



# ***How to make FAST faster, cheaper, and better***

With views from industry experts



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Back in 2018, we noticed the emergence of a new kind of streaming service - free and ad-supported, which went against the perception most people had about what streaming would be: subscription and ad-free. As such, there was a great deal of skepticism as to whether they would succeed, if anyone would actually want to watch ads on streaming, even if it was free.

Fast-forward five years and our hesitations were proven to be unfounded. FASTs are the hottest commodity on TV right now, both in the US and internationally. They are increasingly improving their offerings, producing original content and refining their interfaces. They also provide advertisers with a way to reach all those audiences that have left for streaming.

This white paper offers an excellent overview of the FAST ecosystem, along with practical advice on how to thrive in this rapidly evolving landscape. I am confident that you will gain valuable insights from reading it.

**Alan Wolk** — Co-Founder/Lead Analyst, TVREV



Isn't it remarkable how quickly FAST has become a household name? As catchy and promising as it is open to interpretation, this acronym for Free Ad-Supported Streaming Television has become the umbrella name for a widening array of streaming TV services.

According to media analyst Alan Wolk, who coined the FAST acronym, SVOD, AVOD, and FAST have become misnomers over recent years because of shifts in the offerings. SVOD services increasingly include live streams, for instance, or have ad-supported tiers, and some AVOD content also requires a subscription. As for FAST: state-supported FASTs are not ad-supported, and almost all FAST services offer both FAST channels and on-demand. That is why 'FAST' now stands for the business model of streaming TV services that supply programming for free.

Alan Wolk: "Back in 2018 in the U.S., everybody was using subscription AVOD, except for Pluto, which was free. So we started calling Pluto free ad-supported streaming TV, and that just got shortened to FAST."

According to Alan Wolk, 'free' is the keyword when defining a 'FAST service', whereas 'Linear' is the keyword in the definition of 'FAST channel', i.e. the delivery method via a linear stream.

We will focus on the challenges of channels that offer audiences focused, targeted or thematic programming niches for free, through linear streams over the public internet, whether or not they leverage the accelerated integration of Linear and VOD.

*"Back in 2018 in the U.S., everybody was using subscription AVOD, except for Pluto, which was free. So we started calling Pluto free ad-supported streaming TV, and that just got shortened to FAST."*

**- Alan Wolk -**



FAST channel genres now range from TV shows and movies to news, sports, music and opinion with countless subgenres and niches. These streaming channels have in common that they are offered for free in exchange for watching ads and that they rediscovered the long-underestimated propensity of viewers to lean back and let serendipity do its linear magic.

Many entered the FAST field in search of the goose with the golden eggs, only to find out that the eggs are tiny and only worth the push if you know how to make an appealing omelette at minimal cost. But the goose is here to stay, and here is why.

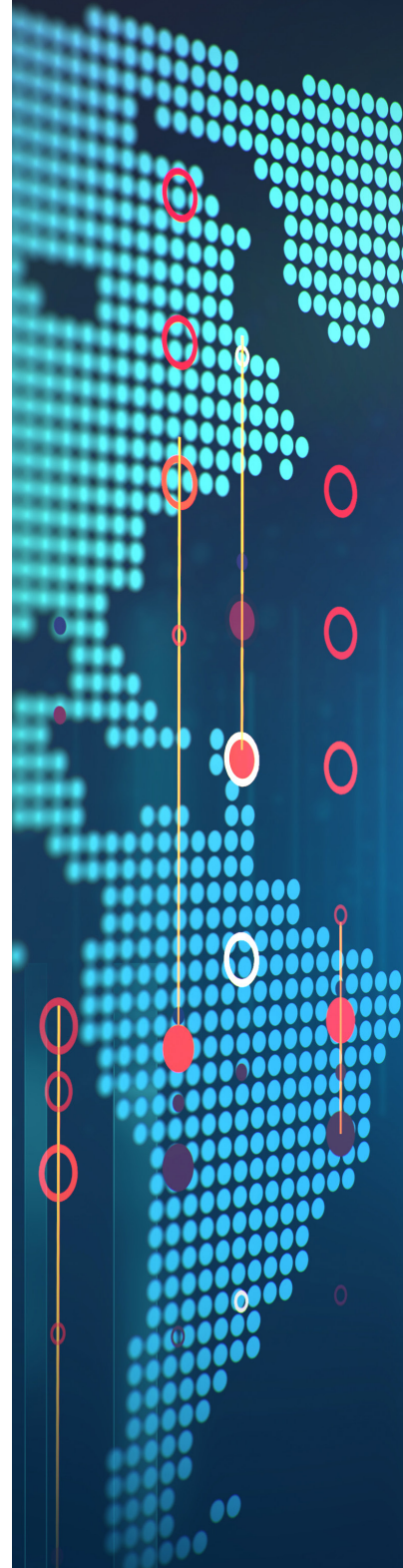


In the U.S., FAST has been attracting viewers in droves, with advertisers following happily in their wake.

You will remember that FAST really surfaced in 2020 when the pandemic-imposed restrictions kept people at home. With nowhere to go, people turned to digital video consumption, which triggered the steep rise of SVOD services. Streaming services mushroomed so rapidly, and the SVOD offer grew so fragmented that people were at the same time overwhelmed by choice and frustrated over the number of subscriptions they had to take to access their favourite content.

They started to replace anything above their budget with content they could watch for free. If that meant they had to watch ads, then so be it. Viewers are, in fact, increasingly inclined to accept advertising in streaming television as the ads are relevantly targeted, and the ad loads remain reasonable. Also, new ad-insertion technologies provide far more possibilities to be smarter about where to place ads, how to target them and how to make them effective and impactful.

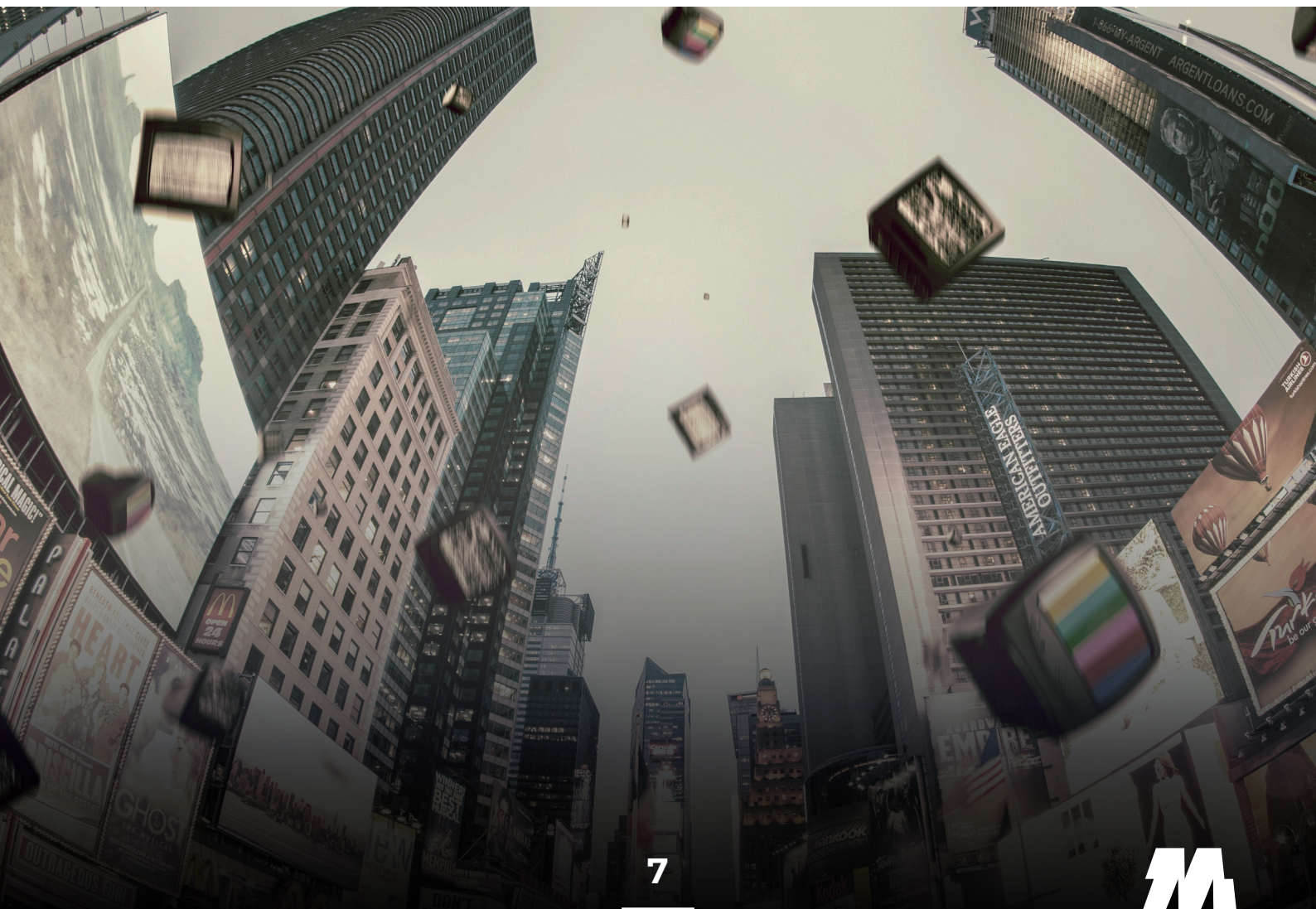
*“The viewer is happy to leave the curator job to the channel owner.”*





Growing weary of searching for content they liked, people also rediscovered the lean-back comfort of traditional linear schedules. It is a viewing experience the FAST channels replicate so well and to which they add the ease and flexibility of watching TV on any connected device. Viewers search a TV-guide-like grid, click on whatever appeals to them and let serendipity take over. They are happy to leave the curator job to the channel owner.

The rapid viewer shift to FAST happened on the back of global broadband connectivity and the steep rise of smart TVs and connected devices. Not surprisingly, connected device providers have conquered prominent positions in a strategic move to provide content at the centre of their interfaces.



Alan Wolk: “On a macro level, you can say that there are three types of FASTs in the U.S. You have the ones that are tied to media companies, such as Paramount’s Pluto TV, NBCUniversal’s Xumo, and Tubi TV, which is tied to Fox. Those are the three original FASTs in the U.S. They have access to exclusive content from their parent company. Secondly, you have the FASTs that are tied to the OEMs: the Roku Channel, Amazon’s Freevee, Samsung TV Plus, LG Channels, and Vizio WatchFree+. They are at the centre of the device’s interface. And then you also have a lot of independents.”

## Trends

The FAST market continues to change. One of the significant trends is the better integration of Linear and On-Demand, now that media companies negotiate or renegotiate their content rights with better foresight. Viewers who come to a channel and see their movie is already halfway can switch to the AVOD asset in the background. What is the difference between a VOD service that automatically starts a new episode of a series as soon as the viewer has finished watching the previous one and a FAST channel that runs all episodes back-to-back on a linear schedule?

Another trend is a drive to higher quality. Alan Wolk: “Initially, FASTs used whatever they could lay their hands on just to build out their services. As soon as they had more than they needed, they started to curate their channels, bringing in more popular content and getting rid of anything that didn’t perform well. You can no longer conjure up a FAST channel lock, stock, and barrel. You have to get it right.”

To scale up, FASTs increasingly need huge catalogues and now must produce original content to compete for audiences. Freevee, Tubi and Roku started to commission original content in 2021. Today, almost every media brand in the U.S. has a FAST channel with original content, some even with live content.

*“You can no longer conjure up a FAST channel lock, stock, and barrel. You have to get it right.”*

**- Alan Wolk -**







More players enter the FAST field, each with their specific motives, hopes and questions.

Broadcasters think, “I have loyal viewers and my content is widely recognized for its quality. Can I use FAST to reinvent myself and re-linearize my back catalogue online for new, targeted audiences?”

SVOD service providers ask themselves, “Can FAST be my way to get viewers hooked on old hit series so that they stay on or return to my SVOD platform?”

Connected device manufacturers wonder, “Can I boost sales and compensate slim margins with ad revenues by offering hundreds of FAST channels on my device?”

*“The beauty of ad-based revenues is that you do not have to deal with the hassle of subscription payments.”*

Premium brands and media businesses also venture into the FAST space looking for an effective way to implement or diversify a cross-media strategy.

Meanwhile, many smaller new kids on the block are trying to make a FAST buck with their niche content.

Starting up a single FAST channel as a content owner seems simple enough. After all, FAST channels are linear television without the complex infrastructure of traditional TV. Besides, the beauty of ad-based revenues is that you do not have to deal with the hassle of subscription payments.

According to Tony Huidor, Chief Technology and Product Officer for Cinedigm, “All you need is 120 hours of content with a refresh rate of 15 to 20%, so about 200 to 300 hours of programming for the first year.” You could also do with an OTT app compatible with a great many devices, a place to store your video content and a lightweight video player. Even finding advertisers to monetize your content is as easy as pie with programmatic ad buying and dynamic ad insertion. No need to have your own commercial department or tight connections with a commercial partner. No need for experience with commercial proposals and negotiations.

Anyway, you don’t have to launch your own platform or add your FAST channels to your own app. You can create and distribute your channels on third-party platforms, so you don’t have to build your audience from scratch. All kinds of middle players can help you with the technicalities. Connectors can help you get your FAST channel out there on the EPGs of the big platforms powered by FAST channel aggregators, smart TV manufacturers, telecom operators, etc. Either you let the platform sell the advertising, and you agree on a revenue share, or you and the platform each monetize your own part.

*“All you need is 120 hours of content with a refresh rate of 15 to 20%, so about 200 to 300 hours of programming for the first year.”*

**- Tony Huidor -**





But it is not all rainbows and unicorns in the FAST realm. The FAST environment is a crowded place, where the fight for EPG slots and eyeballs is fierce, and margins are tight and unforgiving.

While we can set up as many FAST channels as we want about whatever content, the fact that viewers increasingly disperse across platforms implies that we need to get our channels on multiple platforms. Getting them onto the larger ones that ensure us the advertising revenues we need is challenging, so we must be creative with additional ways to build an audience while keeping a tight grip on costs.





When looking to build your audience at minimum cost, programming FAST channels may turn out to be more complex than you had hoped. Important choices need to be made.

### **1. How will you engage the viewers knowing that erratic programming won't work and that you need to promote your content?**

- How will you deal with the challenging process of creating linear channels if hiring professional schedulers is not economically viable?
- Do you have a four to six-hour playlist that repeats itself – as was the case in the early days of FAST – or do you go with the trend of scheduling the entire day, only repeating a limited part or nothing at all? Do you want to **schedule on the clock** with every episode of a series starting at the same time, so your viewers grow accustomed and even attached to that rhythm? Or do you prefer to **replicate SVOD binge-watching**, scheduling multiple episodes of the same series back to back? Note that FAST channels increasingly use the same techniques as traditional broadcast TV, programming by dayparts and scheduling on the clock with fixed blocks for appointment viewing.
- If your channels are watched in a larger region, your schedule and programming may need to adapt to different time zones, locations, languages, and viewing habits, so your channels resonate with different audiences. In fragmented regions like Europe, you need to localize your content, brands, and marketing, which means that if you want to scale up, you will need to **automate channel creation in multiple languages**.



- Will you carry **live feeds** – such as news and weather reports or sports events – for some part of the day, and do you need to ensure the schedule is continuous around start and end points that may not always be predictable?
- How will you optimize your **promos and trailers** to capture audiences and get them to return to your channel?
- How will you organize your secondary events that announce upcoming programmes, give parental guidance warnings, and other messages?
- How can you **combine FAST and AVOD** in a compelling user experience? Your service could start a playlist from the beginning once selected, or the viewer could have the possibility to begin binge-watching a series they stumbled upon in the linear schedule.
- To steal a march on competition, you also need to **pivot quickly** based on the time of year, events, holidays, and movie releases, putting up and taking down themed channels.

## 2. Given the pressure on the margins, how can you do more with less?

- How can you easily put up **additional channels**? How quickly can you scale your service up or down?
- How can you schedule them with **minimal effort**?
- How do you **rapidly find the right content** in your library?
- How do you parse, group and sequence the content so you can, say, **automatically fill thematic channels** (e.g., crime, comedies, royals, all episodes of Dr Who, ...) or pop-up channels around an event, such as a new movie release?



- How can you effortlessly prepare and assign the right video, sound, subs and dubs to the right transmissions?
- How easily can you **repurpose** existing material?
- How can you **automate segmentation** for commercial breaks and promotion time?
- How will you **schedule your ad breaks**? Soon this will have to resemble how it is done on traditional broadcast TV. Interrupting content midsentence is no longer accepted by the viewer. Often, you will need to program your ad breaks as dictated by the platforms your channel is on.

And then you have all those other technical headaches and a longer-than-expected list of operational capabilities you need:

- How will you send out your **commercial slots** and expect the partner to fill them?
- How do you schedule content **3 to 6 months in advance**, before you have the contract or the material files?
- How strong are your scheduling and editing capabilities when **unplanned changes and updates** are needed (e.g. popularity drop, discontinued show, ...)?
- How will you deal with all the secondary events and overlays?
- How do you **automate distribution** to multiple downstream platforms?



All this needs to be done to high standards as the FAST market has matured. **There is no longer room for strangely mixed programming, chaotic scheduling, mind-numbing repetitions of the same ads, or poorly directed on-channel promotions.** Aggregators and platforms have raised the bar, combining the familiar, professional programming of linear TV schedules with the AI-assisted, personalized user interface of the streaming world.

### **3. How will you avoid the legal pitfalls when scheduling multiple FAST channels at speed with a limited headcount?**

When scheduling at speed, are you always aware of all the copyrights and other IP rights underlying a particular piece of content? Do you always remember to wait for permission? Are you always sure your schedules are compliant in the diverse territories, for instance, concerning parental guidance rules? How big is the risk that, sooner or later, you monetize content in ways, on screens and in time slots you don't have the rights for? And how will you ensure the commercials will stay within the allowed times? The pitfalls are many, and errors are quickly made under pressure.

**Not having a proper rights management system can have significant negative impacts on your company's finances, operations, and reputation.** Apart from the costly legal disputes, damages, operational inefficiencies, and disorganized libraries, you may miss out on great opportunities to monetize your content or close interesting licensing or syndication deals.





Even if it seems like a good idea to jump on the FAST bandwagon, there are many things to consider. First of all, you have to know your market and your catalogue. You need a different approach for original content and licensed content. Will you partner with existing FAST channels or strike a deal to be part of a curated channel, or is it more advantageous to launch your own channel and attract people to your owned-and-operated platforms? And how will you stand out from the FAST crowd knowing that the big aggregator services have hundreds of channels on them?

The fact is that creating a FAST channel that is well thought-out, approaches the quality of a traditional TV schedule, stays within rights and budget, engages the viewer, and creates viewer loyalty, could quickly turn out to be more work than you bargained (and budgeted) for.

**We asked a panel of experts to throw light on this and share their insights and experience.** The debate took place on 4 May 2023 and was moderated by Alan Wolk, co-founder and lead analyst of TVREV, the analyst group covering changes in TV and media.



The panel included:



### **Tony Huidor**

#### **CHIEF TECHNOLOGY AND PRODUCT OFFICER FOR CINEDIGM**

Cinedigm manages a portfolio of about 60,000 films and television episodes, distributing across every major TVOD, AVOD and SVOD platform in North America. They have about two dozen FAST channels.



### **Mary Ann Halford**

#### **PARTNER AT ALTMAN SOLON**

Altman Solon is the world's largest M&E strategy consultancy. For over 25 years, Mary Ann has been actively building businesses in the media and entertainment industry in the US, Europe, and internationally.



### **Rebecca Twardy**

#### **STRATEGIC ACCOUNT DIRECTOR FOR MEDIAGENIX**

Rebecca has over 20 years of experience in broadcast and media, during which she worked with broadcasters in the FAST space as they launched new channels and crafted their go-to-market strategies.



### **Michel Beke**

#### **PRODUCT AMBASSADOR FOR MEDIAGENIX**

Michel has been active in the media sector for over 30 years, following its evolution in close contact with the international MEDIAGENIX customer base.

Here is what the panelists said concerning the three key challenges we elaborated on in the previous chapter.

## **How will you engage the viewers and stand out from the FAST crowd?**

**Michel Beke:** “While content, content, content is the mantra in the media world, with FAST it is also stand out, stand out, stand out. There is already a lot you can do with programming and scheduling strategies. The diversity of how audiences consume media will define how you schedule. If you have episodes with a continued storyline, you can schedule an episode a day at the same time of day so that the viewers get into the habit of tuning in. Or you schedule a number of episodes in a row to cater to the viewer’s binge-watching proclivity. Or you shuffle the episodes any way you think fit. The traditional art of programming and crafting a linear schedule is not lost on FAST channel owners.”

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**Mary Ann Halford:** “There are a lot of places where you can get your content out in unique, interesting and cost-effective ways to make audiences aware that you exist and bring them in to watch your channels. You should leverage avenues like YouTube, TikTok, or Instagram. When you have a known brand, people search for it on YouTube and other social channels.”

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**Rebecca Twardy:** “Social media are a good avenue for promotion. You can put short- and mid-form up on YouTube to drive viewers to your FAST channels.

But audience engagement is also about being able to pivot as soon as you see your content is underperforming on certain platforms. You might get better results from a handful of other smaller, niche platforms, which will get you better-targeted advertising. But it is really important that you know your niche audience and take the opportunities to advertise towards those niches.”



**Michel Beke:** “The lower cost of streaming makes it possible to cater to niche audiences. But can you also tie the commercials to that audience? That will be the golden bullet. Otherwise, you are just putting more content out there. Tying the audience to the niche will determine the sustainability of niche channels.”

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**Mary Ann Halford:** “**You have to think outside the box** to put this together. Every channel owner has interesting opportunities to figure out how to leverage what is unique about their content and reach other audiences.”

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**Tony Huidor:** “We feel there is an **opportunity to tap into underserved markets**. A lot of multicultural content has yet to make it to the U.S. and FAST. We have an Asian channel called AsianCrush, an anime channel called RetroCrush, and we recently made a deal with Fubu, the African American lifestyle brand focused on hip-hop from the nineties. We are working on an African American theme channel; we feel that area is underserved. There is also a huge demand for South-Korean drama.

Last year, we launched the Elvis Channel fairly quickly to have it coincide with the release of an Elvis movie. The fastest we have launched a channel was three to four weeks. We had already built the channel but had to deliver it to a new platform and expand the content programming block we were delivering. But the launching time is probably closer to three months on average as most platforms have a window for launching new channels.”





**Mary Ann Halford:** “Cinedigm’s Elvis Channel is a good example of how **it helps to have known content or a known brand**. Elvis is a huge brand, and launching the channel simultaneously with the release of an Elvis movie gave it a lot of tailwinds to ride. Successful FAST channels are also often based on what were once popular television series. People can, for instance, watch 300 or more episodes of Baywatch.

Cinedigm have assiduously focused on **building and developing channels with a unique point of view, audience, and content angle**. When you have those elements, you are in a much better position to promote your channels because you know how to connect the audience to that content, and you have a sense of knowing how to reach an outer audience.

The large companies who build out their bundles with linear FAST channels may also use traditional television commercials and out-of-home advertising, such as ads on bus stops.”

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**Tony Huidor:** “Indeed, **what is old is new again**. At Cinedigm, we use traditional TV broadcasts practices for promotion, with preview clips ‘Later on Tonight’, and ‘Premiering on Friday’. We have ‘Movie of the Week’. We use a variety of traditional standard programming techniques, and we can do **cross-channel promotion** with all the channels that we manage. If you’re on, say, the Bob Ross channel, we can promote watching the Dove channel at 18:05. But each platform is different. We may have a platform where our family channel does well, but our horror channel does better on another platform. You need to consider that each platform’s user base is different.”



**Mary Ann Halford:** “A lot depends on where you sit in the paradigm. Take Pluto, Tubi or ViX. They have a very wide distribution, allowing them to curate and add new channels regularly, depending on feedback from the market. If you are your own device, it is harder to distribute outside of your walled garden. You won’t find Samsungs’ suite of channels on LG or Vizio TV sets. And if you are a single channel, it is important that you have the kind of relationships that can get you the distribution you need. In the U.S., you will need to **aim for 30 distribution endpoints**. If you are carried within the likes of, say, Pluto, Tubi, Samsung or Vizio, that will drive the economics for your business.”

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**Tony Huidor:** “Keep in mind that with every feed you deliver to an endpoint, there is a cost attached. I have 175 different feeds going on at any one time. If you have two dozen channels and 30 endpoints, not every platform will take your channel, and not every platform will make money. **So it becomes a juggling act trying to get wide distribution while minimizing costs**. That is why we spend much time optimizing where we deliver. And as the business gets more and more expensive, we must constantly look at performance to see whether it merits keeping a channel on a particular platform.”

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**Alan Wolk:** “**Measuring the KPIs is so important**. First of all, for the content owners. When they negotiate or renegotiate a deal with a platform that wants to carry their content, they want to be able to show how many views their content has on other platforms. On the advertising side, it is a huge problem because a lot of the advertising is inserted programmatically. In traditional broadcasting, the advertisers are used to knowing exactly where their ad ran, on what show, on what ad pod during the show, and even between what other ads. And now all they get is: ‘It ran on Roku, last week.’”



**Tony Huidor:** “The core KPIs you will want to measure are the number of plays, the number of minutes viewed, and—from an engagement perspective – the monthly active users. From an advertising point of view, you want impressions and, obviously, revenue. Minutes viewed is becoming the equivalent of a Nielsen share or Nielsen point. It shows engagement and growth.”

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**Rebecca Twardy:** “Measurement now, especially for FAST, is like the Wild, Wild West in that you have a really small amount of information and many people that have some of the numbers. Some are keeping it close to the vest. It’s different from the old days when you could see what number one, two, and three in the ratings was. You have to rely on really granular and specific data that you might get from the platforms; In a lot of instances, the syndication partners aren’t necessarily forthcoming with all of that data.”

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**Michel Beke:** “I had hoped that measurements of the views on commercials would be relatable to the platform’s viewership, but the commercials increasingly are either published by the content owner or the intermediate platform or dynamically inserted. There are so many different ways of doing things that **it is tough to aggregate the numbers.**”



**Mary Ann Halford:** “Right now, **we have measurement stew**. You can be distributing to up to 30 different endpoints, and each of these distribution points can have different ways of measuring how your channel is performing. Some are robust in what they provide. Others are very vague. What is a session, for instance? If somebody looks at something for five seconds, is that a session? **We need better definitions.**”

The fact that channels use various playout systems that also provide other measurements complicates it even more. There is a tremendous demand in the advertising industry for a common currency. The challenges to arrive at a currency like we used to have with Nielsen and others are enormous, but we need to get there sooner rather than later.”

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**Tony Huidor:** “**If you control the CDN or the ad server, you can work with that data.** We developed our own reporting dashboard and backing called Matchpoint Insights. We import whatever performance and revenue reports we get from the OTT platforms, normalize the data, clean it, scrub it, visualize it and then look at channel performance at platform level, down to the title. So, we have tools to measure channels and report back to content owners and licensors about what royalties they are due to receive based on the performance of their content.”

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**Rebecca Twardy:** “In the meantime, you could also **look for social cues and other forms of popularity data** and get an idea of what’s airing in other places. Certain companies track programmes on different streaming channels and platforms to see where the eyeballs are going.”





## How can you do more with less? With automation and AI?

**Tony Huidor:** “The secret sauce to succeed in FAST is that you need a strong VOD catalogue that is clean and ready for OTT broadcast. Once the channel has gone live, maintaining and updating it is ongoing work that needs to be built into the channel’s planning and management. Take the refresh rates. Some platforms have staff who monitor the refresh rates for the channels on their service, and they push those rates stringently.”

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**Tony Huidor:** “We developed our Matchpoint platform specifically for powering our FAST channel business. **Automation is crucial to be competitive**, and we spend a lot of effort on reducing costs and making scheduling easier. We use AI for content compliance, visual QC and auto-editing—to find points from bad masters, slate, black frames, and FBI warnings. We also use AI for creating ad breaks and for contextual tagging. We send out the entire catalogue to Iris TV, and they send us tags, which we pass on to the advertisers.

And yet, **all our channels are still curated by humans**. That is because you do need an understanding of the content and the various techniques. But when dealing with two dozen channels and tens of thousands of titles, no human can know every title on the catalogue and what is the best fit. We have spent a lot of time with metadata and contextual tagging to get as much information as possible about a show and make it searchable. This makes it easier for programmers to search for the right content when they are looking to fill a particular slot within the schedule. We are exploring AI-based programming, but that is still in the pilot stage.”

**Michel Beke:** “You need to find the balance between cost and quality, and you can indeed bridge the gap with metadata and human or artificial intelligence. With automation, you can speed up manual work making it easier to explore the catalogues, verify how many times you can run a show, and churn out the channels. For automated scheduling, however, there is still a lack of metadata. You cannot simply schedule genre-based because what is an action movie? There are so many flavours and so many differences between target audiences. You could integrate metadata providers into the system, tag feedback from social media to find trends, define key identifiers to find similar content, and automate part of the scheduling tasks. That is work in progress.”

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**Rebecca Twardy:** “The viewer experience on your channel can make or break your brand, so there is still a lot to be done before you can make operations touchless. You can use certain parameters for curation, but when it comes to driving new users to FAST channels, we’re not ready with AI yet.”



## How can you avoid legal pitfalls?

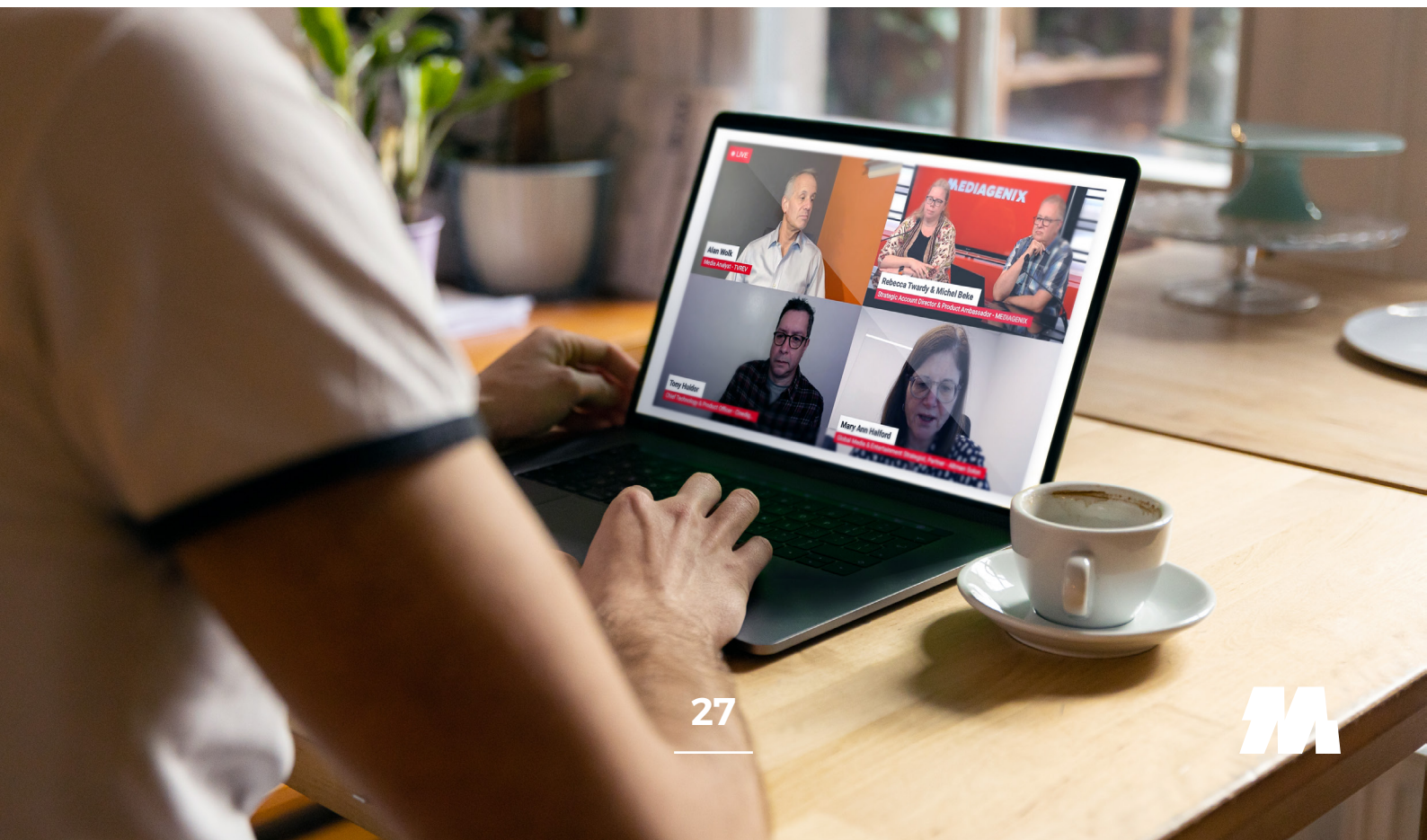
**Alan Wolk:** “Remember ‘The Bad News Bears’, the American comedy film about a baseball team starring Walter Matthau? As it was made in the seventies, there is a lot of inappropriate language. So, when it now runs on a service, and advertisers have put their ads on it, tagged for kids, they are not amused when Walter Matthau starts cursing up a storm on screen. With IRIS TV’s IRIS\_ID, buying platforms can avoid such surprises by **determining the content’s brand suitability by means of extended content IDs.**”

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**Tony Huidor:** “We depend on AI to have our content checked for profanity, nudity, and explicit content.”

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**Michel Beke:** “It is not always that easy to know whether your schedule conflicts with any applicable parental guidance rules. The lenience with which content is rated can vary significantly from region to region and between different channels and platforms. **These challenges are much like the ones facing television channels.**”



So yes, you enter a fierce war for eyeballs where survival depends on your agility and ability to operate at minimal cost with fewer resources to get the work done. You can either be daunted or see it as an excellent opportunity. If you go for the golden eggs, here are the rules of thumb that will help you along the way to success.

### **1. Be fast on your feet and grow as you go**

Be sure you can get up and running quickly with a short Time-to-Value and without high upfront costs and infrastructure requirements. **With FAST channels, you need to be able to experiment and fail fast.** You need to scale dynamically, spinning channels up or down and utilizing less or more FAST platforms as required. You should adapt to the requirements of new opportunities and introduce new best-in-class tools into your ecosystem without significantly impacting the existing operational capabilities.

Use an open platform that readily connects to your existing tech stack. Scalable SaaS solutions will allow you to maximize your operational scalability and align your cost structure with your growth path. Go with partners that offer the solutions you really need and can scale with you.

### **2. Do more with less effort: automate and manage by exception**

One of the key issues companies face when starting FAST channels is the manual labour that goes into setting up channels, scheduling content and managing the end-to-end process.

And yet, if you have enough content at the ready and the tools to easily specify and configure rights, material, and language needs for your channels, **you should be able to set up and launch additional FAST channels in less than a day.**





Your tools should have intuitive UIs that can be readily configured to the task at hand and enable you to:

- easily collect and categorize content;
- create a VOD publication schedule;
- schedule an entire linear channel;
- verify rights;
- verify material availability;
- prepare playlists.

Scheduling the channel for weeks and months in advance shouldn't take more than a day either if you have the tools to:

- easily make sequenced collections of suitable content;
- create a structured schedule with formats planned in bulk, preassigned to content;
- copy episodes and any content sequence automatically forward, filling the grid with a few clicks;
- plan the content with or without the material — this is assuming you can track the delivery of the material and automatically assign it to the transmissions; the right dubs and subs should be added automatically based on the channel settings;
- let commercial breaks and promotion time coincide with the segmentations already available on the material;
- make the playlists continuous across days to have a loop of 24-hour schedules;
- add interstitials or stretch buffer clips where needed to ensure fixed start times.



And what about AI and machine learning? You could use AI to review previous schedules and automatically fill future time slots. **You could have entire FAST schedules automatically generated with a combination of business rules and machine learning**, taking historical viewership and ad revenue statistics into the equation. You would just need to apply filters and specify which value criteria are important. Based on these criteria, the algorithm calculates a weighted value score for all available content. Considering the structural requirements – such as already planned content, fixed starting time for episodes of series, and absence of gaps or overlaps – it creates the schedule in a matter of seconds. You can always decide to finetune the schedule by having a list of recommended content generated, for instance through ML-based ratings predictions that are combined with other value criteria and filters. In the meantime, the algorithm will keep learning which choices result in the best schedule.

**AI-assisted or not, one system should manage the workflow for all your channels**, from the master plan to the transmission plan with time slots for programmes, series, trailers, promotions, branding and commercials, right down to the fully-fledged playlist complete with secondary events and graphics.

That's for programming and scheduling. But how to manage the laborious end-to-end process from ingest and archive to publication? How do you get the media asset material in? How do you integrate MAM and Playout? How do you make sure what is in the schedule is also in Playout? How do you go about Quality Control? How do you strategically manage ad placement to maximize value for advertisers and allow dynamic alignment with their campaigns?

It all takes away time you could put to better use elsewhere.



You can solve this with **a single shared and consistent process** that is streamlined around one source of truth for content, rights, planning and promotions.

Know where your touchpoints are, standardize and automate so you can **rely on touchless operations and manage by exception**. A holistic view of time, effort, and costs should provide insights into inefficiencies. The intelligence captured along the way should help you make better decisions and drive incremental improvements.

AI and ML products can either help with small individual tasks or be combined into essential tools that help lift the entire content supply chain to new levels of operational and strategic excellence.

### **3. Ensure audience engagement**

To attract viewers to your channels, you first of all need to have the right content quickly at the ready. This requires powerful and flexible tools to search your content library and find the best possible content for your target audience while keeping track of the rights, costs, materials and availabilities for the FAST channels in question.

To really engage your viewers, you schedule that content cleverly, **combining the flexibility and binge-watching appeal of streaming with the appointment-viewing strengths of traditional broadcasting**. Catering for binge-watching requires capabilities to automatically group and sequence content and schedule episodes back-to-back. You can choose to schedule your series in the original episode order or – if you want to rekindle interest in old series and you have the proper metadata – match the topic of the episodes with current events or the time of year, such as Christmas.



Having fixed clock times in the scheduling day is equally important. After all, we are all creatures of habit. We get used to tuning in at a fixed time. If you can lock start times in your schedule, you can quickly achieve the kind of rhythm in the schedule that encourages the formation of viewing habits.

Most scheduling strategies for FAST require capabilities to **copy episodes and other content sequences forward so the sequence automatically continues for weeks and months**, filling the grid in seconds. Viewers get hooked more quickly if you schedule episodes and seasons with a natural pattern and predictable frequency (daily, weekly, ...).

Ever more FAST channels are incorporating live feeds and live studio events into their programming to build a loyal viewer base. It is true that if you can punctuate your schedule with news, weather or traffic information at regular intervals, your viewers are more likely to stay tuned. Live shows offer high value, too. That requires coordination with production and quickly switching to the right source or studio.

Now that you have great content scheduled in a clever way, you need to attract viewers and drive return visits to your channel. **Keep them informed and warmed up for upcoming programmes with trailers, promotions and secondary events.** Ideally, you should be able to plan promotions as cross-channel campaigns, monitoring and optimizing their performance until the last minute. These campaigns could run automatically, manually or any combination of both, but always based on predicted ratings and campaign targets and in line with regulations and context-sensitive restrictions.



It is good to know that for your many secondary events—such as ‘coming up’ messages — **the promotional texts can be automatically ‘calculated’** based on programme and scheduling metadata (title, description, channel, broadcast date and time ... ) and that any changes to the schedule automatically cause the texts to be updated.

#### **4. Simplify and unify processes across VOD and Linear**

Simplify your processes so you can **schedule many channels simultaneously**, with the right localized and relevant content.

Be sure you can distribute your services to a wide variety of FAST platforms and any additional linear and on-demand streaming or traditional platforms. Do this with **unified workflows that flexibly adapt to the specifics of the distribution channels**.

One platform may allow 54 minutes of content per hour, and another 56 minutes. A platform may limit the number of characters in EPG descriptions. All this needs to be managed thoughtfully and autonomously, with as few manual interventions as possible.

While many FAST services focus on linear scheduling, it has become best practice to **manage linear and nonlinear together**. With unified processes and extensive scheduling functionality, you can have a dynamic operational environment far better equipped to efficiently manage linear and nonlinear rights, schedules, and operations.

When linear and VOD operate on the same real-time data, you will, for instance, always know what is available when to which regions or countries across the world.

## 5. And whatever you do, stay clear of trouble

Scheduling FAST channels requires automated, multi-level verification of complex rights, restrictions and obligations, **with a granularity that keeps you away from trouble and greatly facilitates content repurposing and repackaging** (incl. royalty management and music rights clearances).

You should at all times keep real-time insight into what is available for planning while you effortlessly deal with underlying rights, royalties and revenue shares. That asks for easy capture of rights data with pluggable web apps that **facilitate task-based contributions from various parties along the content supply chain.**

With business rules you can automate verification of VOD and linear rights types, and check rights for runs, periods, regions and devices while you keep costs in control and amortizations on track.

Your scheduling system should not only ensure your scheduling is in line with licence conditions but also with regulations, such as **parental guidance restrictions and commercial payload checks.** It should also enable you to easily comply with reporting obligations, such as asrun and copyright reporting.

Note that it is not always easy to know whether your schedule conflicts with any applicable parental guidance rules, for instance. The lenience with which content is rated can vary significantly from region to region and between different channels and platforms. You should be able to easily configure the criteria to define the parental rating for every regulator and document the scenes and extracts that underlie the ruling.

With all that, it becomes clear that if we are to minimize the human effort, we certainly need a system that checks the stock and the available rights, automatically schedules content per those rights and prepares playlists complete with commercials, promos, and secondary events with all the right breaks in the right places. We need supporting functionality for search, content grouping, costs, auto timing and padding, and so on.

But there is more to it. **We must take the content supply chain to the next level and make it smart and touchless.** In an ideal (future) world, the system does not halt whenever a decision needs to be taken. It should be smart enough to make those decisions by itself. Especially when you have a lot of plates spinning, you cannot be bothered to check every transmission and click the button every time the process should enter a new stage. Ideally, **you should be able to start fully automated channels with one click of a master button**, lean back and only manage the exceptions that matter.

The system itself should answer all questions that pop up along the way. Is there no contract for that content? Let it schedule similar content. Do you have two movie formats in the database, one with three segments and one with four? Let it pick the one that best accommodates a standard volume of promos and commercials. Whether you set up one FAST channel, or twenty or one hundred, whether they are about golf, football, or the art of motor maintenance, **it is vital to minimize their operational cost.** Typically, one commercial engine is used for all channels. Revenues are measured and evaluated on channel level, and channels are put up or taken down depending on how the balance shifts.

Taking a step back to look at the big picture, we see that the internet has enabled viewers to pull media companies to the type of content experiences they want. And now, FAST is further enriching a mix of business models and viewer experiences that will coexist on multiple platforms. For viewers, the ultimate dream is to switch on any connected device and have a set of automatically curated and personalized channels. That, too, will come fast.





Before you launch a FAST channel ... ensure you will be able to:

**1. Spin channels up and down fast and easily:**

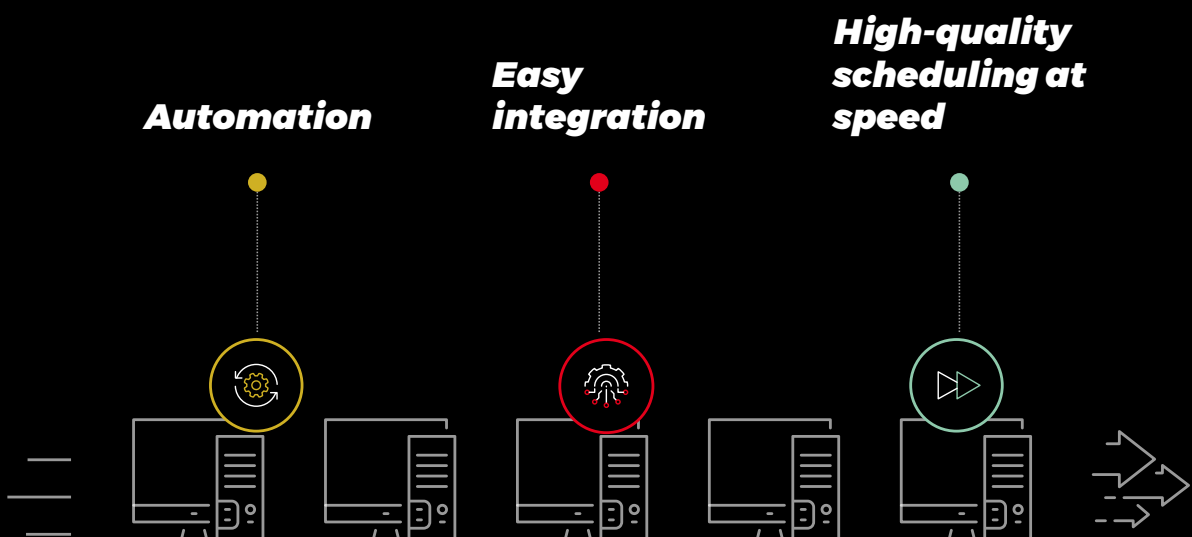
- Easily collect and categorize content
- Create a VOD publication schedule
- Schedule an entire linear channel
- Verify rights
- Verify material availability
- Prepare playlists

**2. Create an engaging offer for your viewers with:**

- Structured qualitative linear channels
  - With a natural pattern
  - Weekly, daily, back-to-back
  - Episode order
  - Fixed start times
- Live news, sports, weather...
- Correctly planned promotions
- Informative secondary events automation

**3. Run the channel with minimum effort keeping costs and rights under control with automation and powerful user tools for:**

- Material planning (video, dubs and subs, plan with material or plan without and track delivery)
- Secondary events with calculated text
- Rights verification
- Promotion planning
- Episode planning
- Playlist timing



#### 4. Avoid legal pitfalls with business rules and reporting by having:

- Rights verification on all content
  - VOD and linear rights types
  - Runs and periods
  - Region and device checks
  - Costs and amortizations
- Commercial payload checks
- Parental guidance restrictions
- Copyright reporting
- Asrun reporting

We hope you have found some of our pointers for life in the FAST lane useful. We would love to tell you more, and help your business do more with less. Get in touch with us today!

**Credits:**

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