

Airey: User control key to new-media success

By Etan Vlessing

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BANFF, Alberta -- Having just suffered a very public fallout with abortive British TV upstart Iostar, Dawn Airey on Monday offered tips to help fellow traditional media executives relax and learn to love digital media.

"Content companies will only have a rosy future in a broadband-enabled world if they learn to relax their sphincter muscles," Airey, now director of global content at Britain's ITV, said in a keynote address to the Banff World Television Festival.

In her first public comments since resigning from Iostar in April after only eight days as the company's CEO, Airey said the British TV upstart should be renamed "IOUstar." "It owes a lot of money to a lot of people," she said of the company, which recently went bust.

With the matter now in the hands of her lawyers, Airey declined to expand on her brief tenure at Iostar, insisting that the company's dramatic collapse remains something of a mystery to her.

She recalled Iostar's early promise fizzling when co-founders Mark Grenside and Tim Carron Brown failed to raise about \$40 million required to acquire talent, production and distribution companies as part of their grand strategy.

"The day before I joined, I get a phone call from my assistant saying, 'I can't get in the office because the rent hasn't been paid,'" she said.

Airey, who will join ITV in October, said traditional media needs to get Darwinian to survive and thrive against growing competition from social networking sites such as YouTube and Facebook.

She urged traditional media executives to think "fluidly" and avoid the temptation to control how TV viewers access and consume their content. "Letting people use and play with content is in the best interests of networks," Airey told Banff delegates.

She pointed to NBC issuing a cease-and-desist order when its Saturday Night Live skit "Lazy Sunday" became one of the most widely viewed clips on the Internet. Airey said NBC should instead have embraced the new online audience to bring more viewers to SNL and other NBC content through promotion.

Other newsmakers in Banff included Konrad von Finckenstein, the newly installed chairman of the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, who ruled last Friday that Canadian media giant CTVglobemedia would have to spin off five Citytv free-to-air TV stations as part of a bid to acquire rival broadcaster Chum Ltd.

"I'm sure there (are) lots of people who disagree with the decision. That's besides the point. Now the two companies can move on with their businesses," von Finckenstein told a breakfast gathering.

On the market side, Movieola, the Canadian short-film channel, unveiled content distribution deals with upstart Web TV player Joost and file-sharing site Azureus.

And VisionTV, Canada's multifaith channel, said it is teaming up with the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network to produce "Rabbit Fall," a six-part drama about a small-town police officer who discovers that malevolent supernatural forces are at work in her picturesque community.

Angel Entertainment of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, is producing.

Elsewhere, Canadian youth cable channel YTV and Vancouver-based producer Nerd Corps Entertainment are teaming on "Storm Hawks," a 3-D animated series to launch on mobile, online and VOD before its bows on TV in September.


And Movie Central and the Movie Network, Canada's two premium pay TV networks, are partnering on a new eight-part drama, "The Weight," screenwriters George F. Walker and Dani Romain's portrait of two cops as bent as the criminals they pursue. Debbie Nightingale, Walker and Romain are executive producing.

The Banff World Television Festival will continue through Wednesday in the Banff Rockies.

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