

OTT Video

Thunderbirds are Go at Synamedia, with metadata makeover

Perhaps through no fault of its own, but the nature of transitioning to a SaaS-based operating model, the launch of Synamedia Go – the modular product suite first unveiled by the video software heavyweight in Q1 2021 – will be forever associated with a plague of delays.

Now, over a year on since Synamedia's May 2022 acquisition of Utelly, the UK-based search and recommendations specialist, the Synamedia Go umbrella looks almost fully rainproof. This followed a relaunch of Synamedia Go at NAB 2022 that evidently revealed a need to buy its way to personalization algorithm clout.

We recall at the time of the deal how Utelly was framed as a perfect fit for the new SaaS approach, and so we suspect the Utelly team would not take kindly to any assertions that the aforementioned launch delays were a result of integration teething problems.

A whistlestop presentation this week walked us through another new-look Synamedia Go suite – Go.Aggregate, Go.Enrich, and Go.Recommend. We notice that the Synamedia Go product page still lists Go.Personalize and Go.Time-shift TV as two additional modules which were omitted from this week's presentation. It is possible that Synamedia marketing is leading with these three flagship services, and offering additional add-on modules as customers' business needs change, rather than having scrapped these two modules entirely.

Of course, we won't rule it out, because Synamedia has quietly canned products in the past.

The three services are all self-explanatory, but there is more firepower under the hood. Importantly, each is available modularly or together as part of a broader platform deployment. If a customer is not using a Synamedia-based video platform, it is possible to use Synamedia Go products without depending on the Synamedia Go Experience Manager, for example, which is a UI module that sits on top of the managing homepage, which includes personalized content recommendations.

Romain Eude, Director of Content Discovery for Synamedia (née founder and CEO of Utelly), broke down the technicalities of the Go suite exclusively for attendees this week, in what was framed as a pre-IBC teaser trailer.

As with any personalization plot, the story starts with metadata. A great user experience can only be achieved with great metadata, according to Eude, otherwise it's just "garbage in, garbage out."

That is why the first module has been coined Go.Enrich. The metadata enrichment process is designed to transform basic metadata descriptions into "super-rich" experiences. The big picture, according to Eude, is that Synamedia takes raw metadata, runs it through a machine, and applies enrichments, both proprietary and third-party – hooking up to metadata from YouTube, Rotten Tomatoes, IMDb, Netflix, Gracenote etc. and creating deep links between content assets.

Such is the problem with "flattening out" – or "normalizing – metadata, to create something close to a single source of truth, that specialist vendors have emerged to handle exactly this. For broadcasters in particular, a common problem is an inability to ingest metadata from more than one source.

This is about bringing value to data files with deep links, with some vendors applying AI, machine learning and advanced data science techniques to acquire, transform, classify and harmonize metadata from preferred sources.

We note that the buzzwords AI and ML are not used during this week's Synamedia Go briefing, but the inclusion of metadata enrichment as a core module inside the suite itself could have a negative impact on firms specializing in metadata enrichment.

Go.Aggregate is then about creating metadata from multiple sources – simplifying it and melding it into a single user experience. This effort is designed to increase usage, reduce overheads, and make it easier to bring in new sources of data – although no supporting metrics were provided by Synamedia.

Metadata is a notoriously messy business. Ingesting, cleaning, and de-duplicating metadata is some of the dirty work that Synamedia Go handles. By sorting the mess, this allows Go.Aggregate algorithms to combine content assets across multiple languages – which is not an easy feat – and therefore allow service providers to offer genuinely universal search to consumers.

Universal search is something of a holy grail. This is why Synamedia offers this as a tier 1 feature, along with adaptive search, related results, and autocomplete. Standard features of the search process include handling user entry errors, synonyms, and partial match.

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Moving on to Go.Recommend, Synamedia offers a single API that caters for typical use cases, such as content filtering (you watched this movie and this movie is similar) and collaborative filtering (recommending a movie to user A based on similar tastes of user B).

Another technique, developed about three years ago, is called media embedding. This looks at how to identify patterns and serve content recommendations between mediums of media – such as VoD to podcasts, or books to music. Eude described this as the transfer of knowledge, comparing it the large language models (LLMs) seen in generative AI chat systems.

Again, Eude chose words carefully, avoiding buzzwords while mentioning that this method of modelling through vectors has the capabilities to generate predictions not seen through the first two rudimentary recommendation techniques.

With the combination of all three methods, customers can have a “really interesting experience,” Eude claims – such as recommending entire personalized pages in the UX, not just content, or decide which content rail should be shown and which is not. Video providers can also start to customize which thumbnails to highlight over others.

Synamedia could even extend these capabilities to include personalized thumbnail imagery, presenting different artwork from the same title to different users, based on tastes and what is most likely to generate a clickthrough. Synamedia did not confirm whether this is being explored. We have seen ThinkAnalytics and Gracenote collaborate on personalized imagery, but have not heard about any customers.

A slide on Synamedia Go customers is telling. We understand that all four flagship customers of Synamedia Go services – Netgem, STV, Alma, and To Do Media – are all Utelly customers from before the acquisition. At the time of the deal, the lack of customer overlap is a positive. Now, there are question marks over Synamedia Go’s ability to attract new business.

Yes, the pay TV subsidiary of Israeli telco Bezeq, is the exception, but we noticed the logo was missing from the deck. Yes took the Synamedia Go Experience Manager earlier this year – including personalized content recommendations. Synamedia’s better-known security suite and video network technologies are also being used by yes, but the Experience Manager was the emphasis of the announcement.

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