



NY1 technology reporter Adam Balkin interviews Nintendo spokeswoman Amber McCollom for a tech feature, on which he serves as reporter, shooter, and editor. Balkin typically uses a shoulder-mounted Panasonic AJ-SPX800 instead of the more portable HVX200 many NY1 reporters use because of its more 'professional' form factor, in addition to its image performance and workflow advantages.

As the late January sun sets behind the towering skyline of Manhattan's Financial District, a television reporter is shooting himself. Standing on the sidewalk in front of Hanover Square, Bobby Cuza squints hard into the flipped-over viewfinder of his Panasonic AG-HVX200 camcorder and makes a quick pass at his hair before stepping in front of his own tripod. As the transit reporter for NY1 News, New York's local news station, Cuza is on his own for on-camera styling, as he is for just about everything else.

A microphone cord stretches from Cuza's gloved hand to the XLR input on the camera. Onto the camera's P2 solid-state storage cards, he is recording a standup to bookend a piece about the construction of a new subway line. A truck blasts its horn, interrupting his third take. A middle-aged man walks by and shouts, "Hey, transit guy, all right!"

Bleeding-edge ENG

NY1 reporters have shot their own stories since the station's inception in 1992, when the acquisition format was Hi8 tape. NY1 became the first news station to adopt Panasonic's DVCPRO tape format in 1996. In 2002, the station moved from 42nd Street to a larger, brighter facility in the Chelsea Market. NY1 used that opportunity to switch to a server-based storage and playout system, accommodating at first 600 hours of DV25—and, a year later, 1,100 hours. (See digitalcontentproducer.com/fieldprod/revfeat/video_room_improvements for more on the switch.)

NY1 News employs 37 full-time reporters and anchors, and a couple dozen news assistants. Most reporters shoot their own stories, including interviews and standups, and the 2002 switchover to the Pinnacle Vortex server in the new Chelsea location gave reporters the opportunity to edit their own material, via Vortex DeskEdit proxy editing systems on

One-Man Crew

BY TREVOR BOYER

"Sometimes I forget that people actually watch NY1," Cuza jokes. The next take is satisfactory, so Cuza packs up his gear and gets back on the subway, toting a lightweight Manfrotto 501 tripod and a Kata camera bag. He rides the train not only to keep himself immersed in his beat, but also because it's often faster than fighting city traffic and dealing with NY1's parking garage. The L train terminal at 8th Avenue is one short and one long block from NY1's headquarters, where Cuza will return his gear and edit his piece for an evening broadcast.

In contrast to Cuza's modesty, NY1 is one of the highest-rated cable channels in New York. Owned by Time Warner Cable, the station covers every aspect of local news: politics, weather, crime, business, entertainment, and transit. NY1 has a fraction of CNN's budget, but, like its corporate cousin, it has 24 hours of airtime to fill every day. Therefore, the station has always needed to adopt innovative newsgathering and production strategies.

their desktops. The news assistants are on hand to shoot a reporter's story in a competitive environment such as a press conference or major event.

One such event was the Republican National Convention, held at Madison Square Garden during the summer of 2004. Here, NY1 debuted its recent major purchase: tapeless camcorders. The news team at the Garden used six Panasonic AJ-SPX800 shoulder-mount camcorders to record the events of the convention. Material from the solid-state P2 cards was edited onsite on Pinnacle Liquid Edition editing workstations, and the edited baseband video was sent back to the station over fiber lines.

Steve Paulus, NY1's senior VP and general manager, and Joe Truncale, VP of operations and engineering, traveled to Japan in March 2004 to get a preview of the P2 system from Panasonic and cover the beginning of the Yankees' season there in April. Paulus and Truncale say NY1 was the first Western news team to use the tapeless cameras.

NY1 BUILDS ON
ITS TAPELESS
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SOLID-STATE FIELD
ACQUISITION.



Paulus and Truncale were impressed with the technology, and they decided to purchase 22 SPX800s, along with eight AJ-SPD850 studio decks and nine AJ-PCD10 card drives. Eventually, NY1 would have 26 SPX800 cameras and 300 4GB P2 cards, which each hold about 15 minutes of 25Mbps DVCPRO video. This was a formidable capital expense for the station—the cards alone were \$1,200 each (at a volume discount) when NY1 first bought them in 2004. (They're now available for about \$500 each at a discount.)

Still, the considerable up-front costs will save the station money in the long run—about four or five years after the purchase, Truncale says—and make it more efficient. The current annual tape budget is around \$13,000. For 2004 and before, it was around \$80,000, according to Truncale. “The two main principles,” he says, “were cost savings on the operating side and ingest speed. When you're able to get 24 minutes worth of material in the server in eight minutes, it really accelerates workflow.”

The tapeless newsroom

Today, tape-based recording has been completely phased out at NY1. The station holds onto a few DVCPRO tape camcorders, but uses them only for live feeds to microwave trucks.

Top: NY1 political reporter Dominic Carter covers the 2004 Republican National Convention at Madison Square Garden, during which the station debuted its P2-based Panasonic SPX800. Bottom: NY1 reporters use the AP ENPS newsroom system to access all clips, which they edit themselves using Pinnacle Vortex DeskEdit software.

Late last year, the station purchased 24 AG-HVX200 camcorders, giving its reporters a lightweight option for tapeless recording (the station had employed the similar-sized DVX100 before abandoning tape-based acquisition). The HVX200 camcorders are famous for their ability to shoot high-definition DVCPRO HD to P2 cards, but so far NY1 is not planning for a switch to HD. All material at the station is recorded and stored strictly as 25Mbps video. Still, the new camcorders give the station a way to phase in HD capture when the time comes.

For reporters accustomed to holding onto “important” tapes of their raw footage in their desk drawers, the switch to the new file-based recording and archiving system required hours of education, and a bit of convincing. With the \$1,200 P2 cards, hoarding was simply not acceptable. “Reporters inevitably want to hold onto their material,” Paulus says. “We had to persuade people, ‘We’re going to create an archive system that is going to work better than your desk drawer,’ and I think we’ve accomplished that.”

NY1 uses a barcode scanner system called ASAP Checkout to check each P2 card in and out. At the engineering department (ENG), reporters going out into the field are issued a camcorder and a tripod—along with a bag, a light, a battery, a microphone or two, and a cord—and generally five 4GB cards at once. When reporters return, they hand their full cards over to the ingest department. The cards are scanned in and ingested at 3X to 4X realtime into Pinnacle Liquid Edition, which unwraps AVI video and WAV audio files from the native MXF wrapper.

For his story about the new Second Avenue subway line, Cuza used only one card. On 4GB of solid-state media, he'd recorded a standup and an interview. Within 20 minutes of dropping off his card at the ingest department, Cuza sees his clips on the AP ENPS interface on his desktop. NY1 uses AP ENPS facility-wide to allow reporters to see newswires, write their stories, and interface with the Omnibus automation system.

Now Cuza can perform a rough cut within Pinnacle's Vortex DeskEdit, a limited version of the Vortex NLE that the full-time editors at NY1 use. He also has to cut his soundbites, write the voiceover script, get it approved, and finalize the package with an editor. NY1 has 10 dedicated edit rooms, with six full-time editors and about the same number of freelancers.

The next day, I caught a replay of Cuza's piece on the television at the falafel place on 7th Avenue in Chelsea. The HVX200 picture looked just as you would expect from any standard network news broadcast. Cuza's interview with the transit bigwig had the usual gravitas imparted by paneled walls and big leather chairs. Cuza's hair looked fine. Many fewer people had touched the story than would have at a major network, but you'd be hard-pressed to tell the difference.

The tech-savant

On a snowy morning in early February, NY1 technology reporter Adam Balkin drives to the Soho Grand hotel, where Nintendo is hosting a launch event for its Wii Play game. Balkin is reporting a story about whether regular operation of the new Wii system—which requires that players get off the couch and move around—might constitute real exercise.

He checks his gear out of the ENG department, lugs the camera bag and tripod an avenue block to a parking garage, and checks a Ford Escape SUV out of NY1's fleet. Balkin doesn't take the subway—partly because he often tows the larger P2 camera, the shoulder-mounted Panasonic SPX800. He prefers this camcorder for a non-technical reason: Its bulk alone lends a cachet, especially at crowded, competitive coverage environments such as CES. He's instantly recognized as a "real TV journalist." It also offers five card slots compared to the HVX200's two, and its better lens facilitates stronger low-light performance.

The morning light streaming into the penthouse of the Soho Grand is enough that Balkin doesn't need the Frezzi light mounted atop the SPX800 he'd been issued. Stocked with art books, the earth-toned space is divided by columns and low, rectangular couches, and a Sony plasma dominates the modernist mantle. Three demo guys are bouncing around, waving their controllers at the Wii sensor beneath their competitor's screen.

Balkin interviews Amber McCollom, senior public relations manager at Nintendo. He mounts the SPX800 on a tripod extended to waist-height to accommodate McCollom's seated position. He'd forgotten to pack a lavalier, so he uses the standard handheld mic. But, because this story will be syndicated to other stations (as many of his technology pieces are), he slides the yellow-and-blue NY1 flag off the handle. He adjusts camera settings after checking the picture on the LCD—tucked against the camera body but facing outward—and kneels to interview McCollom, switching from one knee to the other. McCollom is careful to explain that Nintendo makes no health claims for its Wii system, but notes that "getting up off the couch" is certainly a benefit.

Balkin is a flurry of movement with the camera, extending the tripod legs to record his intro and outro standups. He then cradles the camcorder in his arms to get low close-ups of the game cases for B-roll.

Being curious about technology is his job, so it's no surprise that Balkin is the station's de facto early adopter. He's one of the few reporter/shooters at NY1 who take advantage of the subtler technological advantages of the larger SPX800 camera, which is more traditionally designed for ENG. Take the camera's longer pre-record buffer, for instance. Balkin travels to CES in Las Vegas every January, and this year Bill Gates gave the keynote speech. Instead of recording the whole thing, he could record the interesting soundbites that he wanted after he heard them, using the SPX800's 15-second cache—a form of editing before recording.

Balkin learned video editing as long ago as high school, so he has no problems doing the final edit on most of his pieces. He does have a certain degree of greater flexibility than other reporters, because his technology stories are usually features rather than breaking news.

NY1's future

Many NY1 reporters are not even aware that their HVX200 cameras can already shoot HD video today. Although HD is on the minds of the station principals, so far there's been no testing—even with the adoption of the HVX200s.

For the moment, they're focused more on transitioning to widescreen capture in standard def. A brand-new Time Warner sister station in Binghamton, N.Y., has given NY1 an opportunity to test out an appropriate workflow. The plan is to shoot everything in widescreen SD, edit and archive packages in 16:9, but play it to air as center-cut 4:3. That way, all archived content will be future-proofed for broadcast in widescreen HD.

Paulus says he believes that, at this point, training reporters to shoot news in high definition is simply not necessary. "It's news material. It's meat-and-potatoes video. But the viewer having to contend with the shrinking and expanding of the video image—I think that is a true irritation."

For his part as the technology reporter, Balkin says he fears NY1, even with its ahead-of-its-time workflow, is "slowly slipping down the curve with all the HD stuff." Still, he expects that the retraining of the staff to shoot 16:9 will be relatively simple.

Lately, Balkin and other reporters have been occupied more with the current state of the station's archive than with its future technology plans. The raw material from the P2 cards is stored on the station's main server for a day or two, and it lives for 30 days on a second server.

When the reporters return their P2 cards to ingest, they can check a box on a form to tell the librarian to burn the P2 content to DVD as data. This constitutes the station's permanent archive. Between the two servers, the offline DataDirect storage, and the DVDs, this gives NY1 "triple redundancy," as Paulus puts it.

Truncale acknowledges that there have been complaints about the archive—that reporters will be able to access a clip's audio, but see a black screen in place of the video. The nature of the archive's problem is not clear, but Truncale says that the issue is not the actual DataDirect drives that make up the server. "Something happens that no one has even been able to identify at this point," he says, indicating that there seem to be communication issues among the Omnibus transfer manager, the Veritas middleware, the archive, and the online server.

Balkin describes instances when the whole 30-day archive had gone down temporarily. But he's confident that anything he shoots now will be accessible from the 30-day archive—and, if not that, from a DVD if he tags a story for burning.

Looking to the future, Truncale says that a next-generation newsroom system for NY1 is under development. The station is looking at Avid, Apple, and Grass Valley for a new NLE solution. A lot of decisions are still up in the air, including whether the station will have two servers: one on-air and one editing.

Of course, the 24-hour news cycle never stops churning, and NY1 is successfully filling the clock with local news content every day, in a completely tapeless environment. "Everybody who walks through here and sees this place and really gets a good demonstration of how things operate is pretty impressed with what they see," Truncale says, "with warts and all." □

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