of that, but it's not what keeps us afloat.

"As a supplier to inhouse and third-party post facilities, the infrastructure and where it's provided from is largely separate from what we sell. Our own infrastructure is like Lego, we can swap out what we need and integrate anything from anywhere in the world without any downsides. The people remain key."

SOHONET'S **CHUCK PARKER** drew the strands together by distinguishing between the processes that can increasingly be automated and the creative judgement that cannot. "The useful way in is to stop treating a production as one thing and see it as a stack of tasks. Some are automate-first: conform, transcode, packaging, moving and holding media. They're high-volume and machine-verifiable, and their price is steadily being competed down - by software on one side and by studios pulling the work inhouse on the other. It's the layer under the most pressure, and the hardest to keep charging for.

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> **CHUCK PARKER**
> SOHONET

"What doesn't automate is the work where the stakes are high and "right" can't be checked by a machine - the creative decisions. And the value there isn't the task; it's whose context sits behind the decision. A director keeps control because the call is theirs and the context is human. A colourist or a sound lead endures because clients trust their judgement, not because the tool is rare. Craft with thin context around it is the exposed part.

"So the efficiency conversation is really a workflow one. Modernise the plumbing of how work moves - connectivity, cloud access, a single trusted source of truth, remote creative review, data movement, shot-review workflows and the supporting pieces around them - and you take cost out of the automate-first work that no longer pays, while freeing your best people for the decisions that do.

"For thirty years, post answered one question: do you have the creative talent and the purpose-built facility? The facility half of that is being competed away. What endures is the other half - the talent, and the trusted context they bring to the decisions a machine can't make." ■