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Fibre to the Home Conference showcases race to the digital future

25 February, 2013 | By Neal Romanek

London's ExCel Centre hosted a gathering last week to discuss issues that may not have been the most glamorous, but are some of the most important for the media industries.

The [Fibre To The Home Conference](#) is an annual event run by the FTTH Council Europe, an organization whose mission is to accelerate the availability of fibre-based, ultra-high-speed networks for consumers and businesses.

The FTTH Council was founded in 2004 by Alcatel-Lucent, Cisco, Corning, Emtelle and OFS and now has over 150 members. This year marks the 10th year of the FTTH Conference and the first time it was held in London.

An ultra-high-speed data infrastructure has become a vital component of growing economies, and is critical for growth of the media sector. Fast exchange of big digital files is essential in all parts of the production workflow, and with facilities increasingly interconnected internationally, the quality of a country's data infrastructure affects its partnership with facilities in other countries.

2013 has been seen as the year that 4K video becomes a major format for production and exhibition. Reliable ultra-high-speed fibre networks can reduce the cost of distribution to cinemas and allow more flexible options for screening live or alternative content in cinemas.

Consumption of 4K in the home has become a central topic of discussion across the media industry, and there is general agreement that getting 4K video to the home on a large scale will be impossible without a sophisticated fibre optic distribution system. 4K "cinema in the home" will profoundly change the way movies are distributed and the way viewers consume content.

Interactive and transmedia content also rely on data infrastructure and as productions move increasingly cross-platform and become more sophisticated, high speed distribution networks must be available to bring them to the consumer.

Among European nations, the UK ranks at the bottom of fibre connectivity, beside Germany and Italy. Throughout the conference sessions, no criticism was spared for British Telecom and the British approach to building a 21st century data infrastructure. Despite being invited, BT's

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presence at the conference was minimal, despite being invited to participate.

One discussion directly addressed the problems with creating a UK-wide fibre network and the creative solutions small companies have employed to deliver fibre. It was agreed that delay is a danger to the UK economy. Malcolm Corbett of INCA (Independent Networks Cooperative Association) said, "The goal is to get rid of bandwidth as a barrier. If we wait, then I wonder what my 13-year-old son will be doing in 10 years. Will he be working here or in China?"

Mark Collins of CityFibre noted, "In five years time it will be at catastrophic levels if we don't do something now. BT's current operating method is inefficient. It needs to happen now, not in two years time or five years time. We can't wait until we're all absolutely certain there's the demand for it, because then it'll be too late."

Another panel featured a wrap-up panel of CEO's exploring innovative ways different countries have handled the switch to fibre. Panel moderator Richard Jones opened by saying to the room of international delegates: "I am embarrassed about the UK government's response to this conference. I suggest you never come back here."

It was agreed by all the panellists that barriers to wide adoption of fibre are not limited to the UK and that Europe generally lacks a coherent vision of how to proceed. The CEO's were asked how they would reform Europe's fibre connection plans if they could.

Anders Christjansen, CEO of Danish fibre network Waoo!, said that regulations had to be tighter so that networks are made to deliver what they promise. In most countries it is permissible to market a data connection speed and not consistently deliver it. "It's like buying a liter of milk then realizing when you get home there's only half a liter in the bottle." When people start getting the connection speeds they are promised, they will be inclined to go faster connections, because they know what they will be getting.

CEO of Andorra Telecom, Jaume Salvat, said: "The transition to fibre is not a technological project. The objective is not the network, it's serving customers, giving customers a better experience. You have to involve the customer from very beginning. It's worked very well for us. You go faster and spend less money when you do that. The reason we're having take up rates so high is because the customers were involved early."

Murat Erkan, of Turkcell Superonline, which offers 1Gbps connection to 30% of Turkey, said: "In Europe, there is no public awareness. You need to create digital Smart Cities and Smart Homes to show it's valuable to people."

The transformation of Jersey has been one of the great success stories of the fibre to the home transition. Jersey now offers 1Gbps connections to everyone on the island. Jersey Telecom CEO, Graeme Millar said: "We're seeing a much higher uptake than we would've predicted. And it's allowing us to move a step forward. We cannot do the same things we used to. Jersey has been known for financial services, but no one wants to be completely dependent on financial services given the economy. What we're doing is for future generations, but is having benefits for this generation."

Jersey Telecom won this year's FTTH Award for Outstanding Company.

As with the transition to digital cinema, the scale of the



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switch to fibre networks in Europe has often been proportional to the amount of government investment. Sweden has been the model by which other fibre rollouts are measured and careful government assistance has transformed the city.

The FTTH Conference was closed by an address from the Lord Mayor of Stockholm, Margareta Björk. In her address, she said that the Fibre To The Home programme in the city was key to the city's economic success in the midst of a recession. Stockholm has the world's largest fibre network. 90% of households and 100% of businesses have fibre connections. A current housing scheme for the elderly has 9000 seniors with 1GBps connections. Stockholm is also a leader in 4G, with four parallel 4G networks operating and will host next year's FTTH Conference.

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