

Technical & Resources Special Interest Group

King's College, London
7th & 8th December 2001
Chaired by Roger Frisby, Middlesex University

Friday 7th December 2001

Dr Matt Sowter, LSE

Having given a description of the Communitec Project to the full meeting earlier in the day, Matt gave a presentation of some of the technical problems encountered. Included in this was a comparison between various video compression formats and the times taken for his PC to render them.

Saturday 8th December 2001

Progress of meetings with MacMillan

Roger reported that after discussions with Palgrave (MacMillan) at our last meeting concerning digital storage of their "Breakthrough" series, things were progressing. He had received a visit from the company so they could see exactly how we wished to use the material. Their reaction was favourable and it is now in the hands of their lawyers to draw up suitable licences.

Recording of off-air materials Rob Kennedy, SOAS

Rob was interested to know what methods, equipment and standards people are currently using to record off-air material. Most of us are recording masters using VHS or SVHS then making copies. Advantages – most of us are well equipped to do this, it works and it is cheap. Main disadvantage – the quality is pretty poor, especially when copied further. The way forward – digital technology.

Rob asked members to let AULC know (via the Jiscmail AULC-TECH list) what systems they were trying or thinking of trying. (Let Rob know if you're not on this list and would like to be on it)

Rob advised members to check exactly what they were getting for their money when investigating systems, e.g. the recordable DVDs offered by Panasonic and Philips as the recordings may not play on some other DVD players. Some systems use the TIVO method (e.g. Thomson), where recording is directly onto the Hard Disk. Sky Satellite is currently offering digital satellite receivers with HDs built in for recording.

Roger Frisby currently uses a PC with free software to make off-air radio recordings. With a [Hauppauge](#) WinTV/Radio card taking it's feed from sound sub-carriers of satellite TV stations and [Multi-Media Jukebox](#) as a recorder, timed recordings in

many formats are possible. MMJB is freely downloadable and will can also be used as a converter between many digital audio formats.

Rob mentioned that one of the advantages of using digital technology was being able to record a longer sweep than is possible with analogue. If you are not sure of the exact programme timings it is possible to make a good quality 6 hour recording from which you can extract the desired broadcast (without further loss of quality).

Peter Glasgow reminded members that the British Universities Film and Video Council (BUFVC) record all broadcast programmes every day and archive them. These are available for a fee (see later item). He believes that they use 19 digital VHS machines to do this (D-VHS?).

Another question to consider is what standard to use for distributing material, so feedback on current practice in this area would also be useful.

BUFVC Peter Glasgow, Edinburgh

Peter is on the Executive of the BUFVC and wished to report on some points arising from their recent meeting.

- BUFVC may soon change its name because of the advent of digital technology.
- Although BUFVC used to represent only Universities, it now represents colleges too.
- Election to the Exec of the BUFVC - colleges are now eligible to join the BUFVC and that they could then put names forward for election. The BUFVC normally sends out notice of the AGM sometime in late November, which includes applications for nomination to the Exec, each year but this will probably change to Easter 2003. This is due to the BUFVC having to change its financial year to fall in line with other university organisations. Its not just a case of emailing your name to the BUFVC.
- BUFVC record all UK broadcasts daily as a service to members who are ERA licence-holders. Upon payment of a £350 fee to BUFVC you are entitled to up to 12 recordings during a year, with a cost of £25 for each additional recording.
- The other point was that the BUFVC are going to do a report in their Viewfinder magazine regarding Film4, Sky and ITV digital in the next few months. They haven't actually started anything yet. From Peter's own discussions with them he is in touch with the BUFVC regularly about how things are going.

Sky TV, Film4

Language Centres have experienced difficulties in receiving broadcasts from these companies. For the past 3 years it has not been possible to receive digital broadcasts from Sky because a domestic address is needed. In the case of Film4, the BUFVC had been trying to reach an agreement for educational establishments to receive their broadcasts. Although the domestic fee is only £5.99 per month, a monthly fee of £65 had been suggested to one Language Centre. It turns out that this is the commercial rate for hotels etc. Charlotte Reece at Film4 is investigating this further with BUFVC. It has been confirmed by the ERA that their licence covers Film4 broadcasts.

Make-up of the Tech-Resources SIG

Roger Frisby

Roger expressed his concern that the current SIG may be too heavily biased toward the technical side, with little representation of issues affecting resources. He felt this was partly due to his own area of interest. He offered two suggestions

- a) that he stand down as coordinator of the SIG group, and allow new blood to lead, with more input on the resources side
- b) that there be two coordinators of the group, one Technical person, one Resources person. Roger doesn't mind if he continues in one of these roles or not.

The feeling of members at the meeting was that there was so much overlap between the two areas that most people were getting something from the current arrangement. For the same reason it was generally felt that people would not like to have to choose between a Tech meeting or a Resources meeting. It was suggested that Roger circulate a request for suggestions of topics for the next meeting, which may generate some more resources-biased items.

Next meeting

Roger Frisby

AULC had decided not to have a meeting in Spring because of the two national/international conferences next year, which would involve many members. However it was felt that most people in the Tech-Resources SIG would not be attending either of the big meetings, and they would rather not have to wait for a year before meeting again. Colin Connolly said that he would be willing to host an interim meeting at Oxford Brookes sometime between February and May. He suggested that we might usefully look at audio and video streaming. On the Resources side, he would be happy to organise displays/presentations from various publishers, e.g. European Schoolbooks. Roger asked for any further ideas of topics for the next meeting to be e-mailed to him.

Digital laboratories

Roger Frisby

Roger reported that the major current players in the field did not appear to be providing Language Centres with the features they need from a digital lab. He suggested that people e-mail the list with ideas of their requirements, so that we could build up a minimum specification. He hinted that some progress was being made with the development of digital laboratories, though he couldn't say more at

the current time. More details would be available soon. Roger also asked those who already had digital laboratories to e-mail him if they were willing to accept visits (of a few people at a time) to view their laboratories. It was felt this would be more helpful than a manufacturer demonstrating a lab in an artificial environment, and less disruptive than a large group of us visiting the same institution.

Alison Robson
21 December 2001

Updated 1 Jan 2002
Peter Glasgow