Why Detroit's WXYZ Made the Move to Final Cut Pro X

The Station Is One of Several Scripps-Owned Outlets Converting to FCPX Workflows in the Studio and in the Field

By Beth Marchant   /   Jun 25, 2014

WXYZ TV is Detroit's largest news outlet and was the first in the state to broadcast in HD. One of 14 other TV news stations from San Diego to Tampa Bay owned by the E.W. Scripps Company, the station has had an Apple-based editorial and graphics workflow since 2002, when it first transitioned from a more traditional broadcast edit environment to Final Cut Pro. According to Scripps vice president of engineering, Ray Thurber, "There were a lot of us back then that thought no one was going to keep up with emerging codecs and new technology as fast as Apple would. We set up a test with some of the key players in our newsroom." Thurber says the primary consideration at the time was ease of use. "But more importantly, when you're editing in a news environment and you have to be able to access all of the production elements available, the emphasis quickly shifts to speed." The editorial and engineering team set up a series of "races" between Final Cut and other editing platforms. "We basically clocked how long it took our key editors to assemble a story," he says. "In 2002, Apple by far outpaced the others and had the quickest workflow."

WXYZ's early success with Final Cut in the studio eventually led to FCP transitions at the nine other stations then owned by Scripps. "There were people coming out of college that we could immediately connect with and hire, journalists and editors that already understood the technology after using it in school," says Thurber. The station was also among the first to send its field editors out on assignment with FCP. "For a broadcaster to have it on a laptop in the field with a photographer right there was a little bit out-of-the-box in 2002," he says. "Plenty of people wondered what the heck we were doing. But when they also saw how quickly we could work, I think we made a lot of converts, even among our competitors." Crews typically edit in the field and send their work back to the station via FTP or through WXYZ microwave trucks.

Even back in 2002, says Thurber, some traditionalists in the newsroom felt a definitive line had been crossed. "We had a very, very short window to make the change, and a few people thought we were making a 'prosumer' decision. But once those folks started to work with FCP in a SAN environment, those issues quickly fell away."

Thurber says the newsroom has never looked back. "From 2002 up until this moment, we've been developing a native workflow. Our workflow started out as HDV and throughout it stayed HDV. That's a big reason we've become so fast," he says. "We never had to worry about different file types on the timeline. And that's exactly what we liked so much about FCPX: we didn't have to worry about all the different emerging file formats like GoPro and iPhones. Now we can take a mix of content—from users covering a storm or from our own experiments with new cameras—and drop different formats right on the timeline. FCPX handles that mix of H.264 and HDV, which we typically import as MPEG-2 QuickTime files and render as ProRes, exceptionally well. And Thunderbolt is just such a wonderful IO that opens up so many more ways for us to ingest content."

Still, says Thurber, the transition to FCPX was not immediate. "We knew, from talking with Apple, that there were going to be features added on to subsequent versions of X that were critically important to us. We were also in a very comfortable environment with 7, so we decided to wait." The first Scripps station moved to FCPX last year, and Detroit transitioned this year, after the sixth upgrade to Apple's original X release. "Several more of the stations will move over to X in 2014," he says.

FCPX's integration with Motion templates was the most anticipated benefit of an upgrade for the station, further streamlining the workflow from the station's graphics hub in Tampa and editorial in Detroit. "We give all our editors access to Motion templates," says Thurber. "Before we had FCPX, it would take 15 or more minutes to render out a 3D motion template we needed out in the field. Now, with X, we can eliminate that 15 minutes by reracking the timeline play, and it will render out as it plays. It was worth the wait to get that kind of seamless workflow." The station purchased all new laptops and iMacs in 2013 in anticipation of the move to X.

Radu Somesfalean, managing director of graphics in Tampa Bay, says his team of designers is building templates faster than ever thanks to the recent workstation standardization on Mac Pro. "Our more complex templates leverage multiple layers, text elements, drop zones and heavy use of 3D perspectives in Motion 5," he says. "The new Mac Pro gives us the ability to design the most complex templates we've ever produced at a significantly faster rate." Two added benefits? "They are small and really quiet, leaving many of us to leaving us to wonder if the system is even on."

The transition from FCP 6 and 7 to FCPX, says Thurber, was "almost a non-event for every one of the Scripps stations to make the switch. It's been very smooth. We knew it was something we could walk into easily, keeping some people editing on 6 and 7 as others moved into X." Some, including Thurber, felt the way the software handled audio was "overly cumbersome," but those stumbles were swiftly addressed and fixed by Apple. The biggest hurdle, he admits, was training. "But we had a great combination of outsiders we brought in to train a core group of internal editors that went on to train their comrades. As I move from station to station and we discuss the transition, almost everyone has told me the same thing: 'The first week it was difficult to wrap my head around it. But now that we have it, I don't ever want to go back.' I've heard that quote verbatim again and again. Sure, we were all a little bit scared when we first heard about the direction Apple was going. But once we talked with them, we soon understood that a new paradigm was needed to leverage all the hardware advances they'd made."

Thurber says the newsroom now has all the tools it needs to turn breaking news into narrative. "I never hear editors complain that they are missing a feature in FCPX that would help them do their jobs better," he says. "Trust me; if they had an issue, they'd be hunting me down."