Launching the local Newsroom

by Neil Hutchins, CEO, aQ Broadcast

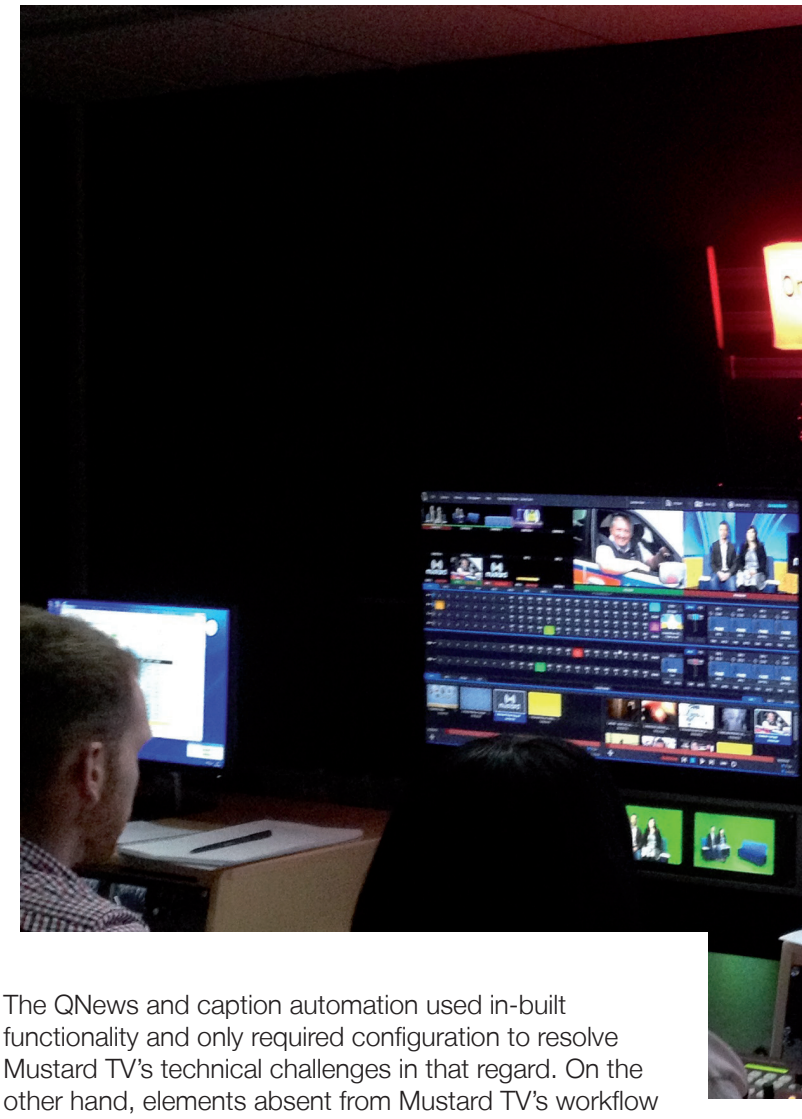
We recently collaborated with Mustard TV, the Norwich-based television division of the Archant newspaper group, for their launch of the UK's second Local TV channel.

With just three weeks to go before the on-air date, we installed our QNews newsroom computer system, including the database server that it runs from, for use by Mustard's journalists and an aVS video server. As is so often the case, limited time before going live required us to make a rapid assessment of the existing technology and customise the two systems to work at peak efficiency and maximum functionality in conjunction with Mustard's existing infrastructure.

In the weeks leading up to their on-air date, Mustard TV had faced a number of technical challenges to establish a complete and effective workflow. Without a newsroom system it was time-consuming and inefficient to transfer individual scripts to the teleprompter, and difficult to obtain accurate timing for the live and pre-recorded shows, which had to fit into precise slots. Without any automation, caption preparation was difficult in the short periods available between different production teams using the gallery. Access to recorded content and play out of new material was awkward because items could not be copied on to or off their production system during live operation. Transcoding to a particular format for upload was difficult because the process took a relatively long time and prevented an edit suite from being used for other purposes. Similar issues relating to accessing, converting and uploading content also affected the web-based catch-up service.

After reviewing these separate challenges, we offered solutions for each by installing, configuring and, in some areas, extending two systems: the QNews newsroom computer (NRCS) software and aVS video server hardware.

QNews provided a single point of integration to Mustard's teleprompter, eliminating the need to send multiple individual files to a standalone prompter PC. It also provided full rundown management facilities, which enabled programs to be planned and produced with the added benefit of extensive timing information. Caption transfer was addressed by extending existing QNews export capabilities to allow CG templates to be loaded automatically onto the production system, utilising a direct link without requiring a separate MOS interface.



The QNews and caption automation used in-built functionality and only required configuration to resolve Mustard TV's technical challenges in that regard. On the other hand, elements absent from Mustard TV's workflow were addressed by introducing the aVS into the technical infrastructure and then carrying out several stages of development work to modify and extend the existing firmware to tackle each aspect.

The architecture of the aVS server has been designed to allow content to be transferred in and out of its media volume while running. By making two relatively simple infrastructure changes, we were able to add that benefit to Mustard's operation.

The aVS already had the ability to transode content from one format to another, but only for items that were already registered with the server's clip database. We implemented new watch-folder handling to allow clips in any supported format to be dropped into one folder for automatic conversion to the appropriate format.

We then extended the aVS's FTP handling to allow it to actively upload clips to a remote server on a private network. To do this we developed a new 'agent' process that would act as a receiver for file transfer from the aVS. This made it possible to send a file directly from the aVS as an automatic process rather than having to carry out a manual copy between networks.

In short, file handling finesse was the key. When we became involved with Mustard TV, the programming aspects had been finalised but challenges remained in the technical workflow. What needed to be done for each day of production was pretty clear, but what wasn't clear was how it could be achieved.

Through collaboration, configuration of existing functionality and the development of new processes - coupled with