

THE PASSING OF ONLINE: An Observation

BY ALAN HARDIMAN

The online production process seems to be going the way of the dodo. Offlining seems to be the order of the day.

The essential distinction between offline and online is that an offline process is one of construction, whereas an online process is one of execution. In media production, online usually follows offline, as in the case of video editing, where a product that has been laboriously constructed in an offline edit suite—perhaps over the course of days or weeks—is executed by machinery following an edit decision list (EDL) in minutes or hours in an online suite.

Since the hourly rate of a well appointed online suite is typically several orders of magnitude higher than that of a small offline studio—often equipped with not much more than a desktop computer running editing software—the distinction between online and offline has long been etched into the steely heart of many a production manager.

Applying this distinction to the business of music production, you might say that playing a score with instruments is generally an online process, and requires the talent to perform. Constructing a musical performance using MIDI step input, for example, is an offline process, and requires a different skill set.

Before Bing Crosby teamed up with Jack Mullin back in 1947 and seized on the potential for splicing tape offline to construct complete recorded performances, recording musicians had to execute a complete work flawlessly to the end while it was being recorded direct to phonograph disc—an online process. If they made a mistake, they had to go back to the beginning, scrap the disc, and start all over again.

Likewise, dialing a phone on a traditional land line is an online process. If you realize you've made a mistake, you have to abort—hang up—and begin again. Dialing a cell phone, on the other hand, is an offline process. You compose the number and, if you make a mistake, you go back a step and delete the wrong input—edit it out—and input the right number. When the entire



The typewriter and splicing block were well established linear editing tools in their day, in contrast to the nonlinear word processor and DAW of today.

telephone number has been constructed to your liking, you go online—literally, hit the green online button—and the call is executed by the service provider.

The ability to edit is what distinguishes offline from online processes.

Sound mixing for film and TV used to be mostly an online activity. It was common practice in the early decades of film sound for an entire 10-minute reel to be mixed in a single pass, following one or more rehearsals. With the development of pick-up and record electronics for film dubbers making punching in possible, the two- or three-person re-recording team enjoyed the ability at last to go back and fix a flawed portion of a mix—usually refining their console settings listening to the sound backwards while the dubbers rewound in real time—without causing

Photo credit: Ella Monk

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undue delay and excessive cost to the production.

Mix automation changed all that, from the introduction of console automation systems in the 1970s to today’s digital audio workstations featuring the ability to graph not just volume and mute, but just about every conceivable control parameter. Automation has allowed the offline construction of mixes to become standard operating procedure, with the mix being subsequently executed online in a single record pass or internal

bounce-to-disk.

Now this has all changed again with the introduction of offline bounce in ProTools 11. This enables “freezing” a mix—that is, rendering the final mix up to 150 times faster than real time, according to Avid—and has made the notion of “online” something of a quaint curiosity.

Now a mix need never be online at all, since we are able to render into a single final file something that doesn’t ever need to be played through, prior to the playback for quality control checking and approval, after the fact.

The notion of online vs. offline, once so central to the production process and necessitating the development of the all-important EDL, is in the process of being relegated to the status of a quaint curiosity, a byway in the development of modern studio practices and procedures. It will soon be forgotten, along with such

other bygone realities as the daily tape recorder alignment ritual, analog noise reduction devices, and uniformed gas station attendants.

It brings to mind the day that I finally sold my once invincible Synclavier digital audio workstation and 16-track Direct-to-Disk recorder—to a couple of vintage equipment collectors, no less.

The only things I hung onto were two blank rack panels and a Hammond AC power bar. At least some things are irreplaceable.



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GREG STIRLING



APPOINTED VICE PRESIDENT, STIRLING COMMUNICATIONS INTERNATIONAL

Scott Stirling, President of Stirling Communications International, is pleased to announce the appointment of Greg Stirling as Vice President effective June 21st, 2014.

Contributing to the brands of The Newfoundland Herald and Newfoundland Broadcasting (NTV and OZFM), Greg will be instrumental in bringing Newfoundland’s culture and the Stirling group of companies’ unique content to the rest of Canada with its future expansion of programming and digital initiatives. With over 25 years’ experience in the broadcast industry, Greg will be a significant asset to the growth of Stirling Communications, says Scott Stirling.

“Greg’s background as a television producer, investment specialist, real estate entrepreneur, publisher and business manager will serve us well in developing our core focus. His renaissance ap-

proach to life also embodies the spirit that our company was founded upon. As an innovative storyteller, world adventurer and competitive racer, Greg brings exceptional heart to the Stirling brand.”

As the 2001 founder of the Vancouver-based Borderless World Productions, Greg has overseen over 200 television, film and corporate projects spanning four continents in the roles of producer, director and cinematographer. Notable projects include *Waterman’s World* (co-produced with Avanti Pictures), *Changing Gears on Kilimanjaro* and *Journey to Xixouau* (NTV documentaries) as well as Toronto International Film Festival entry, *By the Hour*.

Prior to his tenure in Broadcast, Greg served as past Presidents for Weston Consulting Ltd. and Sterling Press Ltd. in addition to roles as both General Manager and Editor-in-Chief of The Newfoundland Herald.

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ABOUT STIRLING COMMUNICATIONS INTERNATIONAL:

SCI is comprised of subsidiaries in the media, financial investment and property sectors. Stirling Communications includes Canada’s Superstation NTV, OZFM Radio and The Newfoundland Herald, which was founded in 1946 by Newfoundland media pioneer, Geoffrey William Stirling, March 22, 1921 – December 21, 2013.



Stirling Communications International is an independently owned and operated company, headquartered in St. John’s, Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada. 446 Logy Bay Rd., St. John’s NL, A1C 5S2.
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