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Microsoft Digs Deep Into Dante

BY STEVE HARVEY

REDMOND, WA—Microsoft Production Studios, a full-service digital media production facility located on the company's 500-acre campus 15 miles east of Seattle in Redmond, WA, is in the midst of upgrading to a comprehensive Audinate Dante network. The network ties together the audio production and post-production audio suites and intercom systems at the complex and across the campus.

The 65,000-square-foot HD and 4K video production studio facility, one of the largest technical production facilities in the Pacific Northwest, encompasses three sound stages plus an insert stage, together with three audio rooms, multiple edit suites and support amenities. The stages have been used for everything from broadcast television contribution to music mixes, including MSNBC's twice-daily political talk show, *Connected: Coast to Coast*, now defunct, and live MSN Music productions featuring the likes of Janet Jackson and Alanis Morissette. These days, "We're supposed to be anything and everything to anybody," laughs John L. Ball, systems engineer at the complex.

The Dante network implementation began when the studios entered into handling sound design and mixing for the user experience at Microsoft retail stores worldwide, Ball reports. The new Dante network also enables the Microsoft Production



John L. Ball, systems engineer at Microsoft Production Studios, which is in the midst of upgrading to a comprehensive Audinate Dante network.

Studios to broadcast live shows featuring company CEO Satya Nadella, for instance, he says. "Maybe he wants to talk about a specific project—maybe a new release or some new Xbox video game. That can be a live feed into the stores."

Justin Friesen, a system designer at Lift AV, the design and integration firm in Renton, WA with which Ball consulted on the project, first brought Dante to his attention. "He recommended Dante; that was the first I'd heard about it; they were one of the early adopters," Ball recounts.

Already heavily invested in RTS intercom systems, Microsoft Production Studios was able to upgrade its equipment with the release of the manufacturer's OMI Matrix Cards

and two-channel OKI Omneo Key-panel Interface card, which enabled Dante integration with the KP-32 keypanels. The RTS Dante network supports back-end communications between all of the stages, production controls and audio rooms, with the floor director, floor manager and A2s on belt packs, he says.

"We initially started out with a small island of Dante to do the mixing for the retail stores. Then Omneo came out, so I thought we should integrate that," Ball explains. "One of the nice features that two-channel Dante in each of the intercom panels gives us is that we can set up panels in various places—here in the production control or out on remotes—

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that allow program to be fed on that second channel.

“The first channel is all the back-end intercom connectivity. The second channel coming into that intercom via Dante can be a program speaker out of the XLR of the KP32. Plus, there’s an audio in, if you’re using that second channel, to get onto the Dante network as well. So we could very easily take a keypanel out to a remote, have an IFB and a microphone plugged directly into the panel, and have back-end communications, all just with a Dante network,” Ball elaborates.

Ball is testing Focusrite’s Red-Net 6 MADI Bridge as an interface to introduce a Miranda AV router’s MADI inputs and outputs onto the Dante network. Currently, the 64 audio channels can be broken out, fed to embedders and inserted into the video stream, or vice versa. Going via the Focusrite box, he says, “We could get that audio on to our Dante network,

down into our audio rooms and our intercom, and now we have the potential to maybe start feeding via IP live streams into the retail stores, if that’s a route that Microsoft wants to go.”

With the retail stores production and intercoms now Dante-enabled, the facility is starting on the audio upgrade. At the moment, two rooms feature Avid D-Control Icons while the third sports a D-Command, with each room also housing 10 Avid 192 interfaces to the respective Pro Tools systems. Ball and the staff are currently contemplating their options for integration of Dante in those control rooms.

Ultimately, the network will allow “MADI going to Dante, Pro Tools going to Dante, intercom going to Dante, retail stores production going to Dante,” says Ball. “Then it’s just mix and match—however we want to set it up for that particular session.”

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