

Inside MTG's new facility

Sweden's Modern Times Group's move to a new London playout facility provided an opportunity to make changes to key technology. **George Bevir** reports

UK viewers are unlikely to be aware of the Modern Times Group; despite its 300-plus workforce in London, none of the Swedish international entertainments group's channels is available in the country.

The Stockholm-headquartered firm's association with the UK dates back to 1987, when regulations prevented commercial broadcasters from being based in Scandinavian countries. To circumvent the rules, the company set up in the UK. What began as one channel for Sweden, Norway and Denmark has since ballooned to more than 110 channels played out to 130 countries on six continents.

The UK base provides a home for the group's centralised media planning, acquisitions, creative services, press, marketing, finance and tech-

What is Modern Times Group?

MTG's operation spans six continents and includes TV channels, radio and online. MTG also has a content production business, Nice, which is made up of 28 different companies in 16 countries. Nice content including *Babes On The Bus* and *The Farm*, is distributed in more than 240 territories worldwide. MTG also has a production company in Ghana, Modern African Productions. Distributor DRG is also part of the company.

nology teams, as well as playout services for channels that are delivered to the Nordics, such as TV3 Norway.

For the past 20 years, the UK playout operation has been based in West Drayton on the outskirts of London. But that has changed with the opening of a new base in Chiswick.

Three years ago, with much of the technology in West Drayton reaching the end of its life, MTG considered outsourcing its playout operation. "The consensus was that we would like to control our own destiny and build again," says vice-president of broadcast operations Rachel Bernard. "We in London aren't a standalone island of technology. We interface very closely with our other playout facility in Riga, Latvia. The two facilities provide disaster recovery for each other, and the link to the mother ship in Sweden is very tight.

"To involve a third party didn't seem like the most sensible option, and when we completed a cost analysis, we found there wasn't a compelling argument for it."

The new Chiswick playout operation, which was going live as *Broadcast TECH* went to press, reaches across the Nordics, delivering 20 channels, which equates to 60 feeds leaving the building, split between 10 free TV channels and 10 pay channels. Across these channels there are eight audio languages and 14 subtitle audio languages. Localisation firm SDI Media provides subtitles and is now integrated into MTG's workflow, with SDI's



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MediaTrack tool used to plan, schedule and track assets. Most of MTG's acquisitions are English-language and require burnt-in subtitles in a host of languages.

Room for expansion

The Chiswick operation will deliver the same number of channels as West Drayton. But importantly, Bernard says, the size of the facility and technology choices will enable it to expand.

The move to Chiswick has provided the opportunity to make significant changes to key technology, including moving from Pharos Mediator to TMD Mediaflex for asset management, and from Harris automation to Pebble Beach's



Chiswick: facility provides
 playout for 20 channels

120
 Number of London-based
 broadcast operations
 staff

Chiswick kit list

- Automation** Pebble Beach Marina
- MAM** TMD Mediaflex
- Graphics** Pixel Power and Vizrt
- Switches** Cisco
- Audio optimisation** Dolby DP600s
- Multi-image display** Evertz MVP
- Archiving and asset storage**
 Front Porch Digital DIVArchive
- Servers** Harmonic Spectrum (pictured below)
- Library** Oracle StorageTek SL8500
- QC** Dalet Amberfin iCR and Aurora
- Subtitling** Screen System



IN-DEPTH

Marina centralised ingest, content management and multi-channel automation system. It is the largest installation of Marina in the UK.

“While 20 channels doesn’t sound a lot, one channel goes out to 19 different regions, so the automation requirement is quite complex,” says Bernard.

There are more than 120 people in the broadcast operations department and, because of the shift to a new platform, there was a significant need for retraining. But it was worth the effort. “We now have products that are easy to adapt and malleable,” Bernard says. “We don’t have to go to our supplier and say we need a new workflow and then have to pay X amount. We have bought a system

‘We have bought a system that allows us to create own workflow and determine our own destiny’

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Luxembourg-based systems integrator Broadcast Centre Europe, which also worked on the Riga facility, has worked on the Chiswick build for the past three years. The SI’s content distribution system Movie2Me is used to move content between London and Riga

The Riga playout facility is a comparable operation to Chiswick, with a similar channel count and the same media management technology for sharing content. Some of the heavy hardware is the same, including Oracle robots, Front Porch Digital DIVArchive control, Mediaflex for MAM and Marina automation for playout. “The philosophy is:

ingest anywhere and play anywhere, at any time,” says Bernard.

The Chiswick facility will receive 50% of content on tape and 50% as files, made up of its own productions, commercials and short-form content. Owing to the “organic growth” of the West Drayton facility, MTG hadn’t standardised a house format for delivery, but after the Chiswick facility goes live, it will look to receive all content as files.

“We are considering whether to participate in the DPP standard but we are currently working out what that will mean for us. If our suppliers have already onboarded with other broadcasters to the DPP’s spec, then it might make sense to take content in that format as well,” says Bernard.