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SBS quickly on the scene with Inmarsat's BGAN

About three years ago SBS Broadcasting, the company behind Dutch commercial tv-stations SBS6, NET 5 and Veronica first started using an Inmarsat BGAN-system. As a flexible solution for ad hoc satellite communications BGAN allows reporters working for Hart van Nederland, Shownieuws and other popular programs to quickly arrive on to the scene and instantly start relaying footage to SBS's production company in Amsterdam.

SBS first linked up with 2connect-IT at a demo of the Inmarsat BGAN satellite system by the satcom service provider, a little over three years ago. "From the outset we were impressed by the system's straightforwardness", says Ewoud Flameling, Chief Technical Facilities at SBS Productions. "What we had in mind was reporters abroad working on their own, as true one man bands. For that to happen, the system for relaying the footage had to be truly 'plug & play'. Thanks to the accompanying video software it really takes only two or three steps to get a news item to Amsterdam."

Its compactness is another key characteristic of the BGAN system. Says Flameling: "Sometimes it is paramount to be on the scene really quickly, as was the case just after the recent plane crash in Tripoli. The quickest way to travel is with just hand baggage. The BGAN system fits neatly into a small rucksack and is therefore a truly 'fly-away' satellite system." An additional advantage of BGAN is that it does not require a broadcast permit, which means it can be employed anywhere without time consuming paperwork.

It was the codec provided with BGAN, however, that really clinched the deal for SBS when they were looking for a new satellite system. "It is the codec that determines the image quality of this type of broadcasts," Flameling explains. "The items our people relay simply have to be of consistently good quality." The video encoding 2connect-IT provides is based on the M-Link video software developed by British company Livewire. Flameling: "M-Link really is invaluable."

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Inmarsat BGAN

Support

Soon after the demo by 2connect-IT the purchase of the satellite communication system got the green light at SBS. "From the outset the support by 2connect-IT has been very good," says Flaming. "Initially there were a few teething troubles and user problems, but they were resolved very efficiently. The help I got was to the point and friendly, even at those times when I called in the middle of the night. Good support is indispensable. An added bonus is that 2connect-IT handles our satellite account, which means that we only have one invoice to pay." The all-in-one solution consists of a high-end laptop with Avid Media Composer as the editing platform and the M-Link software for practically lossless file compression. "A three to four minute item can easily be forty to sixty MB in size," Flaming explains the need for compression. In the absence of fixed or mobile internet, after prior compression BGAN is deployed to send on the footage.

The Inmarsat system does not require the booking of a 'slot' prior to the actual relaying of data. This advantage comes at a price, however: the availability of a communication channel cannot be guaranteed. "It rarely happens that there is no channel available, however," SBS's Chief Technical Facilities observes. "As far as I know we have never been pushed off a channel during a live broadcast."

Deployment

Although SBS deploys the Inmarsat system most often in countries like Afghanistan, Iraq and Russia, where a stable mobile or fixed internet connection for relaying footage is frequently not available, BGAN also shown at events like the Eurovision Song Contest and Michael Jackson's funeral.

During the Soccer World Cup in South-Africa the satellite communication system saw heavy use, too. Flaming: "Hart van Nederland was the only national broadcaster present at the Oranjecamping, the number one South-African campsite for Dutch soccer aficionados supporting our national team. We dispatched an experienced reporter who knew the country well and was able to go into the slum areas to send his reports from there."

Reporting from South-Africa by SBS came in three forms. On a daily basis items were shot that, after encoding through M-Link, were relayed via satellite or the internet.



On occasion broadcasting was semi-live. "For semi-live broadcasting we shoot some footage just prior to airtime and during our broadcast continue shooting in the same manner. In those cases you don't actually see any quality difference between the two types of footage. We use this approach if we want to be absolutely sure the material makes it to the actual broadcast. A number of times we really broadcast live. Our bit of bad luck there was that we turned out to be under a flight path with our BGAN-terminal, which at times made for unstable connections."

"Within the Netherlands our use of BGAN is a lot more limited," says Flaming. "The abundance of plug-in points for relaying material nationally means that we just use the M-Link software for compression and let our terminals stay idle." According to Flaming M-Link's importance will only grow with the gradual phasing out of plug-in points in the Netherlands that has been announced. From then on M-Link will be deployed for the encoding, after which the footage will be relayed via the internet. "A fast upload in an internet café should be no problem," Flaming expects. For live broadcasts Flaming still prefers satellite as opposed to, for example, broadband mobile networks. "While mobile internet is booming, mobile operators do not offer any bandwidth guarantees. If people in the streets all of a sudden start sending each other pictures and videos at broadcast time, you're in trouble. Using satellite you can prearrange your bandwidth and have connectivity guaranteed."

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About SBS Broadcasting

SBS Broadcasting B.V. (SBS) is a subsidiary of ProSiebenSat.1 Media AG and owner of Dutch commercial tv-station NET 5, SBS 6 and Veronica. SBS also owns Veronica Uitgeverij, publishers of, among others, tv-guide Veronica Magazine. Veronica Litho, SBS Productions and teletext companies SBS Text VOF and Veronica/Disney XD VOF are subsidiaries.

About 2connect-IT

2connect-IT can look back on many years of experience within the industry of wireless and mobile communication and has a profound knowledge of the market and its requirements.

With this expertise, 2connect-IT can advise you on all aspects of wireless / mobile communication such as pre-sales consultancy, hardware, software as well as training, support and repair services. As 2connect-IT is a full service provider, competitive services and airtime rates for all Inmarsat services are offered.

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