

CHAPTER 19



Case Studies

Case studies provide an interesting glimpse into how real-world websites get it done. Here we present five case studies, two from Stefan and three from Jan.

Stefan's case studies are from his consulting work, and discuss nitty-gritty goals, requirements and implementation details. Jan can't match the cache of Stefan's client base, so turned journalist and reported on some of the most high-profile uses of Flash video on the web today.

Enjoy.

The Roanoke Times

The *Roanoke Times* and *roanoke.com* is the leading daily newspaper in Roanoke, Virginia. The team runs a daily video webcast called the TimesCast, covering upcoming news stories with a mix of local news, weather, sports, and entertainment information. The paper publishes TimesCast on their own website and distributes it via some well-known video portals, including YouTube.

Implementation

The *Roanoke Times* already had a basic video production workflow in place when they approached me (Stefan) in 2005. They had identified Flash as their chosen delivery platform due to the wide reach it offers and they also realized that the existing Real Server was no longer a good fit for their needs.

After developing a few basic Flash video applications in house, the *Roanoke Times* quickly recognized the need for third-party help in order to take the TimesCast (see **Figure 19-1**) to the next level. The requirements for the new application were fairly advanced, including:

- The ability to run pre-roll video ads before the main feature content
- The ability to support multiple, configurable advertisements, randomly presented
- A traditional banner ad synced to the currently playing video ad
- Configuration via XML

- Graphical elements inside the player should sync with the video content (think cue points)
- Video and graphical content should be easily updateable by the team at the *Roanoke Times* and *roanoke.com*
- The ability to track ad impression, video plays and user interaction
- Bandwidth detection and serving of an appropriately encoded version of the video content.



Figure 19-1
The TimesCast at <http://blogs.roanoke.com/vlog>.

The videos are shot and produced daily in front of a green screen by the team at the *Roanoke Times* and *roanoke.com*. After keying out the background using Grass Valley's Edius 3 and adding custom graphics, the source video is encoded to FLV using Sorenson Squeeze.

Working closely with Seth Gitner, the multimedia editor at the *Roanoke Times*, we quickly established a list of deliverables for version 1 of the TimesCast player. Some features turned out to be a little trickier to implement than others, with the main one being a custom implementation of cue point functionality that allowed for a series of graphics inside the player to be synchronized with time codes of the video itself.

Navigation or event cue points were quickly dismissed, as it would have been fairly inflexible to add the cue points during encoding, a requirement with both navigation and event cue points. ActionScript cue points were also out of the question, as one key requirement was the ability for the player to receive its configuration from an XML file, while ActionScript cue points are usually inserted before compiling.

Instead, we decided to implement our own cue point routine, which uses a series of XML nodes, each specifying the required time-code information. The player continuously monitors the playback time and compares it with the cue-point list loaded from the XML

file. If there's a match, it will show the required graphic on screen. Other features of the completed player included:

- A bandwidth-detection routine utilizing Flash Media Server, with the actual video then delivered progressively via a standard web server
- Banner synchronization through Flash's built-in LocalConnection Object
- Impression and user interaction tracking.

Results

Since its launch over a year ago, the TimesCast has grown in popularity with daily viewing figures ever increasing. And for viewers that are on the move, the site now also offers the TimesCast in a downloadable MP4 (iPod) format.

Rather than recreating a TV news show, the TimesCast is a great example of a new type of on-line content that is quickly emerging and which constitutes a great addition to existing media.

Video on the web and Flash video in particular is now both easy to implement and quick to deploy, with production and broadcast of the TimesCast happening on the same day. Through the use of short and unintrusive advertising, some of the production costs can easily be recovered—not to mention all the positive publicity that this particular use of the technology has received.

The *Roanoke Times* and *roanoke.com* has since won the top award for General Excellence in Online Journalism for medium-sized sites from the Online News Association and the TimesCast was thought to have secured them the top spot. It also received an Eppy Award and was named Best Overall Newspaper-Affiliated Internet Service in the category serving under 1 million unique monthly visitors.

No surprise then that one viewer wrote in to say that the TimesCast was “Better than the Naked News”.

You can check out the TimesCast at <http://blogs.roanoke.com/vlog>.

CNET UK

CNET is well-known for its focus on technology and the site has been deploying a lot of its video content through Flash in recent years. As far back as 2004, CNET deployed live Flash video broadcasts using Flash Communication Server for their “Help Desk Live” feature.

When CNET UK contacted me (Stefan) in 2006 to upgrade their existing video players to ActionScript 2 and for help with migrating their existing content to the Akamai network, I quickly agreed.

Implementation

CNET already had a massive library of video content and needed a way to transition their existing video players to the Akamai network, using streaming Flash video. A simple switch