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What Now? What Next?

When the COVID-19 pandemic ends, the innovations we've made to get through it will not

By Nancy Jundi, COO, DigitalFilm Tree

Abstract: Like everyone else in the entertainment industry, we have found ourselves in a new age of innovation and urgency to solve for our greatest challenges. We're hyper-aware of the role we play in the larger scope of that responsibility — to our immediate community, as well as those we serve at home, watching the shows we help bring to life. And as many of us in M&E know, if we go dark, many go dark. Despite the ambiguities our industry is currently facing, we find ourselves uniquely suited to continue business as usual. How?

Carving out the safest paths forward to bring productions back to life consumes our days and keeps us up at night.

While DigitalFilm Tree (DFT) is a varied provider to both the entertainment and technology industries, our soul is in television and independent features. We've spent countless hours brainstorming with studios and storytellers to discern all technological possibilities that can be leveraged in an effort to get productions up and running again. Whether it's from home or standing six feet apart, we've never been better equipped or poised to solve these challenges together.

While some shows have begun discussing protective shields or literal bubbles for their boom operators and gaffers, others are discussing robotic cameras and separate rooms for directors to live-pipe feedback. Australian soap opera *Neighbours* leads the charge by beginning production with clear guidelines relating to everything from makeup application to distancing (including no physical contact between the actors, which should prove interesting for a daytime drama).

We will learn, responsibly, from one another. We will make educated decisions that allow more creatives to perform their work online and create greater efficiencies. These efficiencies will allow us to get back to work, and free up production dollars to be spent in crafting that content. Actors, directors, cinematographers and their unions have a large stake in the discussions around safety and the future of how they perform their jobs. The decisions we make today will impact us long after the virus is solved for.

Under one roof or many roofs, shows now have a **bevy of options** when **accessing the tools** that can keep them **moving forward** with **post-production,** as well as **production,** while **maintaining social distancing measures.**

A post-pandemic outlook

The innovations and new ways of thinking created in the M&E industry during the pandemic won't go away when the virus does. New revenue streams and greater means to connect with an audience will remain tantamount to the work itself. How we account for how our industry and our audiences will consume media post COVID-19 is as meaningful to our current thought process as it is to who we will be as consumers going forward.

Much like the evolutions we experienced after the 2008 writers' strike and 2011 tsunami, necessity will always be the mother of innovation — the influx and embrace of reality shows has not gone away, nor have we gone back to tape-based workflows. Much the same, it's difficult to imagine a future in which we return to grueling commutes, crowded meetings or an overflow of people on a set who could all be more efficient functioning in the cloud.

With billions of dollars allocated to new content prior to COVID-19, we have an increasingly accelerated demand to both fill airtime and engage the viewer. Cinecode — the pre-visualization and virtual production leg of DFT — is working with TV shows to improve blocking to incorporate distancing measures, implementing lidar scans of locations to reduce site visits and pre-blocking scenes in a virtual environment, where their specific cameras can test the shots virtually in advance of shooting. They're also providing concert vendors with 2D and 3D content, allowing fans to experience a "live" show, as well as photo real environments to retailers who can no longer hold photo shoots for their product marketing.

GeoPost — our cloud-operating, remote services and solutions arm — is in the homes of creatives who are sourcing more material from their shows to offer supplementary content and planning for more intentional shoots going forward. DFT is producing content for brands that need help furthering their narrative during a time of relevancy challenges while their storefronts are shuttered.

Past preparation eases the burden

At DFT we're always pivoting and have largely already solved for remote work that was both collaborative and secure years ago. GeoPost allowed for the seamless transition of both our own teams, and vendor partners, as well as our traditional facility clients, from offices to individual homes overnight. Without loss to timelines or risk to their health or our clients' media, we also deployed remote systems and routers to those teams still working to deliver shows, allowing them to approve final color, conform, VFX and titles without compromising picture quality, impacting workflows or impeding air dates.

With a robust, cloud-based network infrastructure that's as secure as it is convenient, we were able to manage the immediate influx of media pulls from the cloud without down time or an uptick in egress fees. We were able to offer our friends — other vendors — a layer of security on top of their own solutions, thanks to our advanced routers and managed firewalls as architected by our CISO. Our immediate goal was to keep people working, with their health and media protected, wherever they may be. Again, if we go dark, many go dark, and with so many shows having halted, the question is now, what's next?

The tools in use

Under one roof or many roofs, shows now have a bevy of options when accessing the tools that can keep them moving forward with post-production, as well as production, while maintaining social distancing measures.

■ *Cinecode* helps us stay laser-focused on serving the needs of television shows to prototype their stories from pre-development to physical productions. Cinecode leverages game engine technology to quickly and affordably iterate and prototype stories in the virtual environment, making physical production planning and efficiency exponentially better than current methods. Our team can recreate scenes in 2D or 3D for virtual environments and animations based on a script and actual location(s) of filming — saving repeat site visits for location scouting, while including more stakeholders earlier in the process.

■ *GeoDailies* offers seamless integration for productions near and far and is supported by DFT's interdisciplinary, hands on team of post, IP and networking wizards. Services include camera raw storage with media asset management and transport, international production servicing and enterprise supply chain management.

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■ *GeoEdit* serves offline Avid editors, as well as Resolve online editors, allowing them to work seamlessly and securely from home, offering remote camera raw conform and titling resources, as well as live, low latency, remote dual desktop (KVM) support, with a live-feed, high-fidelity, remote 'client' monitor for critical viewing and approvals.

■ *GeoVFX*, similar to the editorial workflow, the GeoPost platform for VFX teams leverages DFT's hardware and software to support artists using tools like After Effects and NUKE. Offering an integrated solution with low latency, remote dual desktop (KVM) support includes peripherals like Wacom tablets, and a live-feed, high-fidelity remote 'client' monitor for critical VFX tasks like spotting, shot iteration, and final review.

■ *GeoColor* resources support Resolve users requiring full color managed monitors with a Resolve virtual data base for a truly camera raw workflow — allowing for live, remote color grading sessions. Similar to other GeoPost offerings, this is an end-to-end secure and integrated solution allowing producers to sign off on final air masters from home, with the same confidence as they would have at a facility.

■ *DFT Media Security* recognizes that the home is not the most secure place to work, and now is not the time to settle for poor network and security practices. While some shows have gone on hiatus, others have moved their teams into individual homes, relying on physical drives to be shuttled between creatives, using slow home internet connections that were full of potential security blind spots.

DFT has intentionally focused our efforts on solving for critical pain points around security and efficiency for our shows. To this end, we pivoted our resources to double down on our internal network and security capabilities for staff, clients and vendors alike, anywhere in the world.

Re-architecting what can be

We have a chance to lead like never before — this is not an opportunity we're likely to see again in our lifetimes. It's a near total and meaningful re-architecture of what has been and what can be, for creatives, technologists, and consumers alike. Unlike the migration from film to digital or pen to keyboard, we're being asked to protect one another as much as we're protecting the future of media.

Collaboration over competition and integration over isolated innovation will power us forward. We're excited to be together again in person, but equally excited for how we emerge and who we'll be on the other side of this. ■