



● CONVERGING MEDIA

Fuel Cells Promise Big Cost Savings

Sinclair to Test Clean Hydrogen Power Source for Cameras

By Daisy Whitney

Sinclair Broadcast Group intends to power its newsgathering cameras with hydrogen-powered fuel cells instead of batteries as part of its NewsCentral centralcasting venture, which now stretches to 12 of the group's 62 stations.

The camera changeover is a component of Sinclair's larger project to upgrade to more efficient and cost-effective technology for NewsCentral. The station group plans to test the environmentally friendly fuel cells as a replacement for traditional camera batteries at its Sacramento, Calif., CBS affiliate, KOVR-TV, next month before dispatching the fuel cells to the rest of its stations later this year. Sinclair will conduct the fuel cell trial in conjunction with a test of a next-generation camera from Panasonic, the P2.

Jadoo Power Systems of Folsom, Calif., will supply the clean energy source to Hunt Valley, Md.-based Sinclair, which invested the majority of the \$5 million round of financing that Jadoo raised in October. Fuel cells last at least 2½ times longer than the average camera battery, and saving time and money is the goal of NewsCentral, said Del Parks, VP, engineering and operations, with Sinclair. "What we would like is to have the photographer and reporter spend more time in the field covering more stories. That's the whole idea behind NewsCentral," he said.

Sinclair rolled out NewsCentral in October 2002, a centralcasting endeavor that should cut local news costs in half, the company has said. The \$6 million NewsCentral facility in Hunt Valley, with three news studios and three weather studios, allows Sinclair to launch newscasts at its stations that don't carry news, add more newscasts to existing news markets and convert portions of many existing newscasts to NewsCentral.

The fuel cells are also "hot swappable," which means a photographer can switch cells in the middle of an interview and the camera will still run.

Sinclair ponied up for Jadoo because of the technology's potential as well. Batteries are an old technology and advances are minuscule, but the innovations in fuel cells will likely be significant, said Len Ostroff, chief operating officer of Sinclair Ventures. He expects about a 30 percent improvement in fuel cell capability each year.

Fuel cells are easier to use than batteries, he said. "When a photographer is out there in the field and his battery runs dead, he needs to stop the interview and slap a new battery on," he said. "[Photographers] bring four to five batteries on every shoot. They take four to eight hours to recharge. They don't operate well in cold."

Photographers won't face those problems with fuel cells, he said.

KOVR will receive about three fuel cells in February. Sinclair's flagship station in Baltimore, Fox affiliate WBFF-TV, as well its WB affiliate in Baltimore, WNUV-TV, will follow shortly afterward.

Mr. Ostroff expects another three Sinclair markets will also test the fuel cells. "The test will be a kick-the-tire phase. Batteries have been around forever in this business and people need to get comfortable with a [new] technology," he said.

Sinclair will also check out Panasonic's P2 cameras, with the expectation that it will upgrade as they

become available from Panasonic. The P2 camera comes with five P2 slots for Panasonic's memory cards that replace tape cassettes and are the size of a PCMCIA card. That gives the camera the potential to record 90 minutes at DVCPRO, Panasonic said.

Journalists can then plug the card into the Avid NewsCutters that NewsCentral uses and immediately start editing, Mr. Parks said.

Jadoo will introduce the fuel cells to the industry at the National Association of Broadcasters Convention in Las Vegas in April, said Larry Bawden, president and CEO of Jadoo. The company plans to price the system-two hydrides, a fuel cell and a refill station-for under \$3,500. That's comparable to a battery recharger and three batteries, Mr. Ostroff said.

Mr. Bawden said the fuel cell is virtually the same weight and size as an Anton Bauer battery, the most commonly used camera battery, so camera balance remains the same.#

© COPYRIGHT 2004 BY CRAIN COMMUNICATIONS