A NEWS APPROACH
Miljenko Logozar on how a transitional solution has revived a dying newsroom system at Al Jazeera Arabic
January started on a rather unusual note, with Al Jazeera America (AJAM) announcing its exit from the US and Sky News Arabia (SNA) simultaneously announcing its digital entry into the country. Al Jazeera has also stated that it intends to re-enter the US market with a strong digital presence in the next few months.

Al Jazeera’s bold entry into the US was remarkable, given the fact that having an affiliate there has had to suffice for most international players. Despite being plagued with legal battles, having to tone down its stories and being given the cold shoulder by distributors, it held its own for three years before finally calling it a day. Whatever the outcome, the fact remains that it dared to enter where most others feared to tread, but the treatment meted out to the Qatari network has also stated that it intends having an affiliate there has had to suffice for most international players. Despite being plagued with legal battles, having to tone down its stories and being given the cold shoulder by distributors, it held its own for three years before finally calling it a day. Whatever the outcome, the fact remains that it dared to enter where most others feared to tread, but the treatment meted out to the Qatari network.

The Al Jazeera Workplace is an organisation that has dared to take big strides forward, despite having suffered several setbacks. Still, I have a lot of respect for an entity that has never broken the law, and has always been the subject of much controversy, not just internationally but closer to home as well, with some of its projects steeped in conflict for various reasons.

This month, we bring you one of the projects that form part of this huge jigsaw puzzle. For the first time, we also have on the cover Miljenko Logozar, the man who helped set up the country. Al Jazeera Transformation project is one such project, which has continued to make huge strides forward, despite having suffered several setbacks.

Al Jazeera has been the subject of much controversy, not just internationally but closer to home as well, with some of its projects steeped in conflict for various reasons. Still, I have a lot of respect for an organisation that has dared to take on unusual challenges and stayed the course. The Al Jazeera Workplace Transformation project is one such project, which has continued to make huge strides forward, despite having suffered several setbacks.
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Distributor establishes Dubai office

Symbolise Communication and Broadcast Solutions FZE, a new distributor, recently opened an office in Dubai and will be exhibiting at CABSAT next month. Established by Jeroen Husken, formerly with Newtec and with Comtech EP Data before that, the distributor represents a number of international companies that provide a combination of solutions for the broadcast and communication markets.

“There is so much crossover these days, it is difficult to keep these markets separate. Our aim is to be a partner to our clients and stay ahead in developing ideas and creating solutions,” commented Husken, adding that his clients are mostly service providers and VVIPs.

“A common interest amongst all of our clients is that they want to deal with a supplier who understands their business, acts quickly, adds value by offering advanced products and is dependable. The VVIPs we worked with are on the lookout for good communication solutions in remote areas, to which they often travel for leisure or work. Symbolise, recently provided terminals and services for a special Arab VVIP client," he commented. Symbolise represents brands such as Vantage, Skyline (Dataminer), Hillbright, Tellumat, Datum Systems, CCOM, Canare and Barnfind, a relatively young Norwegian company that provides video transport solutions.

“Terrestrial fibre connectivity is widely available and continues to expand every day,” commented Husken, adding that Barnfind is an open-frame solution, which means it not only provides its own line of small form-factor pluggable (SFP) modules but also supports other manufacturers’ SFPs, enabling customers to cost-effectively perform a range of media conversions over fibre. Clients use Barnfind’s Barnolve products to route and transport a variety of input and output signals including 3G/1.5G HD-SDI links connecting cameras and CCUs, Ethernet and ASI,” Husken elaborated.

“Barnfind also allows one to transport video over fibre across the UAE, from stadium to studio for example, within a campus or even a building,” he commented, adding that its solutions are used for several sports events including Formula 1, Moto GP, baseball, Premier League football, golf, the China Youth Games and the US Open Tennis Championships.

“If fibre access is available, Barnfind can even eliminate the need to roll out an OB van and connect the cameras in a stadium or at an event directly to the studio. This makes a production a lot less strenuous and brings substantial cost savings to the client,” he said, adding that Symbolise has a product portfolio that caters to both terrestrial (fibre) and satellite users.

“It depends on the application and project specifics. We have a close relationship with our customers and can provide customised solutions, but are also constructing a webshop for those who prefer out-of-the-box solutions.”

Rosco opens new office in Dubai

Rosco Laboratories is opening its new Middle East office in Dubai. Kees Frijters, Rosco’s President of EMEA, will be responsible for leading the operations in the region while continuing his present responsibilities in Europe, Asia and Africa.

Rosco has been operating in the Middle East for many years. The Dubai office is aimed at keeping up with the rapid growth in the region and servicing its customers in a more efficient manner. Mark Engels, Rosco’s CEO, commented: “Our existing client base in the region and the potential to expand Rosco globally make this the perfect time to make our mark in the UAE.”

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Sky News Arabia announces US entry through Dish Network’s online service

Hot on the heels of last month’s announcement that Al Jazeera America will be shut down in April 2016, Sky News Arabia CEO Nart Bouran has announced that the channel’s programming is now available to US audiences via Dish Network’s online service, Sling TV. The online platform gives SNA’s US viewers the opportunity to subscribe to an online package and receive live streams of the channel’s political, economic and social programmes, including talk shows.

Commenting on the move, Bouran said: “Sky News Arabia (SNA) is now one of the channels included in Sling TV’s roster for online subscribers. This gives us a fantastic opportunity to enhance our digital media footprint. Given the large number of media platforms available today and taking into account media consumption trends, we continually endeavour to broadcast across every available platform in order to appeal to the tastes and formats of varied audiences. “This new service will allow our viewers in the US to watch Sky News Arabia live on smart devices as well as television. It also complements our existing offerings via satellite TV, website, social media, smart mobile applications and live broadcasting on six major international airlines. The ability to connect with a wider audience through unique digital formats also reaffirms our commitment to up our game.”

Etisalat has launched an exclusive partnership with Starz Play Arabia to offer a wide range of Hollywood blockbuster movies and the latest series directly to Etisalat’s eLife TV customers. Starz Play Arabia is a multiscreen video-on-demand service that allows streaming on hand-held devices, laptops and smart TVs. Many popular TV shows and series will have all previous seasons available, allowing customers to binge-watch entire box sets without interruptions or commercial breaks.

Khaled El Khouly, Chief Consumer Officer at Etisalat, said: “eLife TV customers have more access to content than ever before; our partnership with StarzPlay is testament to our promise to deliver not only the biggest and best catalogue but also exclusive, never-before-seen content in the UAE. The development team in Italy is working closely with the SAM team in the UK to push the ongoing expansion of Momentum and its toolset. Momentum is targeted at both the production and playout side.

Netflix has announced plans to block VPN proxies in a bid to protect licensing deals with studios and content owners. The video streaming service that recently launched in 130 new countries around the world will crack down on subscribers who access Netflix content via a proxy server or virtual private network (VPN), which allows users to mask their locations.

Ted Sarandos, Chief Content Officer of Netflix, had said at DFF 2015 that using VPNs or proxies to cross borders violates Netflix’s terms of use. Subscribers will no longer be able to use proxies to watch content not available in their home country.
OSN signs content deals; launches six new HD channels

Close on the heels of its deals with HBO First and Warner Bros., OSN has signed a new and extended long-term deal with NBCUniversal International (NBUi). OSN also recently announced exclusive lifetime rights to Turkish series Kosem Sultan, in a bid to offer the popular drama to the MENA audiences.

The MENA pay TV and OTT market has seen a lot of activity in recent months, with new entrants such as beIN Media Group and Netflix announcing plans for the region. beIN, known for its strong sports offering, has now diversified its portfolio to claim a share in the entertainment domain. Last month, the network announced a partnership with Turner Broadcasting to air Turner’s channels, including Cartoon Network, which used to be a part of OSN’s offering.

Executive Officer of OSN, said: “The pay TV industry will be led by those who own the most compelling content, and OSN is dominating the space of original and exclusive programming through our long-term channel and content partnerships such as with NBCUniversal International, which truly opens a universe of unmatched content available now only for OSN subscribers.”

The deal secures first pay window rights for OSN, in addition to exclusive over-the-top (OTT) content access on OSN Play, which is free to subscribers, and GO, its non-subscriber-based online TV service.

OSN will also unveil six new HD channels offering films, series, general entertainment and Arabic movies. These channels are in addition to the recently announced HBO First HD for the MENA region.

CNN opens Dubai office

CNN has opened a new digital broadcast studio in Dubai Media City. CNN Arabic will use the studio for interviews and a range of video content, while CNN shows across the network will also utilise the facility for news and programming. The studio will also offer an array of new video capabilities to CNNArabic.com. The Dubai facility features a system called Global Control.

This is the latest addition to CNN’s operations in the Middle East. CNN Arabic launched in 2002 and its Abu Dhabi bureau was opened in 2009.

BKP launches Middle East radio awards

BKP, a Dubai-based recording and editing facility has launched Radiohoria, a creative awards competition in the Middle East focused exclusively on radio advertising, along with California Chrome. The event is accepting entries until February 3. The competition, supported by UNESCO, will culminate in an awards night on February 10, 2016, at Androvos Beach Bar & Restaurant, Habtoor Grand Beach Resort & Spa, Dubai.

Submitting nominations to the awards is free-of-charge. Contestants may submit any number of entries including submissions that have not been broadcast thus far. The winning entry will be recorded free-of-charge by BKP Media Group and broadcast across the region on February 13, which is also celebrated as World Radio Day. More details are available at radiohoriaawards.com.

Al Jazeera to wind down US operations by April

Al Jazeera America (AJM) will terminate its cable TV and digital operations by April 30 of this year, owing to “a business model [that] is simply not sustainable in light of the economic challenges in the US media marketplace”, the channel’s CEO Al Anstey announced last month. The shutdown will lead to the loss of hundreds of jobs.

Al Jazeera made a bold move in late 2012 when it bought Current TV from Al Gore for USD 500m and launched AJM six months later. The channel, however, was beset with challenges as it met with strong resistance from both US audiences as well as cable distributors. In addition, continuous legal battles and low ratings made it a difficult market for AJM.

In a separate statement, AJM’s parent company, Al Jazeera Media Network (AJMN), announced that it will expand its digital services to the US market. AJM has a successful roster of digital services, including AJ+.
Bollywood film begins shoot in Abu Dhabi

The cast and crew of Dishoom arrived in Abu Dhabi last month to begin a 40-day shoot for the Bollywood film, Abu Dhabi’s longest feature filming project to date. More than 90 cast and crew have been involved in the shoot, alongside a number of Emiratis, who have served as interns on the production. The locations serving the film’s storyline include Nurai, Saadiyat and Yas Islands, as well as Emirates Palace, Sheikh Zayed Stadium and Liwa Desert.

Dishoom’s choice of Abu Dhabi as a filming location was announced in Mumbai last May, during an event for the Bollywood filmmaking community, hosted by twofour54 and the Abu Dhabi Film Commission (ADFC) in conjunction with the Film & Television Producers Guild of India.

Maryam Al Mheiri, Chief Operating Officer of twofour54, said: “After a year packed with high-profile entertainment projects facilitated by twofour54, Dishoom continues the momentum of Abu Dhabi’s film production industry into 2016. Nadiadwala Grandson Entertainment is one of the most reputable production companies in Bollywood, and we look forward to working with them on what is sure to be another box office hit. To be shooting across many locations in the capital shows the producers’ belief in the UAE as well as the services and facilities that we offer.”

The New Year began on a positive note for Arab filmmakers with two nominations for the Oscars. Sanad-funded Jordanian film Theeb is in the race for the Best Foreign Language Film while Palestinian film Ave Maria is vying for the Best Live Action Short Film at this year’s Oscars.

Theeb, was one out of seven Arab films considered for the 88th Academy Awards; three of which, including Theeb, were funded by SANAD. Abu Dhabi’s film fund powered by twofour54.

Theeb, by Jordanian director Naji Abu Nowar, was selected along with four international projects from Denmark, Hungary, France, and Columbia, out of 82 films originally submitted to the Oscars’ foreign film category.

Wazee Digital has appointed Harris Morris as Chairman of the Board. Morris has served as Wazee Digital’s CEO since July 2014. Under his leadership, Wazee Digital has repositioned itself for growth with the launch of its distribution platform, Wazee Digital Core, as a standalone product.

JOB TRACK

Ian Davies, who previously led the special projects initiative at Vizrt Middle East, has moved to a new role as Regional Manager for the company’s regional operations from February. He has taken over from RV Krishnan, who is leaving to lead Vizrt’s graphics sales in Vizrt’s APAC region, based in Thailand.
Satellite broadcasting company Yahlive beams TV channels to culturally diverse viewers across the MENA region. It has recently added new channels in eight languages to the Balkan communities in the Middle East and North Africa. These channels will soon be available in Europe as well.

Another recent addition is the launch of a 43-channel bouquet for the greater Arab Maghreb region, in partnership with Sahli Media Group. It includes 20 exclusive channels offered by Yahlive.

In an interview with BroadcastPro ME, Ammar Baranbo, Senior Director of Business Development and Engineering, Yahlive, commented: “Our premium hand-picked channels are made available to under-served communities to fulfil the needs of thousands of viewers from different demographics. By having a strong presence in under-served markets, we are building deep, lasting relationships. We connect with communities to bring their favourite programmes in local and international TV entertainment, in their native language. For the Farsi-speaking community, Yahlive has the largest bouquet of channels in the region. In addition to that, we also provide the most sought-after content to a wide range of other communities, including Arabic, Kurdish, Afghan, Balkan and North African.”

He added that Yahlive works closely with its broadcast partners to offer a mix of shows that cater to a range of viewing tastes, and that the satellite operator is also investing in 4K-ready uplinks, taking into account the demand for high-quality video.

Yahlive delivers a range of premium television channels to viewers via three beams covering the Middle East, North Africa, southeast Asia and Europe. These satellite services are broadcast over the Yahsat Y1A satellite located at 52.5° E. The east beam targets the Middle East and southwest Asia, a hotspot for the Farsi-speaking community and one of the strongest in the region. The west beam targets the greater Arab Maghreb region, specifically Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. “In Europe, Yahlive’s coverage is widely used by expatriates, providing them with easy access to a variety of programming from their home countries,” he added.

“We’re expanding our coverage areas, and our recent deal with SES provides us with additional expansion capacity and backup capabilities. In the past, channels in the region were delivered through signals scattered across many satellites, which resulted in weaker signals for viewers. By consolidating the channels onto one satellite, this has vastly improved, claimed Baranbo.

In 2015, global research company Ipsos published results of a survey into the viewing habits of the Farsi-speaking community, highlighting that more than 25m Farsi speakers watch Yahlive, with 16,464,000 of those viewers watching at home. Yahlive will be conducting a new survey in Q1 of 2016, which will provide an updated figure on viewership.

With regards to the business model of the company, Baranbo commented: “We have a simple business model where we focus on servicing diverse communities across our coverage area with high-quality television channels. We bring the most sought-after channels to typically under-served communities, in their own language, for free. We’re always looking for opportunities to branch out in to other markets. As we work on perfecting our services in our current coverage area, we are also in talks with international partners on how our services can become available in other regions in the future.”

Yahlive also plans to deliver 4K channels soon. “In addition to reaching the right communities with the right programmes, we work to evolve our broadcast service quality. As we provide coverage in many different markets and regions, we carefully source and consult with local partners to correctly tailor our offerings based on the technical availability of each market,” concluded Baranbo.
Al Jazeera Arabic, which struggled with a failing newsroom system, replaced it with a new workflow in December, in order to streamline operational efficiencies. In an exclusive interview with Vijaya Cherian, Miljenko Logozar, who headed the project and Ali Elhusseini, Programme Manager, provide more details about the installation.

Al Jazeera’s Workplace Transformation project has been the talk of the region since 2011 but it looks like the pieces of the jigsaw may finally be falling into place with a tentative completion date in Q4 of 2016. One more piece fell into place with the transitional upgrade of the newsroom system at Al Jazeera Arabic (AJA) in December 2015. Miljenko Logozar, Director of Technology Solutions & Integration at Al Jazeera, headed this project along with Head of Network Operations Standards, Ali Elhusseini, who served as Programme Manager on this project.

Al Jazeera Arabic (AJA) was in dire need of a new and robust newsroom system, explains Logozar. For those who are not familiar with Logozar’s credentials, he is known as the man who helped build Al Jazeera Balkans (AJB) in Sarajevo, from scratch – literally.

“My passion has always been to move channels forward through new technical and operational challenges,” he says, and is presently engaged in projects that are being undertaken to migrate the network from a broadcast environment to an IP and virtualised environment.

At AJB, Logozar was responsible for everything required to build a TV channel from the civil design and broadcast technology to helping with the recruitment of staff for the Technology and Operations department. His core specialty has always been building or moving to new facilities. Logozar also led the technical design team that delivered AJAM in New York in 2013.
Licensed by Microsoft, the STX-200 is a stand-alone, studio-grade solution that leverages Skype to bring live content directly from reporters to the on-air production. The Riedel unit offers broadcast-quality HD-SDI and balanced XLR audio I/Os and is packaged with professional Microsoft Skype TX software, available exclusively with the STX-200.

In this case, Al Jazeera Arabic was working with a Thomson Grass Valley News production system and an outdated version of Avid’s iNEWS Newsroom Computer System for the last ten years. “The lack of upgrades to the system for many years has resulted in health and performance failures, along with serious hardware issues. When spare parts were required, we had to source them from commercial websites such as eBay, as they were no longer available from the official suppliers, so our Executive Director Mohamad Abuagla gave us the green light to proceed with the planning and execution of this critical project,” Logozar says.

With the Al Jazeera Workplace Transformation project announced in 2011, the team was hoping to wait until a complete system was implemented and fully delivered later this year. Over the last two years, however, it became evident that the issues with the AJA production system had become critical, with the risk of the channel falling off air, explains Logozar. Waiting could have become fatal for the channel. “The AJWT project delivery for AJA was too far in the future and as such, it was necessary to urgently implement an intermediate solution to replace the old and unstable systems at AJA in the summer of 2015,” he points out.

Thus began the Al Jazeera Arabic project, which went live in December from Doha after months of preparation, testing and rehearsals. “The lack of upgrades to the system for many years has resulted in health and performance failures, along with serious hardware issues. When spare parts were required, we had to source them from commercial websites such as eBay.”

Miljenko Logozar, Director of Technology Solutions & Integration, Al Jazeera Media Network

“With the new Pebble Beach Marina playout system in the transmission area,
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The transitional system, which is based on Avid technology, paves the way for a fuller upgrade to AJA’s newsroom, which is due to come into operation by Q4 2016, when the workplace transformation project is also scheduled for completion.

The system promises greater networking and sharing of material between Doha and Al Jazeera’s other newsrooms worldwide.

The installation includes a VSM main control room (PCR) as well as a VizRT MOSART main playout application for playing the video files.

“The new MOSART user interface in the PCR is the first step towards more optimised AJA PCR workflows in the future,” explains Logozar.

“We have a Telestream Vantage in place. It represents the main transcoding farm for all incoming
and ongoing files. Vantage is integrated with Avid Interplay via Avid web services. The complete electrical power infrastructure in the PCR and the edit rooms is monitored and managed by TSL power distribution units."

To elaborate, the Telestream system is a fully redundant file-based workflow solution. It integrates Telestream’s Vantage Transcode Pro Connect, Analysis and Avid Advanced options running on GPU-accelerated Telestream Lightspeed servers alongside an Avid news system.

The Telestream Vantage transcoding farm is used to ingest media into the news production workflow: its super-fast operation allows Avid editors to start editing while still ingesting news feeds from Reuters and AP. Both media and associated metadata are ingested, transcoded and delivered to Avid Interplay PAM via web services, enabling staff to edit stories very quickly, referencing valuable metadata and growing HI-10 proxy and hi-res media files far quicker than before."

"To go back in time, Al Jazeera has been using Avid iNEWS since 2003, rolling it out for various channels and international offices as the network grew, with a programme of upgrades and new installations having taken place over the last few years.

"The Al Jazeera Balkans channel moved to complete Avid production in 2011, Al Jazeera America followed in 2013 and London, a year later. The last phase is our headquarters in Doha, which is the most complex of our news centres. Not only is it live, but there are multiple languages, including English and Arabic. We left this installation to the end because we wanted to build centres with the ultimate goal of connecting all of them with the main complex, and with each other, by 2017," he explains.

"While the plan here was to build the outer-lying global network first, the team knew that Doha was the ultimate priority as the iNEWS legacy system had reached the end of its life. With limited growth and no real potential for expansion to include new services and functionality, the current system was consuming the time of creative operational staff.

"There have been major changes in news and newsgathering in recent years," Elhusseini, Programme Manager, elaborates.

"We reached the point where we had to make a change so as not to compromise quality. We knew we needed an entirely new file-based HD workflow, which would be an enormous and disruptive task, so in order to stay on air we decided to create a transitional system that would be an upgrade on the old version of iNEWS, and would also help us build an infrastructure able to cope with the heavy flow of media and information now involved in modern TV journalism."

Among the main requirements for the new system was to upgrade...Vizrt upgrade

The AJA team has been preparing for the upgrade for several months, performing tests in the design room and dry-runs in the studios. Vizrt delivered comprehensive training to the staff at Al Jazeera to prepare them for the upgrade.

"Vizrt was on site to oversee the go-live period but at that point, our team was already quite comfortable with the new systems.

"We used Viz Mosart in Al Jazeera Balkans and were happy with the benefits it provided to our playout efficiency. This was one of the main reasons why we also acquired it for our Doha operations. Viz One and Viz World are also very important to us. We expect to be able to leverage their new features across the whole system while also taking advantage of the latest developments and other new products from Vizrt."

"TX was a challenge...as we had some very specific workflows that we wanted...Vizrt...to support. Vizrt helped us to convert these scenes and templates to the new versions so we could implement a fully automated workflow with automatic data updates that we need in TX."

Ali Elhusseini, Project Manager, Al Jazeera Media Network
to HD, based on what Elhusseini describes as “better orchestrated workflows” that are both fluid and efficient. To achieve this, a complete production chain was created using Avid, iNEWS working with Interplay | Production (production asset management), ISIS 7500 storage, AirSpeed 5000 Media Composer editing workstations, the Avid MediaCentral | UX web-based cloud interface, Interplay Capture scheduling and control and Interplay media services.

Avid’s Professional Services team supported Al Jazeera Arabic throughout the transition, from workflow design to project management to end user training support from both English and Arabic speakers.

The Interplay | Production system was selected so that material could be ingested, edited and played out in the newsroom, with full connectivity to other facilities. Logosar explains that essential but time-consuming procedures, such as transcoding, file delivery and quality control (QC) have been automated to allow reporters, producers and technical staff to concentrate on their jobs.

“The journalists are really experienced in using iNEWS but the challenge here was to train them in the end-to-end video workflow, allowing them to edit video on the fly and search for clips. The fly and search for clips. The way they engaged with the new techniques was quite exceptional. The workflow is now easier from every aspect and the journalists are happy that the technology helps them deliver better stories.”

The main challenge of this delivery was that a new system had to be implemented within the existing AJA newsroom and operational positions without any downtime to the on-air output.

“We knew we needed an entirely new file-based HD workflow, which would be an enormous and disruptive task, so in order to stay on air we decided to create a transitional system that would be an upgrade on the old version of iNEWS, and would also help us build an infrastructure able to cope with the heavy flow of media and information now involved in modern TV journalism.”

Al Elhusseini, Project Manager, Al Jazeera Media Network

“Replacing the main production system when it is still in use is an extremely complex and time-consuming task within any 24/7 live news TV station. Nevertheless, believing in the potential of AJMN Technology and Operations staff and their capabilities to deliver such an ambitious project, it was decided that the entire planning, design, implementation and delivery process would be executed in-house. For the first time in AJMN, employees were able to demonstrate their skill and capability to deliver the project without relying on external systems integrators and consultants. This aggressive approach became possible with the full support and understanding of AJA’s news management team,” explains Logosar.

The transitional system will serve as a stopping stone to a more inclusive and sophisticated Avid-based newsroom network that will link Dubai to Al Jazeera’s other broadcast centres, with all video material and supporting information available online for correspondents around the globe.

The transitional installation is about 20% bigger than the system AJA had been using for 12 years, offering more inputs for playout. The final system that will go into service at the end of 2016 will be designed very much around the needs of the users and be approximately 30% bigger again, with greater bandwidth and storage. Once the new installation has been completed, the present system will continue to serve an important purpose by providing training facilities that will lead to the future of newsgathering for Al Jazeera.

Clare Humphries, Manager – Consulting and Training at Avid Technology Europe, says Al Jazeera’s project team “recognised immediately the value of preparation, consultancy, training and go live operational support”.

“We delivered over 160 days of workflow and training services and together we achieved a seamless go-live. It is a significant project that we can be proud of,” he commented.

For the Al Jazeera team itself, this is just work in progress. The number of internal projects they are working on simultaneously is, in itself, impressive. When the final pieces of the challenging AJWT project fall in place, the network will have a solution that will be the envy of the Arab world.”

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Is digital media a threat to TV, or can the two coexist?
We are in the golden age of TV and there is something for everyone here. TV has never been better, with such good quality shows. TV offers fantastically produced, well-curated stories that viewers sit and watch in the comfort of their homes for their daily dose of entertainment and news.
Digital, on the other hand, is a delivery mechanism. It is a pipeline that connects the content provider to the consumer. I feel there is undue attention given to user-generated content, although it cannot be ignored, but it is short-lived. It can’t sustain for longer periods of time, and it can’t hold a candle to what we do.
20 years after Nettv8, 10 years after YouTube and five years after the first iPad, digital content has not destroyed anything in TV. TV news is still going strong. TV ad spend in 2014 was $68.5bn, which increased to $80.5bn in 2015 and is expected to grow to $78.5bn in 2018.
In the Middle East, TV is considered the most aggressive medium, with penetration in KSA at 99%, Egypt at 98%, the UAE at 97% and Kuwait at 98%.

How do you see OTT developing in the future? Is OTT the future of TV?
Netivist, Hulu, Amazon and so on made an impact when they sought the help of seasoned TV makers to produce premium content like House of Cards, Orange is the New Black and other high-quality original series. The innovation that Netflix and the like have brought to the table is the new scheduling technique. They thrive on binge viewing.
Binge viewing has changed the way writers write for TV. Earlier, writers used to write a cliffhanger end for each episode that would keep the viewers waiting for the next episode the following week. The writing for TV has changed and we no longer have cliffhangers.
Binge viewing is essentially anti-social. We have nothing in common about TV anymore because each of us is watching our own TV. Most of us do not have time to go through the entire offering, and more often than not, we have no idea what to watch. It’s like going to a large warehouse stacked with paintings faced against the wall, as opposed to well-curated museums, where paintings and artworks are collected and mounted on the walls for viewing. The latter is what TV offers, we know exactly what our audience wants.
Consumption of TV in the coming years will expand. It was said that video killed the radio star; today apps are said to be killing channels and internet is killing video. But I don’t believe in that; all of us have room to coexist and thrive.

We recently saw some of the Fox channels move from FTA to pay. What does that signal for the FTA industry in the region?
There is exciting movement happening in the pay space. We are also looking at the pay option for our sports offerings. Our sports channel, which has rights to the Saudi League, can be used as an interesting opportunity to look into an alternative revenue stream.
Players such as beIN, Netflix and Starz will surely impact the existing pay TV scenario.

We are monitoring this movement. The challenge will be how much these big players will invest in tailoring making these programmes for the audience. beIN has hit the ceiling for their sports content, and the only way to move forward is to diversify to general entertainment, hence a family offering where they offer entertainment, but the road ahead is hard and long for them.

It’s no secret that pay TV in the region has accumulated losses. FTA up until now is a better business model for the region. Money has not migrated yet from FTA to pay.

How is MBC embracing the change in broadcast?
MBC is leading the change. We are very serious about our digital business and have a massive digital footprint with Shahid.net, Alarabia.net and MBC.net. We are also present on Twitter, Facebook, and there are various micro-sites of individual programmes that receive traffic. Our various digital platforms have 300m followers and this is something we can tap into.
Shahid.net is a catch-up venue for our TV programming. We have also introduced Shahid Plus, a subscription-based premium VOD service.

Can you elaborate on your digital offering? How do you plan to monetise that?
We need to be everywhere because we have the content. Content is king, but monetising content is bigger than that. We aim to make our digital offerings economically viable. We have gained a lot of traction on the SVOD and TVOD service with Shahid Plus.

How do you woo your advertisers?
It’s not a great time to talk about growing advertisers in the Arab world. We will be lucky to have flat revenue as far as ad revenues are concerned. Having said that, our experience has helped us carve a position for ourselves in the market. Being a premium network, we are the least affected. We have felt the strain of shrinking ad budgets but are lucky to not have a total breakdown.

“We are engaging the millennials now. From 2011, we have been investing in engagement TV rather than escapist TV. In addition to our one-way series and movies, we have invested huge amounts in reality television and programmes that require audience engagement”
Ali Jaber, Group TV Director of MBC
Other channels are suffering. We are the only network that makes money out of the 1,000 channels in the Arab world – be it pay, free or VOD, all of them are struggling. We can’t sit on our laurels; we have to keep our eye on the ball. In TV, we have some tentpole shows that uplift a channel and give us the opportunity to invest in new ones.

For MBC, linear TV is always going to be free-to-air. I see linear free-to-air (FTA) TV going strong for at least another 10 years in the region, although we are exploring other avenues to keep up with the changing broadcast landscape.

Which of your channels are the strongest?
MBC 1 is our flagship channel. It offers well-rounded entertainment for anyone who speaks Arabic anywhere in the world. MBC 2 and 4 are also big drivers of revenue for us. MBC 4 is more pan-Arab, while MBC 2 is a Western movie channel. Our Bollywood channel has gained a lot of momentum, and is doing extremely well.

What is the recipe for success for a TV network?
Knowing your audience and giving them what they want, how and when they want it, is what works in television. We know our audiences and their needs, we know what appeals to them, thanks to 25 years of MBC’s experience with Gulf and Arab audiences.

But the audiences have changed drastically from 25 years ago.

So have we, by constantly reinventing ourselves. We are engaging the millennials now. From 2011, we have been investing in engagement TV rather than escapism TV. In addition to our one-way series and movies, we have invested huge amounts in reality television and programmes that require audience engagement.

People watch the shows on TV and discuss them on social media, which brings more eyeballs back to the show. Activity on social media intrigues those involved in a discussion and prods them to watch those shows. The Voice is an incredibly successful show and now, The Voice Kids is very popular. International formats are great, but the trick lies in adapting them.

Professional formats are great, but the trick lies in adapting them. Other networks have previously tried to adapt The X Factor but their attempts have failed miserably. With MBC, its ratings went through the roof. The success of these shows lies in a strong production department and a robust production infrastructure.

“We are also looking at the pay option for our sports offerings. Our sports channel, which has rights to the Saudi League, can be used as an interesting opportunity to look into an alternative revenue stream”
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AJA is keeping pace with the needs of industry professionals in A/V, broadcast, on set, and post. Our new products leverage the latest technologies, including high-quality conversion to 4K, moving video over ethernet cable, and easily integrating computer content into video pipelines.

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As resolutions continue to go higher, there is greater need for data compression to deliver video files faster and without affecting their quality. Here are a few codecs that are commonly used in the industry.

Predictable, because we need a new picture 25 times a second (or in Ultra HD 120 times a second).

Dedicated teams of mathematicians have developed techniques to compress video in predictable ways. These fall into three categories:

- Mathematically lossless – when decoded, the files are identical to the original (zip files are mathematically lossless)
- Visually lossless – when decoded, the files appear to an experienced viewer to be the same
- Lossy – some degradation and artefacts are created in the encoding and decoding, the level of which depends on the application.

We are probably most familiar with MPEG-2 and MPEG-4, the codecs which bring digital television to our homes. On premium channels, with a healthy bit budget, these look good, although some artefacts are clearly visible when you know what to look for. Sports pitches look like felt when the camera moves, or areas of similar colour break up into bands, for example. These are lossy compression schemes. They are also asymmetric compression schemes. MPEG-4/HEVC (the ITU standard number) is designed for one to many – a broadcaster to millions of receivers. The encoding process can be complex because it is only done once, and a cost of say $25,000 for an encoder is a relatively trivial sum for the broadcaster.

“Tico has been demonstrated to deliver visually lossless processing at 4:1 compression and mathematically lossless performance at lower compression ratios. It too is robust for multiple generations of encoding.”

The decoding, however, has to happen in every television receiver or set-top box. The manufacturers of those devices are under pressure to keep the factory prices down, so the stream needs to be capable of being decoded in a chip costing $5 or less. The complex encoding allows simple decoding.

The natural successor to the MPEG family is HEVC, sometimes called H.265 (high-efficiency video codec). This set out with the aim of doubling the compression efficiency of MPEG-4 – achieving the same visual quality in half the bitrate. In time, this has allowed 4K video to be compressed to twice or less the bitrate of HD.

The MPEG family, including H.265, has two disadvantages though. The first is that the compression schemes are based on a mathematical technique, the

While some applications use uncompressed video, in general, that means very high bitrates which are difficult to handle. Basic HD is 1.5 Gb a second; if we were to move to high dynamic range, 120 frames a second 4K video, we would be looking at a native data rate of 18 Gb a second.

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discrete cosine transform that has been so developed over the 20 years or so of MPEG schemes that it is hard to see how it can advance much further. The second is that its intellectual property is owned by a body which needs to charge royalties on each device which uses it. MPEG and H.265 devices each have a licence cost.

The search is on to find newer compression schemes that can find wide acceptance. One of the first to emerge was JPEG2000, which as the name suggests is a development of the JPEG still picture format. The JPEG2000 standard was developed to include a motion element, so it is ideal for video. It also processes images of up to 4,000 pixels square, so can take even 4K video in a single tile.

JPEG2000 uses a different mathematical technique: wavelet compression. This has the advantage that it degrades very gently when under pressure, unlike MPEG, which breaks up into visible blocks. MPI JPEG2000 compression provides good, visually lossless streams, and is now widely used for applications like IP contribution circuits.

The downside is that JPEG2000 is not royalty-free. In point-to-point applications like contribution circuits, paying a licence for two devices may not be economically impractical though.

Two other, more recent compression standards are moving into prominence, and offer the advantages of more recent design (thus taking advantage of the latest in processing power), better compression capabilities and perhaps most important, no royalty payments.

The first is VC-2. This started life as a research project led by the BBC, which produced a codec called Dirac. Like JPEG2000, this is based on wavelet compression, and was finished in 2008. Later that year, an I-frame only version of the codec (one which does not need to compare successive video frames) was developed, called Dirac Pro, and this was passed to SMPTE for ratification, becoming VC-2.

One of the challenges with professional codecs is that, as content moves around production and post-production, material may be encoded, decoded then recoded a number of times. VC-2 is particularly resilient to recoding. The design can be implemented in software, keeping costs down for the technology, and encode times are measured in lines rather than frames, making for low latency.

Taken together, you can build around 30 channels of VC-2 for the cost of a single JPEG2000 channel. The newest compression scheme on the block is the work of the Tico Alliance. This is a grouping of a large number of major manufacturers— including EVS, Grass Valley, Imagine Communications, Neven and Ross—which have come together with the specific aim of creating the next generation compression scheme. The alliance aims for a high performance, low latency codec which provides the performance needed for live IP-based production.

Tico has been demonstrated to deliver visually lossless processing at 4:1 compression and mathematically lossless performance at lower compression ratios. It too is robust for multiple generations of encoding, and is designed for implementation in FPGA chips with no external memory for very fast processing.

Because it is new, it is designed for resolutions from HD up to 4K and 8K, including high dynamic range and high frame rate Ultra HD systems. Finally, the aim of the alliance is to create a widely recognised and freely available standard which is not burdened by complex licensing and royalties, and will be readily interoperable between vendors.

In the immediate future, it looks like H.265 will maintain the MPEG tradition of being the delivery standard, and it is certainly capable of making 4K to the home a practical proposition. JPEG2000 already has a place in providing very high quality contribution links, over dedicated circuits. The newest compression scheme on the block is the work of the Tico Alliance. This is a grouping of a large number of major manufacturers—including EVS, Grass Valley, Imagine Communications, Neven and Ross—which have come together with the specific aim of creating the next generation compression scheme. The alliance aims for a high performance, low latency codec which provides the performance needed for live IP-based production.

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For broadcast infrastructures, at least at present, there is a choice of two royalty-free codecs. VC-2 is already an SMPTE standard. Tico comes from a broad alliance of vendors working in coalition to create a future-proof, widely recognised codec. These represent a strong platform for the future.
White Collar Dxb, an observational documentary, created and produced by Dubai-based Nomad Productions, recently aired its first season on OSN. Producer Phil Griffiths shares more about the making of the show exclusively with Vibhuti Arora.

More than the event itself, it was the various accounts of the fighters’ journeys that attracted the producers. “The sacrifice, the pride and the pain intrigued us and made us think that it would be good to document that, and so we started developing the show,” Griffiths says.

Season 1 takes 50 white-collar workers from 34 different countries and whittles them down to two teams of eight, who compete against each other on one truly memorable White Collar Dxb Fight Night.

According to Griffiths, the series was a refreshing break from the usual TV content from the region, which centres around wealth and being the biggest, best and fastest. “As a local production company, we wanted to create a show that showcased a true representation of the people and lives that make up the fabric of Dubai society. From an Emirati national recently returned from national service to a barman from the Philippines, an estate agent from New Zealand to an Uzbek web developer – we wanted to cover a large cross-section of backgrounds and lifestyles. This also made it all the more interesting, as we documented the friendships and rivalries that developed along the way.”

The series was shot on the Sony FS7 camera with Canon cinema lenses.

“We at Nomad do have corporate clients that we work closely with, but our core background is predominately based within UK TV broadcast production. Therefore, it seemed only natural to try and develop homegrown TV broadcast productions in the UAE,” he says.

The idea took root when he and a colleague went to a White Collar Boxing event in Dubai and met with a few of the competitors. White Collar Boxing is a form of boxing where men and women in white collar professions train like professional boxers to fight in a special event.

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“We recently traded in all of our in-house cameras for FS7s and have absolutely no regrets. Of course, the RED and ALEXA cameras are wonderful pieces of machinery, but for me they are best suited for corporates and shoots which you have more time to prepare for and carry out. “The Sony FS7 is, for me, the best camera for documentary filmmaking. It’s a small shoulder camera, perfect for guerilla-type filming. Yet it has the ability to get those lovely shallow depth interview shots that a lot of shoulder

“The way we wanted to approach the filming was to get as close to the subject matter, and ingrained in the contestants’ experience, as possible. The intent was to create a reality show that looks as gritty and authentic as the content it depicts,” Griffiths says.

Outside the gyms for the individual contestant features, the show has the feel of a post-production observational documentary, with crafted shots and slick colour correction. The series is full of desaturated colours, blue and green tints and high contrast, creating a visual juxtaposition as evident as that between the contestants’ everyday lives and their new lives as boxers.

“Though scripted voice over narration is utilised, the aim was to get the core narrative thread through interviews with gym experts and White Collar Dxb contestants. This was done to give the show a more intimate and personable feel, with events being articulated and accounted for by those best placed to tell them,” explains Griffiths.

At the White Collar Dxb trials, 50 male and female contestants were selected from hundreds of applicants and put through an unforgiving introduction to the world of boxing over a two-day period in the two competing gyms, Round 10 and KO. Of the 50 initial contestants, 24 were then selected to take part in the inaugural competition, undergoing an eight-week training period and competing for a chance to take part in one glorious Fight Night at the end of the series.

“But with a core production team of only seven people, averaging between 15-20 hours per day, seven days a week, for three months, it was safe to say we were all completely broken and in need of a lengthy holiday from the whole ordeal,” comments Griffiths.

Using boxing as a vehicle, the producers wanted to bring about a genuine change in the lives of the contestants. Whether helping a make-up artist overcome her debilitating anxiety attacks, joining a father of two into a better work-life balance, instilling confidence in a painfully shy salsa dancer or being the catalyst for a chef to quit the Dubai party scene and work towards being reunited with his seven-year-old son, it is a show made to encourage and enable contestants to literally fight for their lives.

“A production team meant everyone had to be working at their absolute limit at all times. Any mistakes were magnified considerably,” says Griffiths.

The producers made sure the workflow was slick. Cards from the cameras were downloaded on location and then clipped into various themes. Interviews were logged and transcribed, and then there were three edits, each with different roles and tasks.

“The key for me is always the logging and clipping up. You can have the most creative and capable team of post-production, but if they haven’t been given the best clips and quotes, sorted in a user-friendly way, then you literally have no chance of serving up a good story. The workflow is the most important part of any production,” says Griffiths.

He adds that the team did not foresee the challenges they faced in the production.

“That goes for coaches, contestants and crew. It was brutal, but oddly enough, all of us were united by the difficulty and the subsequent rewarding nature of the whole ordeal. I’ve seen some of the contestants since, and it really is striking to hear how much they got out of it and how proud they were of having gone through it. It is genuinely the same emotion for the Nomad crew – though instead
PRODUCTION

of getting more healthy throughout
like the contestants, we got way
less healthy. High stress, no sleep,
copious amounts of coffee and junk
food meant we weren’t exactly
the picture of health that we were
trying to promote through the
show. Though in season two, we’re
going to nail it!” says Griffiths.
The show will be in its second
season soon. Next season, the
production will comprise around
20 crew members. Rather than
a six-episode format, it will be
12 episodes in the season.
“This will give us the chance
to introduce more of Dubai’s
colourful characters, delve more
depth into the characters and the
back-stories of the coaching staff,
and become far more analytical
in terms of the White Collar Dxb
fighters’ ability and progress.
To top all that off, we’re aiming

“The sacrifice, the pride
and the pain intrigued us
and made us think that it
would be good to document
that, and so we started
developing the show”

Phil Griffiths, Producer, Nomad Productions
to be far more ambitious, and
visual, with the Team Challenges
that the show offers. This will
more likely result in more
epic shoots, and more exhausted
contestants,” Griffiths explains.
He also adds that season two will
have a much bigger focus on digital.
A production team will focus solely
on creating and distributing online
content and behind-the-scenes
output, aiming to give the audience
a more intimate fly-on-the-wall
insight into the show and what
the coaches and contestants go
through over the 12-week period.
“We’re also looking to use
season two to further integrate
the audience into the show, by
making them effectively a part of
it, offering up regular tutorials in
boxing, conditioning and nutrition
via social media platforms,
along with competitions for free
lessons with the coaches.”
Nomad Productions intends to
develop an app that allows the
viewer to watch the best bits of
the show, behind-the-scenes clips
and tutorials, as well as follow
the contestants’ vlogs and the specifics
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While the transition from analogue to digital is nearly complete in all realms of professional audio, the next wave of change is already here. The use of computer networking as a cost-effective and technically superior means of connecting, routing and managing AV systems is a reality that is changing equipment, workflows and possibilities today. Today’s broadcasters are seeing a steady increase in the number of audio and video channels in use. Controlling and routing all these signals using legacy non-network transports can be a daunting task, involving expensive specialised routers and complex workflows that vary from one manufacturer to another. Adding and incorporating new equipment can mean upgrading and replacing many other pieces of gear to maintain compatibility and provide bandwidth. Simple tasks such as maintaining lip sync can require format conversions and expert use of costly equipment. In contrast, an IP-based solution can handle many hundreds or thousands of channels of audio connecting dozens of devices, using inexpensive Cat5E cabling and a few inexpensive gigabit network switches. There are no specialised routers needed to provide conversion and distribution, all changes are made quickly and easily in software running on ordinary computers, with no disruption of production activities. Even metadata delivery and synchronisation is a natural fit for IP networking, which provides a stable platform for development of delivery systems that non-networked systems cannot match. Gigabit and faster network speeds have made IP networking an indispensable medium. In broadcast, it is simply the best way to transmit bit-perfect audio between as many devices as needed, with low latency and tight synchronisation. Today’s IP technology offers a best-of-all-worlds combination of increasing performance with decreasing costs, a trend sustained by the growing use of IP networks across nearly every type of industry.

Available products
The growth of IP systems for media has resulted in the rapid deployment of hundreds of new products in all key audio categories. Today, there are more than 800 networked audio products available. Complete end-to-end systems from microphones to loudspeakers may be specified across different brands, and new products are constantly being released. Manufacturers have risen to the challenge of integrating digital audio networking with existing systems, so older equipment can remain
a vital part of modern broadcast facilities. Many mixers, routers, intercom systems and amplifiers support multiple interface cards, allowing them to bridge older digital protocols such as MADI or CobraNet to a modern Audio over IP network, and dedicated converters are available for nearly any format. This permits audio flows to remain entirely in the digital domain, avoiding signal degradation from intermediate A/D and D/A conversions.

Building bridges – AES67

Realistic, functional interoperability is required to allow facilities to use products they prefer, even if they employ different audio over IP technology. AES67 seeks to accomplish this task. The AES67 standard is a networked audio interoperability specification developed by the Audio Engineering Society. It describes techniques for exchanging digital audio on a TVU IP networking using RTP (Real-time Transport Protocol). Additionally, AES67 specifies particular implementation constraints to facilitate interoperability between implementations.

It is important to note that AES67 is not a complete audio networking solution and does not include all of the components required for that role. Technologies provide the layers of discovery, routing, diagnostics, auto-configuration, software and support needed to form a workable audio networking solution for both users and manufacturers. In contrast, a system using AES67 to connect multiple network solutions still requires separate management tools for each solution in order to control devices, making setup much more complex and error-prone than with a single-solution system.

AES67 promises basic interconnectivity at its core, and has fairly modest and achievable goals. Primarily focused on the

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Brad Price, Product Marketing Manager, Audinate

audio networking transport element, AES67 does not specifically address system control, signal routing or channel labelling. For audio quality, it requires 48kHz, 24-bit stream with one-millisecond latency as the lowest common denominator. AES67 allows, but does not require, support for higher sample rates and different bit depths, which means that supported audio formats may vary between devices in the ecosystem.

Since AES67 is essentially a set of network standards around how audio channels move across an IP network, it represents a pragmatic evolution in audio networking. Unlike previous specifications (e.g. AVB), AES67 offers a standards-based way to deliver multichannel audio between devices across a network without requiring specialised network equipment.

This is significant, as it is the first specification to achieve this goal. The AES67 transport operates with common off-the-shelf switches in a Layer 3 architecture. Therefore, we do not expect AES67 deployments to face the adoption delays that have challenged AVB rollouts.

A long-term solution

In creating the AES67 interoperability standard, the AES organisation used proven existing standards, which mitigates the risk of moving to networked audio. AES67 does not replace complete audio networking solutions, but enhances them by providing a standards-driven approach for useful, low-level interconnection with others. Leading audio networking solutions will continue to provide the features necessary for reliable, complete systems that are easy to use and understand, including matrix-style signal routing software, virtual soundcards, network health and clock status monitoring, real-world naming for devices and channels, and much more.

In contrast, AES67 only specifies the baseline connectivity of audio streams, and more closely resembles an audio-over-IP version of MADI or AES3. It focuses on how audio channels move through the network between points, without defining how routing or switch-defined control may occur. It’s important that companies in this area continue to be involved in the development and tracking of new standards and protocols that further the possibilities of audio networking for TV and radio broadcasting. One thing is certain: the industry will continue to develop new standards that require implementation in a sensible way, and it is important to have robust networking solutions that can evolve to incorporate the latest standards.

Brad Price is Product Marketing Manager at Audinate.
ARRI has released a little brother for the Alexa, the Alexa Mini. However, it is far from being your typical little brother. I would actually call it the 'little big brother' – although it is smaller in many respects, it is stronger.

I first got to use the Mini on a Max Factor TVC I shot for Bazooka Films. Originally, I was going to use the RED Epic, as I needed 4K capability, but then I learnt that Action Films had just received the Mini. The Mini can shoot Ultra HD (UHD), which is 3840x2160 recording in ProRes 422 HQ, 4444 or even 4444 XQ, which is very impressive. In 2K, it can shoot up to 200fps. The Mini has the option to record ARRI RAW and can be set to 4:3 for anamorphic work. This is an incredibly versatile camera and I can safely say it’s far from a mini anything.

Initially, I understand that ARRI launched the Mini to accompany the Alexa in the world of gimbals and aerial work, where productions would have little choice other than to use the RED Epic. However I believe that the Mini is not a mere
It stands on its own two feet and is the kind of little brother that would not only stick up for you in a fight, but emerge victorious.

I really got to put the Mini to the test when I was asked to shoot a 10-day international campaign for Emirates. First of all, it is small at 185mm in length and 125mm in width. Its body only weighs 2.3kg. These factors are ideal for filming inside an aircraft.

We needed to keep the form factor as small as possible in order to get into the menu and adjust the setting, similar to the Amira access points. The Mini is missing the menu on the dumb side of the camera, which is loved by all camera assistants across the globe and every DoP and operator, but you can’t have everything.

The base ISO is a respectable 800. I found the camera to have low noise and natural skin tones, which is another reason cinematographers and directors love the Alexa look. It has around 14 stops of dynamic range (or so ARRI claims). I am always sceptical, though, about how this is measured. However, it does have a high latitude, which was very helpful for me when shooting aircraft interiors. It meant that for certain daylight scenes, I could lighten high contrast and pump 2x M90 through the aircraft windows, yet still pick out details in the internal fabrication of the new A380.

Gaffer Sharief Mohammed ran his team incredibly professionally and supplied some great aircraft filming experience. He rigged the M90s on cherry pickers and had mirrors outside that we occasionally used via the fire exits. For the high contrast, we used smaller mirrors internally and focused light across the talent’s chest, giving the impression of light from windows and some subtle aircraft movement.

The built-in ND filters are very helpful when working for quick turnaround. Just like the Amira, the Mini has ND 0.6, 1.2 and 2.1. This translates to two stops, four stops and seven stops. From ND 1.2 to 2.1, three stops is quite a jump, so it’s worth carrying an ND 3 and 6 with you so you can get to the exact F stop you want to shoot at without changing any lighting. I used older glass on the Mini as we didn’t want an overly sharp image. The Mini’s ALEV III sensor is worth noting, since it’s the same as the more expensive Alexa XT. I combined the Zeiss Super Speed mark 2 Primes T1.3 with Glimmer glass filters varying from 1 to 2 in strength. While 1 is quite subtle, 2 is better for close-ups. The director references were all from high-end fashion photography. We wanted a modern fashion look, and this approach was taken throughout the campaign. The older super speed lenses helped soften the image, and the Glimmer glass filters emphasised this by cleaning up skin tone and subtly blooming the highlights and flaring, without being over noticeable or looking dated. The Mini, like the Eca, has the ability to change out the lens mount, PL, EF and even B4. This comes in very handy and is an excellent investment. If you have smaller jobs where you don’t have the budget or requirement for PL mount glass, you can still use your camera.

Clockwise from left: Director Kell Mitchell, Gaffer Sharief Mohammed, Grey London Creative Jon Williams, DoP Harvey Glen and Producer Matt Akehurst.
Initially, I understand that ARRI launched the Mini to accompany the Alexa in the world of gimbals and aerial work. However, I believe that the Mini is not a mere B camera; it stands on its own two feet and is the kind of little brother that would not only stick up for you in a fight, but emerge victorious.

Harvey Glen, DoP

My camera department did an amazing job. Focus puller Ayub Khan was fantastic at keeping the images sharp. We mostly shot around the T2 mark and often handheld at 50fps. The 35mm was our favourite lens, but we often used an 85mm or 100mm Macro for close-ups as well. Graham Almeida, the second assistant cameraman, managed the camera efficiently alongside key grip Michael Klam, who rigged it in various configurations.

I have used this camera many times since the Emirates shoot and will be using it in future as well. It has the Alexa look, cuts seamlessly with other Alexa models and is so versatile. Honestly, what’s not to love? Alexa has officially become the 35mm replacement. If you look at the Oscar nominations, ARRI cameras have been used in all the top nominated motion pictures. That’s not to say the camera is responsible for the images – far from it! Cinematographers and the craft are the most important, but are now releasing the Weapon 8K, but as much as I like the RED (and I genuinely do), I don’t think it’s all about resolution. Most clients still finish their projects in 2K or HD.

The Mini was a welcome surprise from ARRI. For me, it covers all the bases and was the perfect choice for my shoot. I really wouldn’t change much, other than add a menu on the dumb-side, which would make it easier for assistants to quickly change settings.

The basic Alexa Mini costs $36,000-45,000, depending on your choice of licence options. For a high-end digital cinema camera, that’s not too bad, especially if you can make it work for the next two to four years. Overall, the Alexa Mini is a great piece of kit and perfect for all levels of filming, from TVCs, documentaries and corporates to features.

Harvey Glen is a Dubai-based cinematographer. He can be reached at www.harveyglen.com.
Arab Telemedia Group has upped its game in the regional television market, with an incremental investment in FilmLight’s colour management techniques for its drama production. BroadcastPro ME takes a look at how the solution helps the media company produce more high-quality 4K dramas.

Arab Telemedia Group is an independent commercial media enterprise run by Adnan Awamleh, Founder and Chairman, and his son Talal Awamleh, Producer and CEO. The media house has produced more than 5,000 hours of drama, including Al Ijtiyah (The invasion), Abana’ Al Rasheed (Sons of Alrasheed), Alhajaj, Zaman al Wasel (The gathering age), and Abu Ja’far Al Mansour, shown on prominent channels such as MBC, Dubai TV, Qatar TV, Abu Dhabi and Rotana.

The Jordanian production house offers creative solutions and a comprehensive production package to media houses. Recent investments include 4K camera systems and a colour management workflow from FilmLight.

In recent years, however, the media house went through an overhaul, primarily to ensure it could handle all aspects of a show’s creation, from production to post and final delivery. In addition, with new platforms emerging, the media house felt the need to reinvent itself to cater to multiple platforms.

“Arab Telemedia is to be a leading player, we felt we had to incorporate the most recent systems. If our creative and technical experts benefit from the best equipment around the globe, we felt they would lead the way for Arab culture,” says Awamleh. This prompted the company to add 4K capabilities to its existing skill set. This included an investment in ARRI and Sony digital cinema cameras, an end-to-end tapeless post-production and archiving system including Avid editing and Spectra Logic storage, and a comprehensive colour management workflow from FilmLight.

“Colour grading in progress at Arab Telemedia Group using FilmLight’s Baselight solutions.”

This encouraged the team to invest more heavily in technology, with the aim of producing more engaging and compelling high-quality content.

“If Arab Telemedia is to be a leading player, we felt we had to incorporate the most recent systems. If our creative and technical experts benefit from the best equipment around the globe, we felt they would lead the way for Arab culture,” says Awamleh. This prompted the company to add 4K capabilities to its existing skill set. This included an investment in ARRI and Sony digital cinema cameras, an end-to-end tapeless post-production and archiving system including Avid editing and Spectra Logic storage, and a comprehensive colour management workflow from FilmLight.

This provided for conversion of the raw ARRI and Sony images on or near set, and non-destructive colour grading at every step of the process,” explains Awamleh. “This is particularly useful on a long-running series, where the action regularly returns to a number of fixed sets. As scenes are shot, the crew get a strong feel for what the final result will look like: FLIP has the ability to update these grades too, allowing the director and DoP to show the colourist how the look should develop in different scenes. As well as the FLIP on-set colour systems, we also use Daylight. This is a Mac-based data wrangling and dailies production system, which takes images straight from the set and creates editorial media.”

According to Awamleh, one important point about the...
FilmLight system is that “it does not fix the grade at any point”. It keeps the footage raw and transfers colour decisions as metadata. When it gets to the grading suite, where the colourist has a full Baselight TWO system, all of the decisions are shown in real time. That look can then be finessed and refined, leading to the best possible image results in a compact timeframe.

“Another benefit of this render-free workflow is that it extends further into the post-production process with Baselight Editions for Avid. Baselight for Avid is a software plug-in that sits inside the Avid editing workstation and provides us with two sets of functionality.

“First, and most important, it imposes the latest grading information onto the pictures the editor is working with. As the colourist publishes an updated grade, the look is updated in real time. Second, the editor can open a Baselight user interface in the editor and make any adjustments to the grade needed for smooth transitions. Once again, these are not permanent changes: they are simply updates to the metadata, and the colourist can further adjust these changes for perfect results. Only once the final grade is signed off is it rendered in all the resolutions required for delivery.”

The media house first used this set-up on Wa’ad al Ghareeb (The Promise), a high-value, high-profile 30-episode series produced in 2015-2016.

“We wanted it to have great production quality, even within a tight television timescale. Now we are grading our latest historical series Mobil Risi Al Rayebi using this set-up, and the results are astonishing,” Awamleh says.

Arab Telemedia Group first talked to FilmLight at IBC in 2014. “We realised immediately that the Baselight pipeline and its seamless, render-free concurrent workflow had huge potential. At that time, we were making a significant investment in Avid technology, so the fact that Baselight Editions could add colour grading to the edit stations was a huge benefit. It meant we could see precisely what the finished product would look like, at any point from the set to the finishing suite.”

Awamleh says this addition to its technology has significantly improved the company’s profile in the regional market, owing to its ability to now produce more high-quality drama productions.

“We know we are getting the best possible quality, quickly and economically, because we have a colour pipeline that is the best in the Middle East.”
WHAT’S NEW AT CABSAT

New exhibitors! A brand new Content Marketplace! More conference specials! Andrew Pert, CABSAT’s Show Director, tells us what to expect in the 2016 edition of the Middle East’s largest broadcast show.

The 22nd edition of CABSAT, which will be held from March 8-10, 2016, will feature some elements never seen before at the show. CABSAT, this year, is not merely a broadcast technology showcase; the show will lay equal emphasis on content and the business of filmed entertainment and its future delivery.

Show Director Andrew Pert explains: “CABSAT is now disrupting the future delivery of content production, management and distribution. The show will provide a platform for industry experts to engage, strategise and debate future market trends, whilst being able to source, experience and test the latest electronic media technologies. The idea is to have a measurable growth for the regional market and to drive business in these areas. “CABSAT will introduce the buying, selling and co-production opportunities for all types of filmed entertainment content. For the first time this year, a focused content market is being developed purely for the MENA region.”

There will be more than 30 brands represented within the Content Marketplace, offering content in TV, serial drama, documentaries, sports, kids TV and films to content buyers from across the region. The programme is expected to host more than 800 meetings around buying, selling and co-production of content. “Content Marketplace is the introduction of the buying, selling and co-production opportunities within the film and entertainment market. This is quite topical now with Netflix coming into the market and a lot of Hollywood productions taking place in the UAE. You will see the ideas of NBC Universal and ITV Studios offering premium content for sale. Exclusive content screenings will be a part of the initiative,” Pert explains.

“Yet another highlight this year will be a two-day Content Congress programme, which will see a lot of the studios discussing and looking at new opportunities to create content in the region,” Pert adds.

The conference programme will cover key Hollywood, Bollywood and Arabic TV and film content – creation, distribution and monetisation trends. Attendees will meet, network and learn from global transmedia, technical, engineering and production leaders around the future of broadcast, satellite and content delivery.

In addition to studios and content creators from across the world, CABSAT also has some new entrants in the exhibition area this year. There will be a Nigerian pavilion this time with companies from West Africa represented there. The Nigerian Broadcast Association will be part of CABSAT for the first time. The GCC, Egypt, Morocco and West Africa will be priority regions. Dubai Studio City, Dubai TV and Film Commission (DTCF) and Dubai Film will be present in full force to support the production and content creation side of things. “It’s going to be a showcase for new opportunities to create new ways of producing content,” says Pert. “Content Marketplace will also have locally produced content that can be potentially exported and monetised. There will be discussions around how to brand content and communicate through video content to a worldwide audience to create more business opportunities,” he comments.

“Content Marketplace will connect companies that acquire, programme and commission the buying of content from TV channels and stations, broadcasters, free-to-air and pay TV operations, sportscasters, distributors, telcos and satellite companies and digital TV and video content platforms. Pert claims that there will be more features and content available at CABSAT 2016 than ever before. The Content Delivery Hub and Satellite Hub seminars – presented by the OVP – will deliver 360° interactive presentations. Several closed-door roundtable discussions will be a part of the programme to address the future of production and screening of content within the region with special focus on content delivery. The Content Congress, presented by CABSAT, Content Marketing and NASB Show, will centre on the future of TV in a connected world. There will be opportunities to learn from speakers from Dreamworks, Hasbro Studios, Dailymotion and Fremantle Media about strategising for the future in the region.

The certified post-production training workshops have been expanded this year and will be delivered by certified Apple and Adobe instructors from the US. The sessions are geared for beginner to intermediate level professionals with two to five years’ experience and are conducted by experts, authors and trainers. The two-day programme will feature workshops for students and up and coming filmmakers in the region.

Two matchmaking programmes – the Global Meetings and Red Carpet Meeting lounge programmes will deliver 800+ pre-arranged business meetings, whilst the Screening Theatre, in partnership with CABSAT & Content MarketPlace’s official title sponsor – Telecinco, will see exclusive premiers of filmed entertainment and dramas for sale leading up to the holy month of Ramadan.

CABSAT will introduce the buying, selling and co-production opportunities for all types of filmed entertainment content. For the first time this year, a focused content market is being developed purely for the MENA region.”

Andrew Pert, CABSAT Show Director
Axon in control at CABSAT

Axon in control at CABSAT will feature a 4K Kahuna switcher with Mavrick control panel and SAM’s ICE channel-in-a-box solutions, in addition to other solutions. ICE integrates with the Morpheus playout automation system, an enterprise-scale system suitable for national broadcasts, sports, network origination, centralcasting and business continuity. ICE integrates with the Morpheus playout automation system, an enterprise-scale system suitable for national broadcasts, sports, network origination, centralcasting and business continuity. ICE integrates with the Morpheus playout automation system, an enterprise-scale system suitable for national broadcasts, sports, network origination, centralcasting and business continuity. ICE integrates with the Morpheus playout automation system, an enterprise-scale system suitable for national broadcasts, sports, network origination, centralcasting and business continuity.

Technical Tranings

Broadcast infrastructure specialist Axon Digital Design will showcase its Cerebrum control and monitoring software at CABSAT. Now a key feature in numerous broadcast facilities across the world, this customisable system is being used for mobile production, news and studio live production, master control and remote production. Cerebrum is suited for complex events like the Dubai World Cup Carnival because it simplifies multi-device monitoring and control on to one easy-to-use interface. It supports a wide range of devices including routers, production switchers, servers, receiver decoders, multiviewers and waveform monitors using either SNMP or third-party protocols.

Jünger powers audio processors

Jünger Audio will also be showing the D*AP-8 MAP EDITION, an eight-channel surround monitoring audio processor that delivers truly comprehensive surround audio and Dolby programme monitoring. With D*AP-8 MAP EDITION on board, broadcasters can audition their stereo or surround mixes, check compliance with relevant loudness standards and verify critical Dolby Digital metadata parameters, to ensure that their audio always reaches its maximum potential.

Live production with SAM

Live production with SAM

The SAM stand at CABSAT will feature a 4K Kahuna switcher with Mavrick control panel and SAM’s ICE channel-in-a-box solutions, in addition to other solutions. ICE integrates with the Morpheus playout automation system, an enterprise-scale system suitable for national broadcasts, sports, network origination, centralcasting and business continuity. ICE integrates with the Morpheus playout automation system, an enterprise-scale system suitable for national broadcasts, sports, network origination, centralcasting and business continuity.
Globecast drives migration to HD

Globecast will focus on migration to HD at CABSAT. The company will be highlighting how it can help customers handle the migration to HD using its global experience. Staff will be able to talk them through its range of solutions. The company will also be showing its playout, regionalisation and disaster recovery services. Broadcasters in the Middle East are looking for ways to adapt their content in order to reach the widest possible audience across multiple regions. Globecast offers a combination of global resources and facilities and expert staff on five continents, and can assist Middle East customers with everything from securing long-term rights management to delivering content on multiple pay-TV and free-to-air platforms.

*Source: PWC

Exterity brings IP portfolio to CABSAT

At CABSAT, Exterity will also demonstrate its extended support for 4K and introduce innovative features in its integrated digital signage solution. Exterity customers in the Middle East include beIN Sport, Oman TV, Best Western, New York University in Abu Dhabi, the Hazza bin Zayed Stadium, Golden Tulip, Nurai Island Resort, Etisalat, King Abdullah Sports City and several of the largest airports in the region including Dubai, Salalah and Doha, as well as multiple oil & gas deployments both on- and off-shore, such as ADNOC, BP, Saudi Aramco and Shell.

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An event focused on buying, selling and exchange of all filmed entertainment and audio content for the MEASA region.

Hollywood, Bollywood, Nollywood, Arabic

MEA total entertainment & Media spend will increase from $43.5BN in 2014 to $65.9BN in 2018*

The new MAGIC ACI93 audio codec will be one of the highlights of the AVT stand at CABSAT. It is shown for the first time in the Middle East. Three LAN interfaces can be used flexibly for audio over IP transmissions, for system control via the Windows PC management software, or for integration into a network management system via SNMP. Both LAN leased-line connections and SIP dial-up connections can be established. With the secure streaming feature, in the LAN leased-line mode, a connection can be established via two independent IP links to ensure reliability.

The system supports standard delivery of the coding algorithms G.711, G.722, H.264 Layer 2 and PCM, as well as OPUS. Optionally, the system can be extended with the enhanced apt-X 16/41 Bit, AAC-LD and AAC-LC-V1/V2 coding algorithms. The system encodes one stereo programme in the standard version and can optionally be upgraded to a second stereo programme.

The audio programmes can flexibly and freely assignable be fed in or given output via an analogue and two digital stereo interfaces.

Stand ZM2-21

AVT makes magic with OPUS

EditShare goes XStream

EditShare will bring its advanced media workflow solutions to CABSAT 2016. The stand will offer a demonstration of the XStream range of shared storage systems, featuring seamless integration with Flow media asset management and Ark archiving solutions. Also on display will be AirFlow, the private cloud platform that enables collaborative media workflows and content sharing globally, using current in-house storage. Using the latest EditShare distributed file system, XStream EFS gives mission-critical media workgroups an open storage platform with smart collaboration features.

Stand ZL2-28

Panasonic makes magic with OPUS

Panasonic Marketing Middle East & Africa (PMMAF) has expanded its studio camera line-up through two new additions – the AK-UC3000 4K system and the AK-HC5500.

Targeted at studios and productions requiring high-end functionality at an affordable price, the UC3000 is equipped with a sensor that outputs a UHD signal up to 3840/2160/60p, while also delivering high HD picture quality. The camera’s Bi-mount accommodates the gamut of existing 2/3-inch lenses, and offers a more economical choice for sports, concerts and similar applications. The UC3000 enables shooting with high sensitivity (F11/2000lx, low noise (S/N 60dB), high resolution (1110 TV lines) and a wide dynamic range of 60dB) (36dB). It boasts new functions including shockless Gain (-6 – 36dB), a User Gamma setting, Black Gamma Correction and many characteristics with the UC3000.

Stand ZL2-10

Tediai evolves its MAM

Tediai Evolution is an enhanced version of its media IT platform.

It provides broadcasters and global media companies with the next generation in MAM and business-driven media workflow. It enables an end-to-end business media platform marrying media preparation and logistics into a complete supply chain. This provides customers with scalable tools that cost-effectively allow them to increase their media throughput in line with the speed at which media consumption is increasing year on year. Tediai Evolution reinforces a collaborative working environment.

Stand ZB3-34

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- Maritime Services

G&D has developed a new KVM extender system, the DP1.2-VisionXG, which enables the remote operation of systems and offers uncompressed transmission of DP1.2 signals. This KVM extender system complies with the new standard for DisplayPort 1.2 signals.

For the new DP1.2-VisionXG, fibre optics connect the KVM transmitter at the computer to the KVM receiver placed at the workstation. Despite distances of up to 10km between computer and workstation, users operate their systems in a 1:1 connection without any latency.

To ensure high video quality, the new DP1.2-VisionXG system transmits video signals transparent, meaning pixel by pixel without any compression. This way, all details remain visible even when it comes to high-resolution 4K images at the full refresh rate of 60Hz and across the entire transmission distance. These extenders also offer Screen-Freeze function.

Sonnet Technologies has begun volume shipments of its new Echo 15+ Thunderbolt 2 Dock, a full-featured 16-port docking station for computers with Thunderbolt ports.

Featuring an optical drive and an internal drive bay, the Echo 15+ offers users a central hub to connect any Mac or Windows computer with a Thunderbolt port to multiple peripheral devices. Using the peripherals’ supplied cables, a user can plug up to 16 devices into the Echo 15+, including printers, keyboards, mice, cable modems, external hard drives and SSDs, displays, headphones, speakers, microphones and Apple iOS devices. The user can instantly connect a computer to all these devices simply by plugging it into the Echo 15+ using a single Thunderbolt cable (sold separately). The Echo 15+ offers a wide range of interfaces, including four for USB 3.0.

G&D’s KVM extender for high performance
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Linear TV viewing is set to drop worldwide for the first time in 2016, with online video consumption (which grew by 23% in 2015) to expand by a further 20% in 2016. Audiences today don’t think of their consumption of media in separate compartments – TV viewing, listening to music, internet surfing, movie watching – they are increasingly one simultaneous stream of content consumption.

The macro social shift in media consumption is also changing how advertisers look at TV and other media to reach consumers.

Unfortunately, TV rating companies all over the world have been very slow to develop new methods of audience measurement that incorporate all these major viewership shifts. For instance, in the US, Fox’s highest-rated TV show, Empire, drew an audience of 25m for its season premiere this fall. Yet, only about 20m of those viewers registered in the three-day Nielsen ratings, with the other 5m not reflected due to the fact that they did not watch the show on traditional linear broadcast TV. Nielsen is only about 30m of those viewers registered in the three-day Nielsen ratings, with the other 30% not reflected due to the fact that they did not watch the show on traditional linear broadcast TV. Nielsen is now available in the region – and then there are low-cost challengers like My-IP, Zeebox and new ‘live’ packages launched by IPTV players like Etisalat and Du, all pointing to the fact that premium content will now increasingly have a first window on pay TV and only then will be available to FTA.

According to a recent industry report, the MENA region presently has an average pay TV penetration of 20%, estimated to grow to 25% by 2021. The number of pay TV homes is estimated to double in this period to 20 million.

This trend, coupled with the fact that pay channels have lesser mass reach but deliver affluent audiences with higher disposable incomes, means advertisers will also look at these channels more seriously, and more ad dollars will move away from FTA to pay channels in the years to come. This will further hamper FTA channels’ ability to acquire premium content, which will further diminish their attractiveness.

This will in turn lead to an increased interest in pay content (a vicious cycle for FTA, but a virtuous cycle for pay TV). Over the next decade or so, the MENA will start looking more and more like other mature pay TV markets in Europe and the US.

The falling price of oil, recessionary conditions in Russia, China and Europe, and instability in parts of the MENA have led to either an actual drop in sales or at least pessimism in sectors like consumer goods, hospitality, real estate and retail. This led several advertisers to cut advertising spends by as much as 15% in 2015, and I see this trend continuing in 2016 as well.

This will make advertisers put greater pressure on broadcasters to justify their relevance to a marketing plan, and will also lead to increased competition among broadcasters in an attempt to retain their share of a smaller pie.

One can, therefore, expect downward pressure on rates and increased freebies and value-adds given out by broadcasters, which is somewhat negative for the TV industry in the short term, but thankfully, this negativity is expected to be a short-lived trend and sentiment is sure to bounce up again in preparation for Expo 2020.

Sachin Bokhale is Vice President & Business Head, Middle East & Africa as well as Head of Sales & Marketing, APAC at Viacom18/IndiaCast.
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