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The Future of Fan-Centric Streaming with Synamedia

Matt Stagg in conversation with Patricia Kellaghan and Guy Southam, Synamedia

IAMT Studio Visual Podcast Series

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Welcome back to the podcast. I'm Matt Stagg, and I'm joined by two very interesting people from Synamedia: Patricia Kellaghan and Guy Southam. We're going to talk about a lot of new products, but also new ways that you are working as the technology moves on and ways of working move on.

So I wonder if we just set the stage for the audience. We'd been talking previously about the three anchors that Synamedia have — I wondered if you could explain that to the audience.

Sure. Just before we get into that, I'll give a quick intro — and thank you for pronouncing my name perfectly. Patricia Kellaghan. I am Senior Director of Product Management for Gravity at Synamedia. Gravity is one of the innovative products in our portfolio, and the firm focus is on broadband services and device management as well. So it's the foundational building block on top of which we then have our video and advanced advertising innovative products.

At Synamedia, as you probably know, we have a long heritage — decades of experience on the video side, really strong experience there. The world of broadcast really is starting to look a lot different, I think, as we'd all recognise, than when we started out. But the thing that's really crystal clear is video consumption and what's happening with it: it is increasing, and surging, we would even say. What's changed has really been the distribution, and where customers are actually engaging with content across more and more screens and more and more devices as well. That's a really interesting trend that we all continue to follow.

But from a Synamedia perspective, we are looking at the multiscreen experience — but we still see TV as the anchor. So it's really critical in terms of what that means for us. What it means is that, at the end of the day, whether it's our video experience delivery, or our UI/UX interface, or our advanced advertising, it's really about delivery, customer experience, and then ultimately monetisation. So those are the three anchors that we wanted to focus on.

That's really interesting, because I was pleased with what you said about anchoring it around the big screen experience. There's so much noise about "you've got to have it here, you've got to have it there" that people tend to lose focus. People still watch the big screen — especially the companies you're involved with. Yes, you can make it accessible, people can have it however they want, but I really like the fact that you're focusing on that.

I was also going to ask about one of the things we discussed earlier: a collision of experience and monetisation. That was very interesting for me. Guy, I wonder if you could expand for our audience on what that means to you and to Synamedia?

Yeah, absolutely. Our advertising product was founded around the concept of unified addressability — being able to take the heritage of what we created with AdSmart in the UK, which is linear ad replacement in broadcast, designed for a pay-TV operator where user experience is paramount. And being able to take that experience out as viewership is fragmenting: being able to provide that best-in-class experience across all screens, across all modes of viewing, but unifying the performance of that campaign back. So the advertiser really understands where that campaign is delivering, what outcomes it's driving, and where that effectiveness is coming from.

That's a principle that applies to a lot of what Patricia just mentioned: bringing a premium experience wherever your audiences access your content. The research suggests that viewers will access this via the biggest screen available — whether that's the main screen in the living room, a laptop device, a tablet, or whatever. You want to make sure that they've got an appropriate, consistent experience that really enhances their viewing, and that you've got appropriate monetisation against that. So it's relevant, it's contextual, it speaks to the type of user that they are and the type of content that they're watching, and it positions those brands in a high-quality, brand-safe environment to drive the outcomes for those companies.

That leads me very nicely on to another thing. You mentioned that attention was a key metric in your company, and that really resonated with me — I'm from BT Sport and Warner Brothers, so attention as an anchor is a really good way of looking at it. I wondered if you could enlighten us a bit more on that?

I think attention is one of those things that's become a bit of a buzzword. It's an area where we know TV performs very strongly. It's a high-attention environment, and the things that TV has always done really well: it's full screen, it's sound on, it's brand aware, it's in a relaxed environment where people are more amenable to advertising.

So we're going beyond getting the right message in front of the right person at the right time, to actually having to do it in a format that is impactful, that captures those high-attention moments, and — as I said before — that is relevant and contextual against the content that they're watching.

So now we've got new formats as well as your traditional ten, fifteen and thirty second ads. We've got things that are happening around the screen inventory, whether that's triggered by a moment in a sporting event. We know the World Cup, for example, is going to have additional drinks breaks because of the heat in the US. How can we do that without leaving the action, but provide a relevant moment for a sponsor or a key brand partner that's contextual to the moment in the game, and perhaps the situation in the game? That's not something you can schedule — that has to be triggered. But it's going to be a really valuable learning experience for us in terms of how we can take that and move it forward to other moments in different kinds of programming as this becomes more the norm.

Building on that topic, we see really high value on the TV platform in terms of ad serving and engagement as well — and engagement in that context translates to value. We know it's a very high-value platform, and that's really where, to go back to another theme, the underlying experience and platform and protecting the integrity of the brand — from a content perspective and an advertiser perspective — is absolutely critical. There's no opportunity for stuttering or failing. You really need to deliver against that quality and premium experience.

Someone said to me: there's no time for relaxing when you're in live sport. What strikes me with Synamedia — and it came out when we were talking — is that sometimes I see a disconnect between technology companies and the creatives that are the customer at the end. I discussed this with Ben Wickham from Sky. But with Synamedia you understand the moments, what that means to people, and you've got that passion that isn't just "here's a really good kit, you should have it."

I think Sky are obviously a very long-term partner for Synamedia, across more than just advertising. We've grown up in that sort of super-premium environment with them. The respect that they have for their customers always has to be paramount because of the relationship they have — this is content that people are paying for. I think we've built products that are designed to enhance that experience.

In terms of how we map storytelling to delivery, I think it's a really interesting area. There's a load of really cool stuff happening with AI in terms of creative generation that's lowering the barrier for getting people onto television. It's not really expensive to make a TV ad any more. We know that TV needs to become easier to purchase, easier to transact, to better compete with digital and social platforms that are capturing a lot of that spend.

But then there is, critically, this orchestration role for the advertising technology as automation becomes more prevalent — as you're getting more volume of campaigns from those small and medium-sized businesses. So we're investing a lot of time and energy now in terms of our agentic tools to support the ad operations teams, to flag campaigns that are in need of attention in terms of making sure they achieve their objectives. And ultimately, in the fullness of time, AI that's empowered to make the necessary changes for itself without requiring that human intervention, as we've got high levels of confidence in it — so that you can ensure the right message gets in front of the right people, that we deliver the campaigns in as smooth a curve as possible, and we make sure we hit those advertiser objectives.

That's interesting, because last year especially, everything was AI. And agentic has always been sort of a poor cousin of generative, because everyone's like, "Oh wow, generative, deep fakes, we're all going to be unemployed." But actually the real work — and I see this especially in media and entertainment and production — is agentic AI taking that heavy lifting. You can give it all the jobs that no one else wants to do.

Yeah. We've all been sat there tagging clips.

Right. And I think if you don't execute against an AI strategy that's really adding value, then you're just going to end up disrupting — and also taking away from the monetisation focus as well. So Guy and his team have been very focused on really finding the highest-value use cases to extend the AI strategy for the advertising product, which is Iris. But very conscious of what that balance is. It's not just AI for AI's sake, or innovation for its own sake — it's really balanced for quality, performance, and then what the value to our partners is.

And I think that's great. It's got to do something. The worst thing you can do in TV, if you're working in technology, is go to an editor and say, "This is going to solve the problem you didn't have."

So you mentioned new monetisation opportunities. Where do you see those coming as we move into the next phase of new production techniques?

The focus for us at the moment is that we know broadcasters are facing challenges in terms of competition for viewers and competition for advertising spend, and the role that automation has played on the demand side has perhaps challenged their unique value in terms of where that demand is coming from. So our mantra, if you want, is to generate the highest return for each viewing session, for each buy, for those broadcasters.

Some of that is workflow. Some of that is making sure your direct-sold, high-value opportunities are the ones you're looking to first, before you're moving to more of a backfill yield optimisation piece. But some of it is more of those things I describe, like your contextual moments — whether that's new formats. We've seen pause ads go from something that's a bit niche to something that's pretty much everywhere in the last three or four years.

Some of the markets that we operate in are a bit ahead, I think, of perhaps Europe or the US in terms of the in-screen format: your L-banners, your squeeze-backs, your side-by-sides. We saw ITV doing side-by-sides in the rugby. I think that's an area where we think there is more opportunity for certain types of advertising — and in the right moments. Again, you've got to find that balance: is this a free-to-air type session where advertising is more tolerated? Is this something that's a more premium environment where you'd have to have a value exchange? And that's when you come into the world of retail media, and whether we're doing transactional or more shoppable-type advertising — offering an element of quid pro quo, in that your segment has been selected and there was a benefit to you for responding to this specific advert, as well as to the advertiser for making you aware of it.

I just wanted to come to you, Patricia — what do you see now as the priority for broadcasters?

From our perspective, it's about simplification at the end of the day, and simplification equalling value. I think the erosion of value is caused by what we have in the ecosystem today: high fragmentation, a lot of different point solutions. Directionally, it's really simplifying and unifying that experience from an end-to-end perspective. That is really key, and what that does ultimately is give back control to the broadcasters, so they can again deliver that best possible customer experience. It's providing them with the tools to run their business in a much more efficient way.

So if you could give your customers, and potential new customers, one takeaway from where you see the industry going — because you have great insights, you see stuff moving around from within the workflow almost?

The future-gazing bit's always hard, right? I always like to leave a company before they realise I didn't...

I think broadcasters becoming more like platforms has to be seen as an opportunity as well as a challenge. I look at my customer base — we started with companies like Sky that were fully vertically integrated. But now you're seeing broadcasters with their own D2C propositions, with this variety of distribution, and there is an enormous amount of complexity there. But to Patricia's point, there's also an enormous amount of opportunity if you can navigate that distribution, navigate that fragmentation, and create solutions that centre around the user — that put that viewer at the heart of all of your different systems, and then provide consistent, appropriate messaging to them.

I always come at this from an advertising perspective; that's what I've worked in for twenty years. But the needs of advertisers haven't changed in all of this. To your point, this is not technology looking for a solution. Advertisers are looking to drive outcomes: awareness, consideration, transactions. And this is just a different challenge in how you deliver against those expectations.

That's great. I could stay chatting all afternoon — I really love what you guys do. But we're going to have to wrap up now. Patricia, Guy, thank you so much for joining us, and have a great show.