

Technology

Producing potential

The battle for supremacy between the PC and Mac

The computer is the heartbeat of the radio studio and an integral link between the business and the broadcast.

From music production for beds, jingles and promos to playout and scheduling software, the computer is a crucial cog in the broadcast machine.

The battle for supremacy between the Microsoft PC and Apple Mac has influenced the development of essential hardware and software for broadcasting.

Within the radio station, both platforms serve many purposes and contribute to the success of the operation on air and behind the scenes.

The PC is often incorporated into a network to carry out background tasks and research, while the Mac provides the creativity of music production.

For the radio producer, the decision between a PC or Mac stems from the desire to produce a high-quality broadcast in an efficient and effective way.

Key factors for the producer to consider will be the computer's user interface and accessibility, yet effective recording and editing is also essential.

This will range from simple cutting and splicing to the creativity of producing music beds and sounds.

Recording and production software available for the PC includes Reason and Cubase, while Logic is dedicated to the Apple Mac system.

Packages have also been developed to function on both platforms, such as Adobe Audition and Pro Tools, in order to integrate systems within the studio.

Robin Vincent, from Rain Computers, explains: "Years ago, I would sell PCs into the BBC running linear audio editing programs similar to tape editing.

"Within the studio as a whole, there has always been a distinction between the PC and Mac, with the former reserved for audio editing and playout and the latter better-suited to content creation."

Mark Williams, head of MW Media UK, comments: "Although many software packages available for audio editing are capable of running on



A sea of computer screens in the radio studio (Photo: Radio Studio Services Ltd)

both PC and Mac, from my experience of radio production at the BBC and commercial stations, most prefer the Windows platform.

"I would definitely choose Adobe Audition for all audio editing, as it is a vastly complex piece of software enabling editing from basic functions such as copy, paste and cutting to enhanced spectral views, frequency analysis and effects processors.

"I have rarely run this on the Mac, finding it much easier on the PC - perhaps due to personal taste but also the great benefits of the right click on a PC."

While the power and potential of software will influence the producer's choice of computer, the ability to work within a network is also crucial.

Paul Mortimer, from eMerging UK, comments: "It is a case of meeting the requirements of everyone working in the studio environment.

"The PC interface has always proved popular, as it is user-friendly and quick and easy to connect across a wider network, while the Mac offers wider creative possibilities."

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The producer's priorities within the studio will also be influenced by the reach of the radio station.

Music production may involve outsourcing or purchasing packages of beds and samples and when creating these from scratch, the creative potential of the Mac is brought to the fore.

John Calvert, managing director of Airforce radio commercial production company, comments: "The Mac has proved reliable within our music studios and operated effectively with plug-ins on Pro Tools.

"We may use the PC for office-based tasks and keeping in contact with clients, but the Mac has certainly proved more adept at music production."

Indeed, the Mac has traditionally led the way in terms of technology for music production, while the enduring appeal of the PC is its affordability.

However, as production software has evolved to work across both platforms, the producer must strike the balance between price and potential.

Richard Lawley, from Radio Studio Services Ltd, explains: "From my experience of working with commercial radio stations, the traditional radio producer has become something of a rare animal.

"In recent years, the platforms have merged in so many ways, with software such as Pro Tools and Adobe Audition now available on both PC and Mac.

"Also, most playout systems are specifically designed for Windows, so by solely using PC it is possible to synchronise the studio set up."

"The Mac has certainly proved more adept at music production."

John Calvert, managing director of Airforce.

For producers at community, student or hospital radio stations, the budget may take precedence.

Oliver Ing, station manager for student radio station Pure FM, explains: "In reality, we do not have the funding or software to warrant buying Macs.

"The PC provides a standard user interface and serves the purpose within the production studio, running Adobe Audition on Windows.

"The Mac comes into its own as a creative tool, but it is not a realistic proposition for our producers."

Radio production students entering the industry at grass roots level may turn towards a familiar user interface when deciding between the PC and Mac.

Kevin Leach, a freelance studio director for BBC Radio 5 Live and radio production tutor, comments: "Many of our students will have been brought up using the PC, so initially find it a challenge to adapt to the Mac and master the user interface.

"Both at the BBC and within the commercial radio industry, the PC has been dominant for many years simply due to its adaptability within the studio.

"Many playout systems have been tailored to run on Windows, while audio editing software has made the gradual shift towards PC in recent years.

"Another consideration for many radio stations will be the cost of transferring from PC to Mac."

Thus, the flexibility and functionality of the PC on a day-to-day basis provides a place for Windows within the radio station, but the Mac maintains its attraction by retaining key creative qualities.

The battle between the PC and Mac will continue to rage, but for the radio producer, it is a case of meeting today's needs before planning for tomorrow.

By Henry Ascoli