

Sky News Active: Notes from a digital TV newsroom

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Introduction

“Sky News Active – This is News – How you want it, when you want it, 24/7”
(Foxtel Digital promotion 2004)

Sky News Australia launched its digital interactive service on 5 January 2004, as one of the more than 120 channels and interactive services being offered as part of Foxtel’s \$550 million rollout of digital subscriber services in Australia (Kruger 2004).

This major initiative is a joint venture of the Seven Network Australia, Publishing and Broadcasting Limited (owner of the Nine television network), and the British Sky Broadcasting (BSkyB) network. The pay-TV news service began in Australia in February 1996, and it remains Australia’s only 24 hour television news channel.

Sky News Australia generates 118 hours of television per week, including news bulletins on the hour and headlines every fifteen minutes, and 14 half hour current affairs and special interest programs. The service is available in more than 1.8 million homes across Australia on the Foxtel, Optus, Austar, Transact and Neighbourhood Cable pay-TV networks, and across New Zealand on the Sky satellite and Telstra cable pay-TV networks (Frangopoulos 2004).

This paper describes the desktop technology employed in the Sky newsroom to provide eight mini-channels of digital TV news content to subscribers. It outlines the developing workflow that has emerged as Sky News pioneers this form of television news content production in Australia. Many of the staff employed specifically to work on the digital service are recent graduates from journalism courses, and this paper notes some of the entry-level skills required by such employees to produce the digital content.

Methodology

This paper is based on observations and interviews with editorial staff conducted during visits to Sky News Australia in December 2003 and January 2004. It is important to note that the original purpose of those visits was related to tertiary journalism course curriculum issues, as opposed to a premeditated ethnographic enquiry into news production such as Ewart and Gregor's (2001) case study of the *Age Online*.

Nonetheless, the data gathered can be turned towards a formative study of the processes involved in the production of interactive television news. Hansen et al (1998, p. 35) note that entering a media production domain continues "to provide a sense of entering relatively unexplored territory" with fresh research trails to be followed. Just as interactive television is a new and developing experience for Australian media producers, this paper presents some early ethnographic notes on the news production process emerging at Sky News Active.

The interactive news service

The Sky News Active content is currently only available to subscribers of the Foxtel or Austar digital services. Suitably equipped users can “go active” by accessing the main Sky News channel, and then pressing a red button on their remote control.

This brings up a new interface of 8 mini-screens representing the eight separate content channels available. As shown in Figure 1, the content areas available are:

1. Sky News (the main news channel)
2. Headlines
3. Top story
4. Sky UK (the BskyB news service from the UK)
5. Sport
6. Business
7. Showbiz
8. Weather



Figure 1: The Sky News Active interface, showing 8 mini-screens of available content.

A mini-channel can then be selected using the remote control, and the main Sky News Active interface appears. The screen is divided into 3 key content areas. About a quarter of the screen is taken up with the video content of the selected channel and,

although the digital technology allows the user to resize the screen, it is being offered initially in this quarter-screen mode because of bandwidth issues. To the right of the video element is a box offering text-only news stories, a selection of current headlines, or even specialist data relevant to a particular mini-channel, such as the weather information shown in Figure 2. At the bottom of the screen is a “news ticker” with constantly changing headlines or information snippets, and some navigation buttons as fast links to the main channel options.



Figure 2: The Sky News Active interface (Weather), showing division of screen content

The user can configure their screen to watch video footage from one channel, while reading text stories from another, for example viewing the video Headlines while reading through Business text stories.

Making the news

The Sky News Active service is built from content being aired on the main Sky News service. A general principle is that material should not go to the Active site until it has been aired on the main channel. This is a clear indication that Sky News sees the

Active service as enhancing its core product, which is the live to air 24-hour news service, rather than providing an alternative news source.

Every bulletin going to air on the main channel is recorded digitally and stored on a server system with more than 100 hours capacity. This then becomes the raw material to be re-packaged for use on the Active mini-channels.

Four of the eight Active services require no input from the Active producers. The Sky News and Sky UK mini-channels are continuous feeds from these two on-air services. The Business mini-channel is managed in the Sky newsroom, but its content comes from the specialist business reporters hired for the main on-air service. They are physically located next to the Active producers in the workspace, but appear to work independently on their own channel. The Weather mini-channel content is sourced from The Weather Company (www.theweather.com.au), which supplies automated weather data to broadcast and online media organizations.

There are two production teams, roughly consisting of pairs of producers working eight and a half hour shifts. As shown in Figure 3, the starting times for each producer are staggered to ensure there are two producers working during the hours perceived to be the most demanding, or likely to require constantly updated content. These periods roughly mirror the traditional broadcast news focus on breakfast, midday, and early evening. Normally, only one producer covers the early afternoons and late evenings.

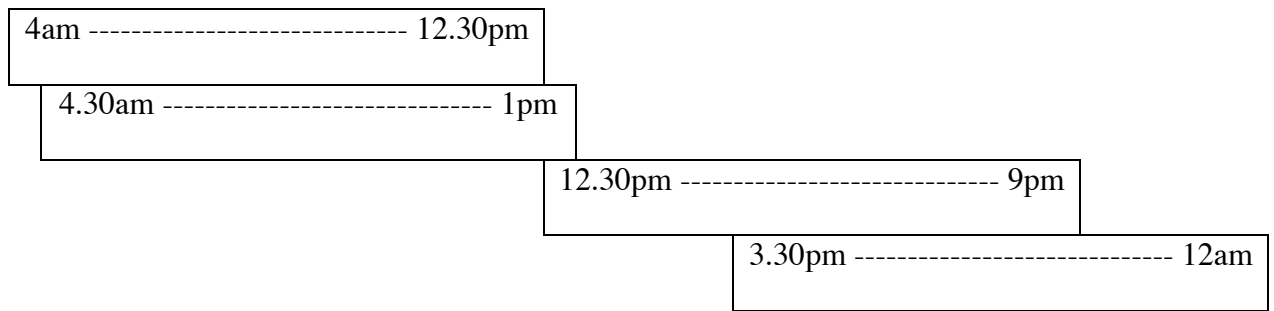


Figure 3: Sky News Active production shifts at a glance

When working in pairs, the producers manage two mini-channels each. One is responsible for the Headlines and Top Story services, while the other covers Sport and Showbiz.

The morning shift sees one producer starting at 4am and the other at 4.30am. Their main goal at the start of this shift is to update content to coincide with the 6am Sky News *First Edition* bulletin airing on the main channel. Their brief is to have all new or substantially updated content, rather than relying heavily on material shelved the night before.

The staggered roster allows a small overlap between the morning and afternoon shifts so that the incoming producer can be brought up to speed with what has been happening. The first afternoon producer starts around 12.30pm and, after the hand-over from the morning team, will generally work alone for the first two to three hours. They are joined by another producer at around 3.30pm, ensuring two staff members are available to work on Active content to complement the prime time bulletins airing on the main channel. From about 9pm the late night producer will work alone. The person on this shift will usually have time to shelve material that might still “have

legs” for the next day, giving the morning team a head start. They are also expected to perform daily housekeeping duties, such as deleting unnecessary video material from the system to free digital storage space.

Software

The Active producers have access to the *ENPS* computerised news production system used by Sky to coordinate its on-air operation. Originally designed for the BBC, the software is now developed by Associated Press and distributed in Australia by Techtel (www.techtel.com.au).

ENPS gives the Producers access to Sky’s bulletin rundowns, scripts and wire services. Sky News also has some access to the Nine Network’s *ENPS* system which allows them to track rundowns and scripts. Script material from the Seven Network is usually sent by email from the Sky producer working in Seven’s Sydney newsroom.

The Active producer uses Quantel’s *Q-Cut* video editing system to edit video content. Sky News is installing *Q-Cut* throughout the newsroom, allowing all journalist/producers access to video footage stored on large servers. The system allows multiple users to access and edit the same footage at the same time, meaning for example that a live feed of a breaking story can be edited simultaneously for the main news channel and the Active service.

The third software package used by the Active producers is the *ISB ClipManager* software used to control content for each of the mini channels. This purpose-designed software enables producers to manage a rundown for each channel. The producer

inserts material into a playlist, and generates a loop of content that will be played out on that channel. The producer can alter the content of the loop by adding or removing material, or rearranging the content. This can be done on the run, provided they don't touch whatever item happens to be playing at the time. It is planned to further develop this software for use with the main news channel.

My visit to Sky in January 2004 coincided with the death of former Australian test cricketer David Hookes, following a Melbourne pub brawl. The story dominated the main Sky News service, with regular live crosses to former team mates and sports commentators trying to piece together the events surrounding Hookes' death, and beginning the series of media eulogies that were to follow. This story was selected by the Active producers to be the focus of the Top Stories channel.

All of the material going to air on the main Sky service is recorded and stored digitally on large computer servers. The Active producer was able to import this material into his desktop *Q-Cut* video editing system, and lift out interview sections and reports. Using the *ClipManager*, these were added to the Top Stories rundown to produce a package of items relating to the David Hookes story.

As a new live interview went to air on sky, material could be repackaged for the Top Stories channel. In fact so many interviews and updates were happening that one point the production team stopped to consider how much material should be going into the Top Stories Channel. In addition to the video footage, text information was edited in the *ENPS* system. The text-only stories would then appear in the Active screen text box, with the first paragraph of each appearing in the scrolling ticker at the

bottom of the screen. Due to bandwidth limitations on Foxtel's satellite services, these text boxes have a built-in word limit – though one staff member commented that Sky News was lucky to have more bandwidth for interactive services than many other pay-TV channels.

Production issues

Producers noted a “hump” in the workflow at the beginning of the day's first shift (4am), resulting from the need to update not just the video content for the mini-channels, but also the text versions that accompany them. Once the initial 6am deadline has passed these tasks seem to spread more easily through the shift as content is added or adjusted on a rolling basis through the day.

One of the main problems across all shifts for the Active producers is sourcing enough content for the specialised channels, particularly Showbiz. As the main Sky News channel doesn't have a particular leaning towards that type of content in its bulletins, there can be a lack of entertainment news to draw from. During my visit there was a tongue-in-cheek discussion between producers as to what actually constitutes “Showbiz” news. For example, does it include news on the British royal family? Also, a plan to replace the Showbiz mini-channel with live feeds from Canberra during Parliamentary sittings was noted with some irony.

Sky News Active will buy in content from agency sources if required, with the producers editing and re-voicing packages to suit. Also, to quote one producer, they can draw material from “less newsy” program sources. Longer interview segments may therefore come from Seven's *Sunrise* or *Today Tonight*, and Nine's *Today Show*

or *A Current Affair*. Sky News has so-called “stripping rights” to take material from these sources once they have aired on their respective free-to-air channels.

This approach can lead to another production problem for the producers. Program content stripped from the breakfast shows often contains other screen clutter, such as news tickers, clocks, and weather details. Apart from dating the material, these elements don’t look particularly pleasing when reduced to the quarter-screen display used by the mini-channels. Such content is therefore avoided if alternative sources can be used, though the Active producers noted that increased competition between the Seven and Nine networks in the breakfast timeslot has seen those stations become more protective of exclusive content. This has led to an increased unwillingness to provide “clean” (unbranded) original footage from these source programs.

Sky News has altered its on-air schedule slightly to accommodate the Active service. A 90 second headline package is now presented at the end of each hour, which can be recorded and used for the Headlines mini-channel each hour. The headline package generally consists of 3 –4 stories, plus a sports story and weather update. This is presented as a voice-over only, with no vision of the on-air presenter, as it was decided not to set a pattern of seeing a “talking head” on the Headline mini-channel.

At the time of my visit in January, producers were also deciding on preferred durations for the content loops that make up the Active mini-channels. Of particular concern was the Top Story service. This mini-channel follows a main story, with the producers adding “second phase” coverage like telephone interviews, studio guests or background pieces to the loop to provide more detail. A problem can be that so much

interesting and relevant content can be generated quickly during Sky News' coverage of a breaking story, the Active producers have difficulty deciding how much to include in the mini-channel. The death of cricketer David Hookes was the top story on the day of my visit, and an Active producer had selected up to 12 minutes of interviews for the Top Stories mini-channel. However the Chief of Production, Lisa Whitby, suggested that three minutes was probably a better length, with a 90 second main story followed by extra content (2004, pers. comm., January 19). She felt that otherwise a viewer could be waiting too long for the actual story. She suggested that the interview material be cut down, and rotated through the day rather than trying to show it all at once.

Video editing skills

All of the editorial staff I spoke to during my visits to Sky News emphasised that core TV journalism skills remained the basic requirement for working on both the Active and the main news services. These were typically expressed as sound news judgement, solid writing and presentation skills, and good general knowledge. Interestingly, the four new staff members employed specifically for the launch of the Active service were all recent graduates from University journalism courses. These roles were seen as good entry-level positions, working under more experienced editorial staff.

One of the key differences between Sky News and other major network newsrooms in Australia is that Sky News very rarely sends journalists into the field. With the exception of political bureau staff or the occasional major breaking story that requires additional local coverage (bushfire emergencies for example), reporters are rarely sent

“on the road”. Editorial staff duties are therefore heavily slanted towards the roles played by television news producers, particularly the sourcing of footage from other sources, checking story details, arranging live-to-air interviews, and overseeing the program schedule as content is aired. Much of the work involves re-packaging stories from external sources, which may include re-voicing the pieces, and finding the most up to date information about breaking stories.

Increasingly, all journalists in the Sky newsroom are being encouraged to develop their video editing skills. Former Seven and Nine Network News Director Ian Cook has been engaged as a consultant to Sky News, and has overseen the introduction of the *Q-Cut* editing system into the newsroom. He observed that:

“Non-linear editing in various forms is fast becoming the norm in television newsrooms. In most places, journalists are not expected to perform complicated editing, but they are expected to carry out basic assemblies and, at the very least, to be able to use non-linear systems to preview their material.” (Ian Cook 2004, pers. comm., October 23).

One of the main tasks for the Active Producers is to repackage video material from other sources, primarily the main news channel. As such, basic digital video editing skills are required. The *Q-Cut* software presents a fairly standard editing interface, similar to current packages such as *Avid*, *Premiere*, *iMovie* or *Final Cut Pro*. Chief of Production, Lisa Whitby, noted that all the staff hired for the Active service were recent University journalism course graduates who had been exposed to desktop video editing. She suggested that they seemed to have little problem adjusting to Sky’s system, and that older journalists would probably find it harder. Sky News is placing *Q-Cut* terminals on each journalist’s desk in the newsroom as a “deliberate attempt to get them involved in more than just viewing; ... what they’ve got on their desk is exactly what the editors have” (Lisa Whitby 2004, pers. comm., January 19).

Managing Editor, Angelos Frangopoulos, (2003, pers. comm., December) stated that specialised editors would be retained, but that all journalists would be encouraged to take on the more basic editing tasks. It's argued that while many journalists may not come to the job with specific editing skills, they are generally not working with raw footage. Rather, they are re-packaging previously produced content, and this requires less specific craft skills. It's hoped that if journalists take on more of this basic editing, the specialist editors can be better employed on more complex production tasks.

In addition to basic non-linear video editing skills, the Active producers are expected to be able to perform on camera if required. Although the mini-channels tend to steer away from developing a "talking head" presentation style, the Active producers are allowed to record and add brief on camera introductions to content segments if they feel it is warranted or necessary. The Sky newsroom includes a permanent single camera setup where staff can easily record their own pieces to camera for use on the main service or the Active channels.

Need for further research

This paper presents some formative notes on the development of interactive TV news production models in Australia. There is clearly scope for more deliberate ethnographic interpretations of the emerging models of journalism being generated by new media technology. One of the fundamental questions that should be asked is "is this journalism?" The shift towards digital television in Australia scheduled over the next few years, coupled with the development of new generation games systems such

as *Playstation 3* and *Xbox 2* that may incorporate digital TV capabilities, point to a television landscape that increasingly demands value-added services. Journalism educators and trainers would benefit from focused examinations of the skills demanded for this type of production.

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