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NEW WAYS TO CONNECT PEOPLE AND DATA



By Matt Turner, Strategic Advisor, Technologist

It's the little things that you miss the most. The hallway hello that conveys so much more. The give and take at the coffee station updating a years-long argument. The way you can make just the right comment for a chuckle during an eye-opening talk. These small interactions and casual connections are important glue for our work. Sadly, we are really missing them as we isolate and zoom instead of gathering in person at conferences and events.

But maybe they aren't totally gone? Maybe we can recreate some of these moments even while we're apart? In July, I helped get together a group of data practitioners in the MESA family. We wanted to continue the work on "smart content" that has helped define the role of data in our industry. But we also wanted to just hang out. Create some space to chat with people who are working in the same space in this strange disconnected time.

After four meetings, the results have far exceeded all of our expectations. On the data front, we've not only been able to share what we're working on, but have realized that we've made a lot of progress on some of the core smart content ideas.

We've been talking about smart content since MESA's Guy Finley and Mary Yurkovic and I coined the term in 2014. Even so, smart content is, after all, still a "new" idea. The shift from thinking about content as just the asset itself — the show, the film, the clip, the shot — to thinking about the data all around that content is a big one. The original smart content graphic still holds true: data from every stage from inception to infinity is the universe we need to address, and might actually be the true value of the asset.

In 2014, most of us we were still grappling with the first wave of digitized distribution. Getting the right assets and feeds from the traditional finance, production, distribution and archiving systems was still a big undertaking. There wasn't a lot of room for holistic, long-term data planning when just getting content to the digital marketplace was the priority. But, pretty quickly, there were individual projects like the "Saturday Night Live" app (2015) and the ETC Suitcase project (2016) that showed how a much larger scope of data could impact the business.

Fast forward to today: real data planning is suddenly a priority and projects are being thrust to the front of the line by the dramatic changes we are all experiencing.

How can a studio mine its archive to get clips and even full-length content to an audience suddenly trapped at home? How can a fledgling streaming service in a crowded market tailor search to its fan-favorite content and stand out from the competition? How can a diverse content company apply AI and machine learning to maximize their assets in this critical time when every invested dollar really has to count?

THE ANSWER LIES WITH SMART CONTENT.

To deliver these immediate business needs, organizations need to be able to get to and, most critically, use all that data around the content.

When there is so much to do, it's been great to be able to hang out with other people who are going through the same thing. The small interactions we were all missing aren't exactly the same on Zoom. But with just hanging out on the agenda, we've been able to let the conversation flow, share some bad jokes and talk about what is happening in our data work.

The first takeaway is that delivering the vision of data all around the content is still hard. Data silos with different names and values for the same data are, if anything, becoming more numerous. And with many parts of the business rapidly digitizing, there are even more stakeholders creating systems that need the "single source of the data."

But new ideas are changing the game and, with their permission, I'm able to share some of the ideas from our group's virtual hallway conversations:

■ **Education.** Bringing data together is a people problem as much as it is a technical problem. To get buy-in to make changes and start projects, the best way is to simply show everyone where the data is going. If you are in production, do you know where the data you generate is used? For finance and business teams, did you know there are often teams of people trying to combine and recreate data sitting in silos? Talking about the data paths and showing the way data is disconnected is a great way to create advocates and make progress on connecting it.

■ **Let the experts in.** The job of data and knowledge management is a very different one than application

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development. You need to invest separately in that expertise and dedicated tools. "A title management system is not a knowledge management solution" is a quote that holds plenty of truth.

■ **Federate to integrate.** Systems are always going to be diverse and specialized. But what if you could federate defined data critical to those systems and make it easier to bring that data together later? This flexibility at the local level but real data management across the organization is a promising way to make real progress.

Like all of you, I can't wait until we can actually get back together and have those hallway chats and coffee station arguments. But it's been great to see that we can still have those small interactions and create and maintain our connections. It turns out, these moments that we get to hang out are providing us all with the much-needed spark and energy to do our smart content work. ☒



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