



Hot Trends in SNG

By Anthony Ward*

SATELLITE NEWS Gathering (SNG) has been another revolution to occur in the satellite industry in the last few years.

Major worldwide events such as the war in Iraq, Tsunami in Asia, London Bombings and Hurricane Katrina, have tested news agencies abilities to respond and deploy crews and resources to be able to cover these events live, and for prolonged periods of time, often into areas where size and weight of accompanying equipment is crucially important, and traditional truck or flyaway SNG systems cannot be taken.

The Iraq war highlighted how new technology has

increased mobility for reporters, and reduced the cost of multiple camera live coverage from remote locations. The benefits of the new SNG techniques can also now be applied to sports, where there is more demand for multiple feeds and roving reporters.

For the biggest news stories, the keys to success are rapid deployment, effective mobile technology and reliable partnerships that ensure content can be transmitted, and links maintained, in often unforgiving circumstances. In recent years there have been perhaps too many occasions for news gathering expertise to be put into action.

In 2006, we are starting to see new standards of

encoding being used in SNG applications and the size and weight of SNG terminals dramatically decreasing. There is a strong move to journalists becoming self sufficient i.e. not requiring dedicated and trained SNG operators, this has meant that equipment vendors have had to quickly react and develop terminals that are more user friendly, and even in some cases designed to be remotely controlled back at the station.

This year's NAB saw the launch of more services and products that continue the trend of making SNG uplinking easier. A variety of vendors were displaying new even smaller, lightweight compact SNG systems, which are both user friendly and self supporting. These systems

feature functionality such as automatic satellite access (true automatic pointing systems) making the SNG setup and operation a breeze. They are designed to be operated by journalists, who, after a morning's training, can jump on a plane in the afternoon, off to do their first live shot or file transfer. The ability to quickly put a SNG kit in a helicopter, or turn up at the airport and check in the system as luggage (not excess baggage) has meant that news gathering is now an easier process than it ever was before.

Newsgathering is moving into a new direction. Combining lightweight camcorders with laptop computers where reporters can edit their own material, and connect to miniaturised satellite uplink equipment to contribute reports has meant that journalists are now not only reporting on stories, but also responsible for their delivery back to the station for broadcast. These systems harness encoding and modulation improvements to work with smaller satellite dishes and low power amplifiers, reversing the trend of the last 20 years of SNG of large satellite dishes, and high power amplifiers.

However, one of the biggest shifts in SNG technology is the use of IP. Innovative portable video IP encoding solutions which are laptop based, and simply connect to a small satellite terminal or larger flyaway SNG kits and can transmit video live or using store and forward – dependant on bandwidth availability. Back at the station, a decoder connects to the field kit via IP address, and can real-time decode the video, as well as provide a 2 way IP talkback system, allowing communications between the studio and the field, via the same system, usually connected to stations talkback, creating a seamless newsgathering experience both in the studio and the field.

It's improvements and functionalities like this that will allow broadcasters to go further than even before, with less equipment, to bring greater coverage of news events to audiences worldwide.

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