Smart Media Solutions CoSTAR FieldEditor

Flying in the face of a lot of digital editor sensibility, this stripped down package targets journalists and aims to prove that less is more when the feature set is well defined. ROB JAMES says he has the key.

FOR THE RADIO JOURNALIST, the digital revolution has not proved to be an unalloyed blessing. Certainly acquisition may be less of a chore, with miniature recorders replacing bulky and frequently temperamental Uhers, but editing, so simple in analogue with chinagraph, razor blade and sticky tape, is another matter. People wanting or needing to do their own editing on location have had an interesting time for the last few years. With DAT, copying to another medium is essential. Editing on MD isn't much fun for anything beyond the most basic hack and slash. Even the latest miniature disk and flash memory recorders are less than ideal as editing tools, so the answer has been to use a DAW. But, thanks to the features list arms race, most DAWs are serious overkill for this kind of work. Enter the FieldEditor.

An Australian group has taken over Fairlight On Air and renamed it Smart Media Solutions. The company, based in the Netherlands produces, among other things, the CoSTAR radio automation system. The FieldEditor offers a convenient solution to the location editing problem with basic single track and more complex four-track modes. Anyone familiar with the editing offered in CoSTAR will be immediately at home.

FieldEditor is unusual in a number of ways. The subject of this review arrived on a 128Mb USB 2 memory key with a price tag of UK£259 plus VAT.

I asked if it is also available on larger (1 or 2Gb) memory keys to facilitate portability of larger projects. The short answer is, 'not at present, unless there is a large order from a broadcaster requesting this'.

The FieldEditor is also available embedded in the Maycom HandHeld Recorder. The premise being, record your piece on the Maycom, plug it into the nearest PC and edit your item ready for air using the FieldEditor application. A reasonably recent PC is required, i.e. with USB 2 and Windows XP and a Direct X 9.x capable sound device.

The first neat trick FieldEditor has up its tiny sleeve is to operate without requiring any installation procedure or drivers whatsoever. All you have to do is launch the application from the USB memory stick and you are up and running. The application presents you with a single window, inside which you can add audio cues to your project, edit, fade, crossfade and change levels and finally bounce the finished item down to a file for 'filing', transmission or whatever.

FieldEditor is an MPEG only audio editor. This

currently means MPEG1-Layer-II audio files. But this is not the whole story. It fully supports Broadcast WAV files and any file playable by Windows Media Player can be imported and converted to MPEG 2 (including sample rate conversion) at a speed, at least on my 2.4GHz P4, vastly exceeding real time. So it is perfectly possible to combine a music bed and sound effects, e.g. ripped from CD, with location recordings.

On the left of the screen the FieldEditor Explorer pane enables audio files to be managed and inserted into the project. Audio files can also be dragged and dropped into the project from Windows Explorer.

There are four stereo tracks with two editing modes, multi or single. Multi shows all four tracks and single, as you would expect, concentrates on the selected track. Track controls are kept simple with buttons for Zooming track height, Solo, Mute and Record. A selected clip or clips can be moved by right-clicking and dragging. In single track mode segments to the right of the selected clip can be locked together when dragging the selected clip. Selections are made by clicking and dragging. You can adjust the size of a selection by dragging the red ends of the yellow bar in the time bar.

Clips may be grouped by selecting them and clicking on the Red, Yellow, Light Blue, Dark Blue and Magenta buttons. The green button ungroups selected clips.

Preset fades and ducks can be invoked by positioning the cursor on a selected clip or clips and clicking on one of the fade buttons. The fade shapes can be changed to suit the operator or material.

Right-click and the Control key are used to considerable effect. Although not totally intuitive, once this is understood, it is perfectly possible to learn most of this application without resorting to the manual. For example, at first I wondered why

the cursor kept jumping around the screen. Then I noticed the blue line with a grey box at each end in the Marker Bar. When 'follow cursor' is selected the timeline display jumps or pages whenever the play head cursor hits one of the grey boxes. If you click and drag one of these as close as possible to the other you get a fixed cursor, moving track display at zoom levels of a minute or more.

There is no EQ, dynamics or plug-ins — thank goodness! Although I would have liked to see fixed low and high pass filters to help deal with the vicissitudes of vox pops.

FieldEditor is a perfect example of 'less is more' a simple and carefully aimed tool for a defined purpose — radio. A refreshing change from the shotgun approach of including every feature the manufacturer thinks the user might require for a wide variety of applications. There is a real risk that users will pressure Smart Media Solutions into lengthening the FieldEditor feature list. I hope that those responsible think long and hard before adding anything. It may not be perfect, nothing is, but adding too much more would spoil the elegant simplicity.

At this price any freelance or aspiring radio journalist should be able to afford one and it will make a lot of sense to broadcasters for their own staff. ■

PROS	Simplicity; lack of features; price.
CONS	Currently no way to audition clips in FieldEditor Explorer; limited audio storage space on the USB flash key.

Contact

SMART MEDIA SOLUTIONS, NETHERLANDS:
Website: www.smartmediasolutions.nl