The Future is Automated

The landscape ahead for M+E looks uncertain. Automation can ease the journey.

WORKFLOWS AND THE CLOUD
From cloud-based productions to unprecedented storage demands, the supply chain has never been more challenging

SMART CONTENT
The questions around AI, metadata, and analytics are endless. But we do have many of the answers already

SECURITY SOLUTIONS:
Cybersecurity and content protection in M&E is always on defense. Can automation can change that?

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AUTOMATION AND CONTENT PRODUCTION: CRACKING 'THE FIRST MILE'

ABSTRACT: Many leading media organizations have taken steps to transform (at least part of) their content distribution ecosystem — tackling upstream workflows, however, has proven to be more challenging. This article will outline a strategic approach for media and entertainment organizations to crack what I call the "First Mile" problem — giving your content production workflows the wheels they deserve to achieve comprehensive transformation across the value chain.
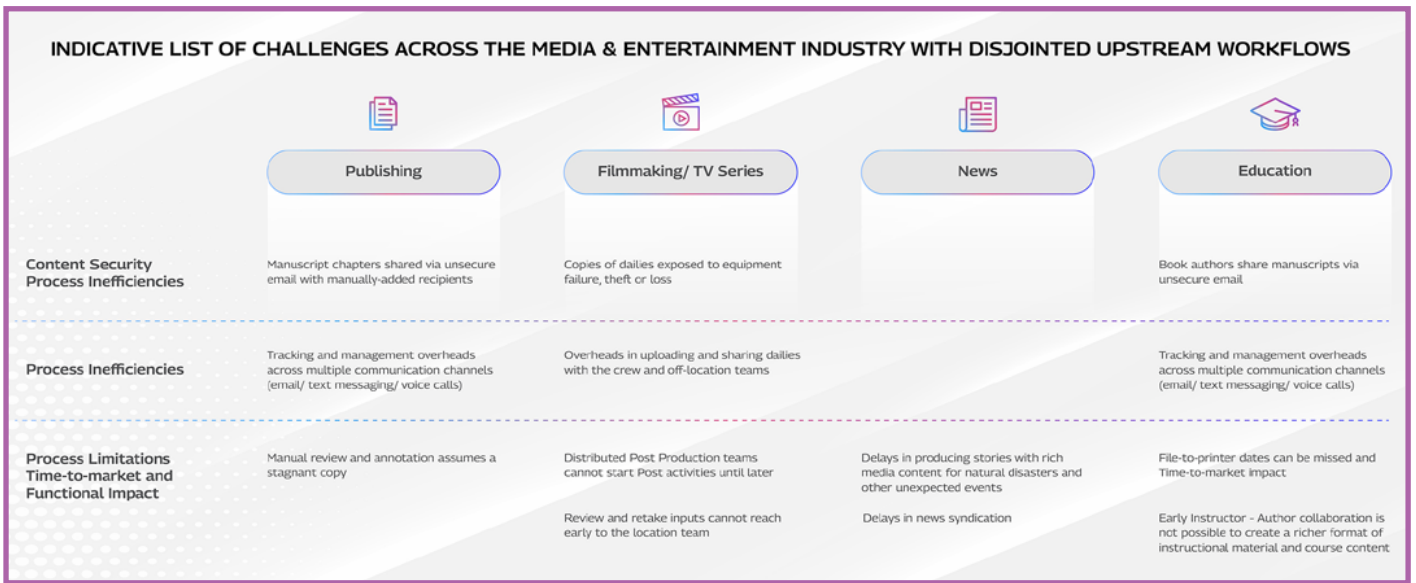
The how, the why and the costs associated with automating workflows

By Kishlay Baranwal, Head of Transformation, Advisory, Media, Entertainment, Tech Mahindra

Many leading media and entertainment organizations have taken steps to transform (at least part of) their content distribution ecosystem — although digital transformation does seem to frequently carry different meanings when it comes to its interpretation and adoption across the industry. At times, and more often than I would like to see, the focus can remain on the consumption side where visually-enamoring user experience and impressive at-your-fingertips functionality can dominate the narrative — but organizations would do well to look at their entire business value chain from a transformation lens (instead of acting at just the periphery) to derive tangible benefits.

Nevertheless, it is heartening to see that, more or less, the larger or more strategically-organized players in the media and entertainment industry have demonstrated a reasonable understanding and desire to move forward with their digital transformation initiatives on the distribution side with a structured plan, and an acceptable team set up for implementation (often, with the right partners — who are critical to the mix — but alas, sometimes the wrong ones as well).

Tackling upstream workflows, especially when it comes to content production, has proven to be more challenging, however.

INDICATIVE LIST OF CHALLENGES ACROSS THE MEDIA & ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY WITH DISJOINTED UPSTREAM WORKFLOWS

	Publishing	Filmmaking/ TV Series	News	Education
Content Security Process Inefficiencies	Manuscript chapters shared via unsecure email with manually-added recipients	Copies of dailies exposed to equipment failure, theft or loss		Book authors share manuscripts via unsecure email
Process Inefficiencies	Tracking and management overheads across multiple communication channels (email/ text messaging/ voice calls)	Overheads in uploading and sharing dailies with the crew and off-location teams		Tracking and management overheads across multiple communication channels (email/ text messaging/ voice calls)
Process Limitations Time-to-market and Functional Impact	Manual review and annotation assumes a stagnant copy	Distributed Post Production teams cannot start Post activities until later	Delays in producing stories with rich media content for natural disasters and other unexpected events	File-to-printer dates can be missed and Time-to-market impact
		Review and retake inputs cannot reach early to the location team	Delays in news syndication	Early Instructor - Author collaboration is not possible to create a richer format of instructional material and course content

Now you could be part of a distributed artists workforce and partners to make a feature film (or TV series), or an author writing the next New York Times bestseller, or in the news production team of a cable news network, or even an instructor creating and delivering your next biology lecture. And each one of you may be wondering how to get your content early into the system, how to derive at least a portion of the myriad benefits that your friends in Tech are always talking about at the water cooler and coffee machines (or, unhappily, but so often in recent years – on a Zoom meeting or equivalent).

Or you may be unconvinced that such efforts would be worthwhile, for you don't believe that those benefits being touted are real and practical and such.

SO, LET'S GET THAT OUT OF THE WAY AND UNDERSTAND …
The why
Looking at the book publishing industry, to start with, one can see manuscripts typically sent across by authors to development editors via email, a few (or sometimes just one) chapters at a time. There is always the possibility of a rushed author, well past the committed timelines (whooshing, as Douglas Adams would say) getting the email address incorrect in their note with the manuscript copy (one can hope it does not end up with another publisher!).

While that's going to have your content security team up in arms (if you ever tell them, that is), there's also the sheer volume of conversations with the author over email, texts, and phone calls which, despite the best efforts of those nifty email tools these days, are a significant tracking and management overhead. Not to speak of the confusion when something was supposedly sent out but wasn't really — and those fun chats to figure out where the ball dropped (without upsetting a touchy author — good luck with that). And your annotations to suggest changes on a manuscript which has already since changed at the author's end is not something your Microsoft Word skills can smoothly address either.

Let's look at another segment, say filmmaking (or TV series production) where again, content security can be critical. So, leaving behind copies of content on location is exposure to loss owing to equipment failure, or theft, or the like. And imagine a world where all your fresh on-location content is very-close-to-immediately available to your post teams distributed just about anywhere, who can start working on the content, checking artistic possibilities and even give a heads up if something needs to be reshot before the set is dismantled and while the crew and cast are still around.

So, you get the drift here. It's quite useful if you can get your content into your systems early, so hopefully we've crossed that out which gets us to …

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SURE, THINGS WILL COST A BIT (you can even look at approaches like reducing capex by automation and operational efficiencies to invest into setting this up) and will take a tad bit of time to iron into your business. Like all things transformation and automation. But you will reap the rewards.

The how

Let's go back to book publishing and imagine a wonderful, little portal app (well, not little but it gives that warm, fuzzy feeling to those tech-averse don't-get-me-started-on-technology authors — wonderful people in their own right, but you do find your development and copy teams dealing with them on an everyday basis just reaching out for that aspirin once in a while; or worse still, asking you for a raise; or even worse still — saying they have had enough — oh what will you do when that happens!).

So, this lovely portal allows the author and the publisher's arsenal of helpful staff (egging on a timely and robust manuscript completion) to see a dashboard of the book very elegantly with the chapters already submitted (through the portal), the ones which are pending beyond their due date, an ability to flag and send a little nudge of a message upstream, and sometimes downstream as necessary. You know, a really nice, comprehensive app which eliminates all attachments and tons of other email/ furiously typed texts/ frantic phone calls besides and brings it all together into a neat little tech-enabled system of producing a book. The manuscript of the book — now that's early.

As the chapters are submitted, layout, pagination, creative and rights/permissions teams will get their act together and get busy doing everything they do to help take that book to the finish line, but with the added advantage of being able to now compress timelines reasonably, often significantly.

Now I am not going to get into specific recommendations here on how best to get this portal system all built/ installed/ set up but suffice to say that you have options.

To take another example, let's turn again to TV production/ filmmaking: imagine all your dailies which you have painstakingly shot through the day (and often nights) are auto-uploading into your backend system while you are taking your well-deserved coffee (with a little something in it) break. And they are big files — so you don't have to stand next to that awful, black machine and hold that wire that particular way to do this. You can get this content into your backend system (the cloud if you prefer) from the shoot location itself. Which allows your post teams to kick in their work early and have a go at the content and start doing wonderfully dreamy things for a slightly earlier production schedule as well. And everyone is happy. No, they really are — no catch.

And again, you have options here though you'll have to catch me at that coffee shop around the corner to allow me to outline them for you (admittedly though, slightly downstream on the post-production/NLE side there are a few things being worked out – but at this stage, you'll be all set as the solution is relatively smooth).

So, you have the why, and have a decent hang of the how, but are you worried about …

HOW MUCH WILL IT COST AND WHAT ABOUT ALL MY PEOPLE?

And to that I say, (with fast-expiring real estate limits here on this page): fear not. Well, at least, not that much.

Sure, things will cost a bit (you can even look at approaches like reducing capex by automation and operational efficiencies to invest into setting this up) and will take a tad bit of time to iron into your business. Like all things transformation and automation.

But you will reap the rewards of the time-to-market advantages, the process streamlining, safeguarding content security, and several other efficiencies, like seldom before. Your teams (will all continue to have their jobs but will be much more efficient on their upstream cycles) and partners will be happy (and may even throw you that extra party in the holiday season).

And they will have that glint in their eye when you see them — and you will know it was worth it. ⊞