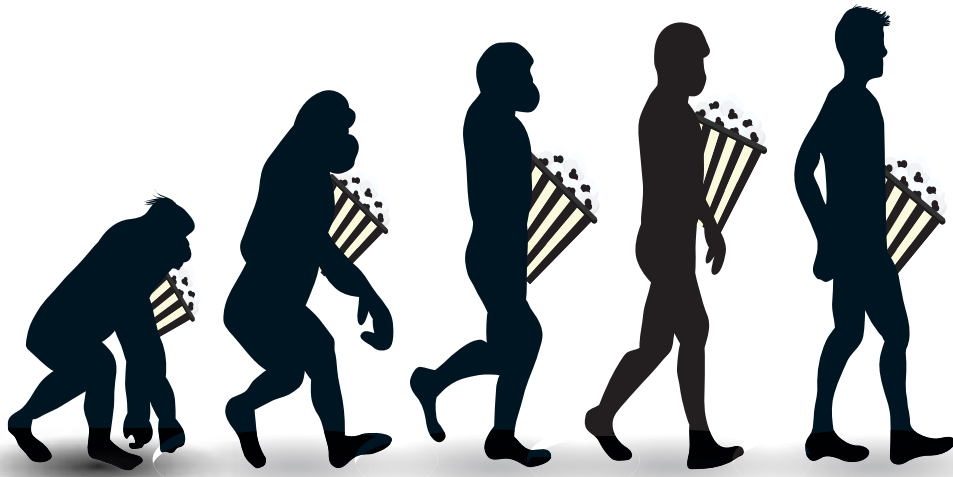


# THE PACE OF CHANGE

*Technological changes have transformed our industry. For the better, asks Graham Lodge?*



Graham Lodge  
Managing Director, Sound Associates



**IF MY FATHER PETER** was still around and involved in Sound Associates, I don't think that he would find anything even remotely recognisable compared to when our firm was UK agent for Cinemeccanica 35mm and 70mm film projectors.

Then, we had shelves and shelves of spare parts covering projectors that had been manufactured in the early 70s and were still in daily use in cinema across the UK and the world. Probably more than 100 unique items per projector type had to be held in the UK for quick despatch to a cinema in need. The intermittent unit was considered to be 'really expensive' at a cost of around £1,500.

We had engineers on hand to talk to those projectionists who were experiencing technical problems — that was the extent of 'remote support' and a short-term fix was typically the removal of a safety wire or holding up a broken bit of metal with a rubber band or a piece of string.

Compare that to the modern day when we are connected via the internet to the vast majority of the digital projectors that we have installed (even down in the Falkland Islands) and the projector reports back

issues and potential off-screen events even before the site manager is aware of a problem. The projectionists have all gone, alas — or been 're-assigned' to other duties within the cinema. Some modern projection rooms are only ever visited by human beings when our engineers arrive on their preventative maintenance visits.

We still hold some spare parts, but the vast majority are shipped from the various manufacturers and cost thousands of pounds, sometimes taking a couple of days to arrive — but this seems to be an acceptable solution to many operators. Not that this change is bad — just different.

## **An accelerating rate of progress**

Technology has changed at a far faster rate in the past 10 years compared to the 35mm world. In the 10 years since 2006, digital cinema has transformed from an untrusted 'new-fangled technology' where the 35mm was typically left in place as a backup. The digital projectors are now put into smaller and smaller places, installed in a far wider range of venues — not just cinemas — and have been accepted as good, reliable and high-quality units that do their job

consistently in a quiet, unassuming manner.

Series one projectors have given way to series two, the trusty xenon lamp now has competition from metal halide, RGB laser and the new, lower-cost phosphor laser light sources, but this hasn't changed the offering to the cinema patron — it has simply changed the economics of how these projectors are going to be paid for.

Other technological changes that are taking place include the new immersive audio systems that utilise lots and lots of speakers placed around the auditorium to provide a more enveloping experience. Dolby Atmos is by far the most accepted at the moment, but competition for an 'open standard' for immersive audio will surely encourage Barco AuroMAX and DTS:X with their offerings — both based on this new, as yet unratified, open sound format?

Integrators — there's a new name that wasn't around 10 years ago — Bell Theatre, Omnex and Sound Associates used to be referred to as installers or dealers, but even those terms seem to have been 'improved'. We are all now simply referred to as integrators together with the other newer entrants to the technical side of the industry. I find it a bit of a bland term, if I'm honest, but it's what we are now known as...

## **Keeping the customer satisfied**

Little has changed from the viewpoint of the end customer. They still go to their independent or multiplex cinema, and they still watch the same type of films. The quality is better — no scratches — and the sound is better, and sometimes immersive.

So how does the customer benefit? A wider range of films, consistent better quality, event cinema (which was simply not possible before to any quality level), immersive sound, immersive pictures (3D).

The biggest benefit of new technology, however, is that places that previously never considered showing feature films due to the complexity and cost of equipment are now discovering that they can purchase something that they use as a simple video projector for part of the time, but that has the added bonus of being able to show Hollywood content as well. A whole new section of the population, previously out of the reach of a cinema, can now enjoy the delights of a first-run feature in their local theatre or even in the village hall. **CT**

**“SOME MODERN PROJECTION ROOMS ARE ONLY EVER VISITED BY HUMANS WHEN OUR ENGINEERS ARRIVE”**