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Yahlive, satellite broadcasting for communities.
If we have looked down on North Africa as our poor cousin these last few years owing to the political upheaval and continuing war, it might be time to change our opinion and strategy towards this emerging market. Having visited Tunisia for the first time last month for the 17th Arab Radio & TV Festival, organised by the Arab States Broadcasting Union, I was taken aback by how much is happening in North Africa and how little of it gets out to the rest of the world. Projects may be slowing down here, but that part of the MENA is ripe for the picking for those looking for fresh woods and pastures new.

In fact, outsiders have been quicker to see potential in this market, judging by the large Chinese pavilion that not only had a big presence at the show but also went on to host a gala dinner for all attendees. Nothing, however, makes any business sense unless it is backed up by figures and numbers. Abdelrahim Suleiman, Director General of ASBU, shares some numbers in our exclusive interview with him. Interestingly, the sharp rise in attendee numbers since the last couple of festivals is perhaps the biggest testimony to the growing importance of North Africa to the larger MENA market.

On an aside, this has also been a very busy month for BroadcastPro ME, unlike in previous years. Just after Cannes and Las Vegas in April and a quick run to Tunisia in early May, we hosted two roundtables for Pebble Beach Systems and Avid, while also extending support to Microsoft for their first big meet with regional broadcasters – and more importantly, we celebrated our sixth anniversary. Details inside.
Our new EK 6042 two-channel slot-in receiver can connect to virtually every Sennheiser wireless system – be it analog or digital (including G3, 2000 series, 3000/5000 series and digital 9000). With the built-in web server, setup is easily managed using any browser including imports and exports of the entire configuration.

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Tunisia opens media city

Tunisia's First Media City, which is partly ready, announced the availability of some of its studio facilities and services at the 17th Arab Radio and TV Festival, held in Hammamet.

When complete, the facility, which houses a full-fledged Media University that has been operational since last year, will include 13 production studios.

The media zone will include studios as large as 1200 sqm in size as well as smaller units.

Aref Gharbi, Director of Art and Programmes at Tunisia Media City says that some of the studios are already operational while others are being built.

“We used the Arab Radio and TV Festival as a platform to announce our very first media city. We are presently hosting an Algerian series in one of the media city studios. Other Tunisian productions for TV are also underway in the studios on the media city premises,” she commented.

Audit signoff marks People Meter success

The UAE’s tview People Meter system has been endorsed as being aligned with international standards and recommended for use by the UAE media industry, according to the latest report from independent auditors CESP.

The third audit showed significant improvement in all the critical performance areas identified in previous audits, continuing the trajectory established in the last two years.

Most notably, the key area of panellist compliance, which measures the active participation of the panellists in the measurement process has passed the 85% benchmark set by CESP and agreed by industry representatives.

Other improvements included a major new large-scale Establishment Survey to accurately determine essential demographic details and increased penetration of TV sets in the panel.

YouTube plans video subscription service

YouTube is reportedly in talks to launch its own online TV subscription service. YouTube’s interest in a live TV package has been reported in the past, but this is the first time the name and details of the plan have emerged. The service, Unplugged, will allow customers to stream cable TV channel bundles online.

Bloomberg has reported that the new service, which will launch in 2017, is one of YouTube’s “biggest priorities”.

YouTube has already overhauled its technical architecture for the project, the report said. YouTube executives have discussed these plans with most major media companies, including Comcast’s NBCUniversal, Viacom, Twenty-First Century Fox and CBS, but have yet to secure any rights.

Unplugged follows YouTube’s ad-supported Red subscription service and will run alongside it.

Istanbul announces Dramasat as DISCOP moves to Dubai

MediaSat, a Turkish entity, has announced the launch of Dramasat, a new platform for buying and selling content, from this year in Turkey. Dramasat Expo is scheduled to be held in Istanbul from March 1 to 3, 2017. The event will be specifically aimed at the MENA region and Turkey.

Adel Tayeb, PR & Research Manager for MediaSat, commented that the company saw an opportunity to launch Dramasat owing to DISCOP’s move to Dubai in January.

“We will launch Dramasat in March 2017 in Istanbul as DISCOP will no longer be held in the city from next year. Turkey is a thriving content market and needs a new platform to attract content suppliers and buyers,” he said.

“We hope to provide an exclusive platform to Arab content buyers and sellers in the region. A majority of the Arab world looks towards MIPTV for TV content at present and the region lacks an event of that kind. Dramasat will fill that void and invite TV and production houses from the MENA and beyond to be part of the programme,” he added.

News Flash: Apple mulls Time Warner takeover, may consider buying Netflix.
MBC to evaluate Orca for Disaster Recovery

MBC is to evaluate the new software-defined virtualised IP channel solution, Orca from Pebble Beach Systems, at its Dubai facility. The system, which is being supplied to MBC, is set to be tested as a disaster recovery solution during the forthcoming Ramadan period.

Orca offers a software-only virtual implementation of the company’s Dolphin integrated channel platform. Orca channels run in a virtual machine (VM) in a private cloud with IP inputs and outputs. Channels can be launched and integrated into a running Marina automation system literally at the click of a button, making it suitable for temporary and event-based services.

Nick Barratt, Senior Manager – Broadcast at MBC, confirmed: “We have partnered with Pebble Beach Systems for a number of years, having initially adopted the Pebble Beach Systems Neptune automation solution for our playout. We are planning to migrate the playout of all existing channels to the company’s Marina platform over the coming 12 months, and look forward to testing the new virtualised IP integrated channel – Orca – under Marina control for use in disaster recovery.”

Selevision chooses Squadeo’s video player to power Seevii

Selevision has chosen Squadeo, a global provider of secure cross-platform OTT video solutions, to power the video playout on mobile, laptops and set-top box devices in the UAE for its entertainment service Seevii.

“As a technology and content provider, we are constantly innovating behind the scenes, developing products and services to improve both the access to premium content and the user experience. We are delighted to partner with Squadeo to reinforce this strategy by adopting this enriched video experience; a cost-effective solution with the ability to deploy the same player with our existing Digital Rights Management (DRM) over HTTP live streaming (HLS) across mobiles, tablets and laptops” said Dr. Raed Khusheim, CEO of Selevision.

TV audiences fall by 5% in MENA

According to the latest survey conducted across six countries by Northwestern University in Qatar (NU-Q) in partnership with Doha Film Institute (DFI), television viewership in the MENA is down by 5% since 2014. While almost all (95%) nationals watch TV, the number who watch daily fell from 69% in 2014 to 64% in 2016. The decline is most notable in Qatar, whose daily TV viewership fell from 62% in 2014 to 41% in 2016, followed by Saudi Arabia (from 65% to 49%). In Egypt, the proportion of those watching TV each day fell from 70% in 2014 to 63% in 2016.

Emad Morcos has taken on a new role at OSN as Chief Content Officer. He will be responsible for driving OSN’s consolidated content strategy and is also mandated with the acquisition of programming rights across all OSN platforms.

With more than 24 years of broadcast experience in some of the world’s leading media companies in the US, Europe and the Middle East, Morcos has been serving as Senior Vice President, Media Partners & Digital at OSN. He reports to David Butorac, Chief Executive Officer of OSN. Morcos has been part of the OSN team since 2007.
Riedel connects Qatar's Lusail Sports Arena

The Lusail Sports Arena in Lusail, Qatar, is using the Riedel MediorNet real-time media network and RockNet real-time audio network to simplify the management of numerous signals throughout the venue. Built to host matches in the 2015 World Men's Handball Championship, the 15,300-capacity indoor sports arena leverages Riedel's fibre networks to reduce the overall volume of cabling required and to make a variety of signals available as needed to support live events.

“Our goal in deploying a fibre network at the Lusail Sports Arena was to manage the transport and routing of many signals throughout the building in the most efficient manner,” said Moufed Elefrangy, Project Engineer at Techno Q, the Qatar-based systems integrator, responsible for the project.

The MediorNet and RockNet systems were integrated into the architecture of the Lusail Sports Arena by Techno Q.

“The Lusail Sports Arena is a powerful and iconic visual symbol of Lusail City, which itself represents Qatar’s vision of a modern sustainable city,” said Ahmed Magd El Din, General Manager for the Middle East and Turkey at Riedel Communications.

“Though it was built according to the tight timeline dictated by its first event, the World Men's Handball Championship, the facility boasts an array of advanced technologies. Our fibre-based real-time media network solutions are an ideal fit for such an installation, simplifying extensive signal management while providing the reliability and versatility essential to high-profile sports events and productions.”

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PSS COMES TO DUBAI

Professional Seminar Series attracted more than 100 attendees this year to its Dubai edition. The event featured presentations from Tektronix, TSL Products, Axon and Dolby.

Antoni Caceres, Applications Engineer, Tektronix introduced IP video and Precision Time Protocol (PTP).

Although many see IP video as new technology, in video distribution workflows, the transition from ASI to IP began 15 years ago. In fact, production is the last remaining stronghold for SDI.

The seminar gave a brief overview of the advantages risks and challenges associated with the use of IP video in a live production environment as well and an overview of the various standards most commonly in use for the distribution of baseband video over IP. Also discussed were the various PTP standards and a brief description of how PTP operates.

Geoff Love of Axon spoke about the practical considerations of ultra-high definition.

UHDTV is four times the resolution and twice the frame rate of full HD, carried as four separate 3G-SDI streams. The use of 3G allows existing equipment to be utilised for logo insertion and audio embedding but compensating delay must be applied where required. UHD produces significant amounts of HF picture content which requires precise filtering to avoid artefacts when the programme is converted to HD-SDI.

Such considerations require system designers and operations managers to factor sufficient research and testing time into UHD projects, Love said.

Geoff Love of Axon spoke about the practical considerations of ultra-high definition.

Pieter Schillebeeckx, Product Director, TSL Products Ltd. spoke about video and audio over IP.

Although even a year ago, it was clear that the rise of IP was unstoppable, the industry was confused and in a holding pattern. Protocol wars were raging between different manufacturers and the IP dream was just that - a dream.

Now, 12 months later, things are starting to look up and proprietary protocols are starting to give way to standards being developed with input from both manufacturers and broadcasters. Another major shift in the market is that this IP revolution is now being driven by the broadcasters with the manufacturers playing catch up.

Lukasz Waksmsanski, Manager at Dolby Laboratories gave an overview of delivering new consumer experiences with next generation codecs.

The most compelling new experiences are immersive sound and customisation of experiences or personalisation. Immersive sound seen as cinematic Dolby ATMOS brought to the home differs from existing surround solutions by enabling height sounds, Waksmsanski said.

Personalisation is the key experience in sports events where one could customise experience according to one’s preferences using new object-based audio approach. In object audio, the scene can be presented as background noise (bed) and dynamically changing sounds (objects).
DIFF opens submissions for Muhr Awards and Enjaaz

Dubai International Film Festival (DIFF) is now accepting entries for feature fiction and non-fiction and short films originating from the UAE and the Arab world, which will compete for the prestigious Muhr Awards.

As the only Arab film festival that qualifies to contribute short films for Oscar consideration, the Muhr Arab short that picks up Best Film will be eligible for entry into the Academy’s 2017 competition. Basil Khalil’s Ave Maria took home the prestigious Muhr Award for Best Short Film at the 12th edition and competed at the recent 88th Academy Awards.

Dubai Film Market (DFM), the business counterpart of Dubai International Film Festival (DIFF), is also accepting submissions for Dubai Film Connection and Enjaaz.

Nigeria launches digital terrestrial TV pilot in Jos

The pilot phase of Nigeria’s nationwide programme to transition from analogue to digital terrestrial television (DTT) has been launched in Jos, Plateau State. The Minister of Information and Culture, Alhaji Lai Mohammed, said that the switch from analogue to DTT broadcasting is a “monumental event” which will revolutionise “the broadcast landscape and architecture, as well as the national economy”.

Go Jetters lands in MENA on beIN

Pre-school series Go Jetters premiered in the Middle East in May 2016, exclusive to the CBeebies channel. First launched on the CBeebies UK website last year, the new TV series airs on CBeebies international channel on beIN across the Middle East and North Africa territories. Go Jetters is a 3D animated British children’s television series which was first launched in UK. The programme was commissioned by CBeebies Controller Kay Benbow and is a co-production of CBeebies In-house Production and BBC Worldwide. The show is aimed at preschool ages of 4–6 year olds.

Turner launches CN Hindi in MENA

With growing demand for tailored content and the lack of a dedicated kids platform that caters to the large South Asian demographic, Turner has launched its fourth flagship kids channel, Cartoon Network Hindi. The channel is aimed at entertaining children between the ages of 4 to 14 from the sub-continent residing in the region. Available in Hindi only, the new channel will include a line-up of popular Cartoon Network originals like Ben10, PPG, The Amazing World of Gumball, Adventure Time and many more, in addition to popular Indian cartoon series that also air on Turner Channels in India.
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Lifetime Turkey chooses Cinegy

Lifetime Turkey has installed a complete IT-based Cinegy solution for everything from ingest to playout.

Lifetime Turkey is the latest addition to the A+E Networks global footprint of lifestyle channels and is a joint venture between A+E Networks and MCD Medya, one of Turkey’s leading digital media multi-developers and distributors. Lifetime Turkey will be free-to-air in the country, where it has the potential to reach more than 19 million households.

The Cinegy software modules, supplied and installed by Cinegy’s partner in Turkey, Orsatek, which specialises in media asset management, automation and workflow, comprise 10 software modules or bundles that include, but are not limited to, Cinegy Archive, Cinegy Air PRO, Cinegy Desktop, Cinegy Route, Cinegy Encoder and Cinegy Multiviewer.

Du launches Eurochannel in the UAE

Du is expanding its TV bouquet with the addition of global film offering Eurochannel.

The premium programming on Eurochannel encompasses European films and TV series and is now available in 22 million households in 10 languages. It will be available on du English Basic and French Basic packages.

Starz Play Arabia and Samsung partner for VOD

Samsung Electronics Co., Ltd. MENA has announced a partnership with Starz Play Arabia.

In addition to a wide range of blockbuster Hollywood movies and the latest English and Arabic TV series, the partnership will deliver 4K content in Arabic directly on Samsung Smart TVs for the first time in the region.

Following the agreement, select Samsung Smart TV models sold in the Middle East will come bundled with up to six months’ free subscription to Starz Play offering more than 4,000 hours of content.

OSN and Viacom launch Comedy Central HD

The worlds of Arabic and Western comedy came together in Dubai to mark the official launch of Comedy Central HD on OSN. Available exclusively on OSN for viewers in the Middle East, Comedy Central HD was launched by Trevor Noah, the host of The Daily Show, and one of Saudi Arabia’s leading stand-up comedians, Fahad Albutairi.

The new launch follows an agreement between OSN and Viacom International Media Networks. Comedy Central HD is the third brand for VIMN in the region, adding to the popular MTV, Nickelodeon and NickJr offerings.

Icflix now accessible on Hisense TV

Icflix has partnered with Hisense, to make movies, TV series, documentaries and kids entertainment from Icflix accessible to consumers across the MENA region.

The Icflix app will come pre-installed on all high-end Hisense TV sets and will include a three-month free subscription for customers who sign up for a premium account.

“This partnership will allow us to present consumers the convenience to watch the best of Hollywood, Jazwood [Arabic] and Bollywood content seamlessly,” said Carlos Tibi, Founder and CEO, ICFLIX.
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SAM is at the forefront of developments in IP, we offer products that work today in the SDI domain and allow expansion into the IP world without excessive risk or substantial upgrades. Our switchers, routers, infrastructure and playout systems are all available with IP interfaces supporting both uncompressed (SMPTE 2022-6 and VSF TR-03) and a range of compression formats, including VC-2. Familiar control interfaces provide hybrid SDI/IP operation.

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- Modular Infrastructure & Conversion

SAM's unique mix of experience and energy is complemented by a true belief in innovation. It is fundamental to everything we do, and helps us deliver solutions that really make a difference to our customers.
Cost Innovation
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The UAE’s Arabian Radio Network has added new digital streams to complement its terrestrial offerings as an extension of its FM channels on mobile apps. In an exclusive interview with network head honchos Mahmoud Rasheed and Steve Smith, Vibhuti Arora finds out more about the back-end services that went into the creation of these digital arms and how digital content is poised to expand the network’s capabilities.

Early last month, Arabian Radio Network (ARN) launched seven new digital radio brands. The Dubai-based radio station already operates nine channels on its terrestrial platform, and the new channels were launched as digital-only offerings. Complementing the output from its existing terrestrial services, the new brands offer content based on mood and are accessible via smartphone apps, including on iPhone and Android.

The station plans to add three to four more digital brands by the end of this year, according to Mahmoud Rasheed, General Manager of ARN, who says that the digital streams will widen the listeners’ choice of music.

“The format of our stations does not allow us to play many genres of music because of time and commercial constraints, hence the new streams to cater to market demand. Our listeners want more, and by means of our digital offerings, we are giving them more choice to experience new music.
genres. These can be accessed on apps as well as online. Within our terrestrial offerings, we have limited scope to offer other music genres beyond the regular ones.”

The digital stations are non-interactive and play out in real time but they allow listeners to purchase the listed music through iTunes or Google Play.

Chief Operating Officer of the now 16-station network Steve Smith adds that the new brands are broadening the listener ecosystem.

“Radio listening is often mood-based, and these new digital brands allow us to build audience loyalty and complement the terrestrial stations. With the mobile phone being at the centre of our world, we want to ensure that we are embracing the latest technology as we continue to lead the media market in the UAE,” he says.

Smith also says that quality-wise, digital content quality is much better.

“We have used top-notch algorithms in the market to offer sound even better than CD quality.”

Rasheed and Smith point out that music is the focus of the new offerings. Keeping listener choice in mind, the brands have been designed to achieve clear-cut commercial goals.

“While our terrestrial brands are at the forefront, these digital streams give our advertisers more options. One major advantage of digital assets is the ability to get real-time data about who’s listening, the listeners’ choices and their preferences, as these have huge monetisation potential,” adds Smith.

The content managers running these brands come from within the ARN set-up.

“We have a great set of people, and we think these platforms will give them an opportunity to showcase their talent. We have RJs playing out in real time and the channel packaging for these digital streams, as we have for the terrestrial ones,” says Smith.

Although FM is still strong in the UAE market, with considerable listenership during the drive, digital is the way forward to keep in step with global trends, according to the ARN head honchos. In the UAE, there is 252% penetration on mobile phones, out of which 90% is on smartphones, thereby giving digital content a wider audience base.

“Going digital is the way forward, as it opens endless possibilities for not only creating engaging content but also creating engaging ways to monetise that content. We will be releasing a programmatic tool into the market, and ARN will be serving programmatic audio in the future. The digital database will be used for target advertising in the future to deliver different audio commercials based on the listener profile. You hear commercials that are most relevant to you,” notes Smith.

Building the back-end

The digital streams were created with the idea of offering the most in-demand genres of music for listeners, available on all major online as well as mobile platforms, using the latest technology. Listeners experience crystal-clear HD audio quality of the music genre of their choice, playing non-stop on their preferred online/mobile platform. The digital output is claimed to sound better than most FM broadcast stations.

At the core of all this, the back-end infrastructure was to run smoothly and be able to accommodate expansions or additions in the future. Murad Jahangir, Director, Information Technology at ARN, who has been overseeing the project, says that the digital streams play out from virtual machines.

“In a conventional FM radio setup, we have workstations and servers built on hardware. For the digital streams, we created an efficient back-end workflow based on virtualisation and created new software-only slots to enable one system to do multiple operations. Within the internal workflow, people can connect and schedule music from anywhere in the world. A private cloud has been built within the company that operates on ramped up, high-efficiency HP servers.”

The radio network began its digital initiative early on in 2010 when it first launched apps for its FM stations. “The digital installation then was designed and customised for FM stations,” explains Jahangir, adding that the new installation caters better to online and mobile platforms.

“We have ensured that the
two systems talk to each other, so integrating any libraries or policies, whenever required, is not an issue,” he points out.

The systems are highly scalable and expandable to meet ARN’s future requirements. Each new digital station can easily fit in the carefully thought-out and planned design, using the virtualised infrastructure. Moreover, the existing digital stations’ database growth can be easily accommodated.

Jahangir explains that the station has used solutions from brands already deployed on the FM side, such as RCS radio automation, Zetta and an Omnia processing platform.

“It was a mix of various solutions, customised to ARN’s requirements. We built our own virtual cloud, created a full digital web radio playout workflow chain, using products from leading radio vendors to support us in delivering this project.”

Brands such as RCS, VMWare, VAC, HP/Dell and Microsoft are part of this virtual infrastructure.

The cloud consists of a pool of fully fault-tolerant virtualised systems capable of handling heavy network traffic and database queries, audio encoding and processing engines, all within a single virtualised environment. The infrastructure is built to support one-to-many virtualised systems to manage a number of virtual machines, which supports

“While our terrestrial brands are at the forefront, these digital streams give our advertisers more options. One major advantage of digital assets is the ability to get real-time data about who’s listening, the listeners’ choices and their preferences”

Steve Smith, COO, ARN
The station uses streaming format – AAC/MP3 – and extended formats to support most mobile platforms.

Commenting on the metadata requirements of the project, Jahangir says: “Initially, we migrated a lot of content from our existing libraries, built over many years. New content is added on a regular basis also. Rich metadata format offering the current song and artist information, with album art and the last 10 played songs information, are also included. We ensured that these are readable by all mobile or online streaming players.”

Considerable testing was done to make sure all the technical elements fall in place to support this build.

On the challenges of virtualised solutions, Jahangir says: “After the back-end was built, tested and ready, then there was the challenge of making the internal programming teams understand the virtual environment in the beginning, as they were used to a certain workflow in the FM environment, with physical machines, edit booths, mixing consoles, on-air studios and so on.”

Rasheed adds that to counter such challenges and in order for the teams to get accustomed to the new systems, an extensive internal training for staff was carried out by both technical and programming teams, to make sure that the teams handling the new stations were well equipped to work in a virtual environment.

Built on a technically advanced, powerful, scalable and fully redundant platform, this set-up allows access to each station from anywhere in the world, for on-air talent for voice-tracking shows, programming to manage their libraries and playlists and the technical teams for full administration.

Elaborating on the programming, Smith says that great content works on any platform.

“For us, FM is as strong as ever. We will, however, continue to innovate and offer more relevant content to our listeners. We buy content globally, and also design and develop our own in-house original formats.

“Going forward, we will use our existing talent pool and hire new mindsets. In fact, all of our presenters don’t even have to be locally present, as technology gives them tools to operate remotely and this widens our scope. All of these give a boost to our digital assets that are growing stronger and creating more opportunities for us and our partners,” concludes Smith.

“In a conventional FM radio setup, we have workstations and servers built on hardware. For the digital streams, we created an efficient back-end workflow based on virtualisation and created new software-only slots to enable one system to do multiple operations”

Muard Jahangir, Director of IT, ARN
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The 17th Arab Radio & TV Festival attracted a large number of visitors from North Africa and the GCC, while also serving as a key platform for broadcast technology manufacturers to reach out to the pan Arab market. Although a much smaller event than NAB, IBC and CABSAT, this event brings together a set of players whom we are not accustomed to seeing at the bigger shows.

More importantly, the event also reflected some interesting trends. For instance, there was a large Chinese pavilion at the event this year and sources there commented that China was indeed looking at North Africa as an important territory in which to sell TV content and subtitling services. A number of manufacturers with stands at the event explained that North Africa was an important market for them and the only way to see the local players was to come to the Arab Radio and TV Festival. As it was BroadcastPro ME’s first trip to the festival, as well as to Tunisia, we were pleased to be able to talk to some of the key TV and radio stations operating in that region and understand the market and its needs better.

Abdelrahim Suleiman, an industry veteran and Director General of ASBU, shared some insights with us.

How has the Arab Radio and TV Festival evolved over the last 17 years?
The Arab Radio and TV Festival is one of the landmark events organised by the Arab States Broadcasting Union (ASBU) as a key regional rendezvous for the MENA broadcasting community of experts, professionals, officials and artists, along with the public at large. It dates back to 1981, but changed its periodicity from once every two years up to the 15th session to annual, starting last year. In addition, the content of the Festival and the events it includes have also changed substantially.

Since you took over as Director General, what specific changes have you brought to ASBU?
This event, in particular, has been the object of major change. Besides the fact that it is hosted annually, participation has sky-rocketed both in terms of numbers as well as the quality of the participants. Our competition has gained a lot of momentum and prominence. We have also seen the parallel rise, since last year, of a broadcasting technology exhibit, which is drawing more and more equipment manufacturers, delivery platforms, potential customers and other professionals.

Elsewhere, our effort and focus is to encourage, lead and help our member corporations to adopt new and emerging broadcasting technologies, be it in the fields of digital radio and TV, HD, ultra HD TV or beyond. In order to keep up with such major and innovative changes, ASBU is now launching a training academy at its HQ in Tunis to benefit member corporations, and other radio and TV professionals in the region.

One other field that we are keen to develop further at ASBU, along with our member corporations, is the daily exchange of radio and TV news and programming packages through our dedicated centre in Algiers. We have developed for this activity our own system, known as the Multimedia Exchange Network over Satellite (MENOS), to which all
our members and several other broadcasters are connected. Our objective now is two-fold – double the flow of such exchanges and improve the quality of exchanged material in order to widen the basis of its placement on and usage by beneficiary channels.

Besides, ASBU has already connected the MENOS network with 700 POPs in 190 cities around the world, in order to maximise the MENOS global reach by integrating with other available networks through a hybrid solution that combines fibre networks with satellite-over-IP networks. Such a combination allows the exchange of news, sports, programmes or any media content for the benefit of ASBU members.

ASBU is connected as well with the networks of sister unions like EBU, ABU and AUB, among others.

ASBU is also working to launch its MENOS cloud network over the internet, in order to achieve more targets and reach more users and audience.

Has ASBU managed to introduce standards and bring about some changes in the thinking of public broadcasters? I believe this was the initial goal?

Yes, standards play a major role in our business. This has always been the case in our industry, and the launch of new technologies highlights this need even more. We need to set the path for our member corporations with respect to adopting new broadcasting technologies. Through our specialised working groups, standing committees as well as technical seminars and symposia, we look at the most appropriate standards and technologies media entities must adopt, and we encourage them to work towards sticking to the same standards.

Besides, our mission is to promote public broadcasting as a free service to the public at large. No community, group or minority in the country should feel left out from such a service. All voices shall be heard.

The North African market seems to be gaining greater significance? Can you share any statistics on the TV and radio market in North Africa with regards to TV and radio stations?

The North African market has gone through the same satellite broadcasting boom as the whole Arab region (Gulf countries, Middle East countries and North Africa). As a result, the number of radio and TV channels – terrestrial, satellite and web-based – have skyrocketed in the five North African countries (Morocco, Mauritania, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya). As an indication of this phenomenal increase, public TV channels went from a handful in the nineties to 16 channels now, while private ones only started appearing two decades ago. By the end of 2015, we had 127 private channels. This is even more so for radio stations, which are public, commercial and community-oriented. All public channels are active ASBU members, while only a few private ones have become members of ASBU so far.

We try to make sure that all the three regions of the Arab world are fairly represented at ASBU and take part equally in its activities.

What are the big challenges in this market for TV and radio broadcasters?

Most of the challenges are the same as the ones facing radio and TV channels around the world and in the Arab region in particular. They relate mainly to technology, human resources, content production and competition. Some of these challenges are more acute to this particular region, though. Financial resources to invest in a new radio or TV venture are scarce and the political and social unrest, a limited advertising market and technical challenges have added to this.

Can you share specific statistics on the number of participants at this year’s show?

Statistics relating to the 17th session of the Festival are quite impressive...
and reflect the great impetus the event is steadily gaining. 55 stands were devoted to radio and TV corporations, 56 more stands were used by manufacturers and broadcasting service providers. Overall, the ASBU convention had 170 stands, as compared with 130 during the last session and 30 to 35 ones during earlier editions.

Besides, 49 TV corporations, including 14 ASBU members, 29 radio corporations, four foreign corporations broadcasting in Arabic, 13 privately-owned channels and 18 production companies and news agencies, participated in the festival. With regards to attendees, we had at least 500 non-Tunisian and some 200 nationals visit the festival or participate in it. There were only 450 people in 2015 and 160 in 2012. In addition, our radio and TV contests attracted 233 programmes (155 TV and 78 radio) of various categories.

What are the objectives of the Arab Radio & TV Festival?
The festival aims to contribute to the development of Arab radio and TV production and to upgrade its content to meet the expectations of member corporations. It also aims to encourage Arab creative energies in the fields of radio and TV.

“One of the important functions performed by ASBU is to negotiate the broadcasting rights to major international sporting events on behalf of its member corporations. Such events included the summer and winter Olympics and various Asian football competitions. Today, Arab channels are able to broadcast these important events at a cost that would have been difficult to obtain, were they to negotiate them individually.”

Abdelrahim Suleiman, Director General of ASBU

Have you seen an increase in the number of people attending the show? Do you get more visitors and manufacturers from the GCC now?
This year, we certainly broke a few records with regards to participation in the Arab radio and TV Festival. More visitors, participants, manufacturers, professionals are coming over every year. The GCC countries...
are particularly active in the festival, since they have strong representation in all events. In addition to our strategic partnership with ARABSAT in co-organising the festival, various Gulf corporations, production companies and service providers, among our members and non-members alike, are even asking every year to be present and play a greater role in the organisation process.

What does ASBU do on a daily basis?
Our missions are so varied, but all converge in providing support to public broadcasting in the Arab region. Basic services consist mainly of organising and coordinating the exchange of information, programmes and sports coverage, technical assistance, covering major events from within and outside the Arab region, a bouquet of programmes broadcast to the world and training staff from member corporations.

ASBU strives to facilitate exchanges among member broadcasters. This service has seen significant and rapid development, allowing Arab corporations today to share three daily exchanges – two weekly packages of sports programmes, along with two other packages, one economic and one cultural.

The Arab Unified Bouquet is one of the outstanding services ASBU provides to Arab satellite channels, allowing them to achieve technical, economic and strategic benefits while providing the best services to Arab viewers in Africa, Asia, Europe and North America, South America and Australia.

In addition, one of the important functions performed by ASBU is to negotiate the broadcasting rights to major international sporting events on behalf of its member corporations. Such events include the summer and winter Olympics and various Asian football competitions. Today, Arab channels are able to broadcast these important events at a cost that would have been difficult to obtain, were they to negotiate them individually.

ASBU also gives special attention to training Arab radio and television professionals as part of its efforts to assist member organisations in developing their production. We organise training sessions for these professionals to enable them to monitor developments in their field of specialty worldwide.

What important changes has ASBU brought about in the thinking of public broadcasters?
Our activity is mainly concentrated in two major fields of action:
• On the technical side, we aim to lead our member corporations on the path of keeping up with the rapid changes affecting the broadcasting industry worldwide. We organise international technical seminars, lobby specialised international organisations such as the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) to defend our members’ rights, make the necessary choices among the technical innovations available, encourage our members to adopt the necessary changes, organise them into working groups and ad hoc committees and assist them in acquiring, installing and using new equipment.
• On the programming side, we raise awareness among our members to develop the mission of public broadcasting from just a panoply of publicly owned broadcasters to public service-oriented corporations. As we are a public entity and receive part of our resources from public funding, we try to serve all public sections and communities fairly, no matter how small they might appear.

Where do you see ASBU heading from here and what would you like to see eventually?
Despite all of the difficulties the broadcasting industry is going through, particularly in the Arab region, we remain optimistic about its future. ASBU can play a major role in setting the agenda of future developments of the industry. Our vision and mission is mainly to promote public broadcasting and develop it to fit the requirements of a public service and not just be a part of a group of other broadcasters in a rat race.
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Audiences still watch television, but demand for second-screen experiences is sky-rocketing. An NBC Sports study on the London 2012 Olympics discovered that those watching the action on four devices (TV, PC, tablet and smartphone) viewed 42% more hours of content per day than those watching on TV alone. Live events also boost engagement levels tenfold and capture a more diverse audience, which greatly expands advertising opportunities. It is easy to see how this would appeal to those tasked with monetising content, and why such executives would be actively exploring options for the building of a multi-channel delivery system.

Such trends were a hot topic at Microsoft’s recent “Take your Media to the next level, take it to the Cloud” event in Dubai. The Gulf’s Internet and smartphone penetration rates are obvious opportunities for multiple-device content-delivery services and delegates proved eager to learn how the cloud could be used to capture wider audiences.

It is no mystery as to what is causing the shift in consumer appetites. The device revolution is no longer a revolution – it is now the new paradigm. But industry sectors are still catching up, frantically innovating against current penetration figures and projected growth. There are many market reports that summarise the mind-bending scale of what is happening. There are 7.2bn devices in the world, one study might say; their numbers are growing five times faster than those of humans, claims another; at some point in the not-too-distant future there will be 20bn devices generating nearly 11 exabytes – that’s 11bn GB – each month. In other words, “growth, growth, growth”.

IP protection and monetisation
How then do we take advantage of all this, and the more-screens-equals-more-viewership proposition? Wider distribution should not come at the expense of the proper licensing and protection of intellectual property, otherwise the end-game – monetisation – is forfeit. Any platform you build should integrate robust digital rights management and content encryption and allow you to effortlessly splice this together with your business rules for licensing, geo-blocking, ad pricing and more.

If you are looking for a way to distribute any technology-centric service globally today, then the cloud should be your first and last consideration. Multiple industries now rely on cloud services for everything from basic back-office ICT operations to core-business services to customers. The key proposition to organisations of all sizes is that the cloud shaves costs while delivering extraordinary flexibility of scale. It also shrinks the cost and logistic hassle of testing technology services. Try one architecture and if it does not meet specifications, change it or grow it instantly. The cloud does nothing less than to make possible projects that would have been unthinkable five or 10 years ago.

During the 2014 Soccer World Cup, Italian digital-media company deltatre delivered a platform that allowed FIFA licensees to offer audiences a sophisticated second-screen experience. The company faced not only having to deliver a high grade of interactivity – including a choice of viewing angles, on-screen statistics and social media integration – but also the cold hard fact that it could not predict with any certainty what peak capacity would look like. In the end, rather than spend the prohibitive hours and cash it would have taken to develop a bespoke in-house solution, deltatre opted for a cloud-based media platform that...
Microsoft Introduces Azure to MENA Broadcasters

Last month, Microsoft held its first large-scale event for broadcasters in the Middle East along with partners, Imagine Communications, Cedexis and Akamai. The event, which brought together around 100 industry professionals, gave the manufacturers and solution providers an opportunity to discuss their cloud-based solutions in greater detail with media professionals. Microsoft showcased Azure Media Services as a platform that enables on-demand and live-streaming video solutions for consumer and enterprise scenarios. They demonstrated how multiple scalable components are built into the solution to allow organisations to build custom media workflows in the cloud. These include cloud upload and storage; encoding and media intelligence; content protection measures; live and on-demand streaming with integrated content-delivery network capabilities; and a rich analytics suite. Imagine Communications demonstrated, together with Microsoft Cloud, its flexible and scalable playout solutions that enable customers to launch new channels, expand their audiences and deliver cross-platform services with much less startup and lower capital equipment costs. Microsoft demonstrated to the audience that one can transition to the cloud at their own pace, and maximise existing investments through a hybrid deployment approach, integrating new, virtualised infrastructure with their current on-site systems. Cedexis also showed the number of outages across the world at each point in time and explained how it optimises web performance across data centres, content delivery networks (CDNs) and clouds for companies that wanted to ensure 100% availability. It also spoke at length about the Buffer Killer for better internet video.

Onur Ozdemir is Azure Media and Apps Lead, Microsoft Middle East & Africa.
had the requisite tools already in place to deliver what they wanted and scale to whatever capacity was needed at peak streaming. deltatre used Microsoft’s Azure Media Services to deliver its World Cup 2014 solution and Azure Media Services Indexer allowed The Washington Post to fulfil its transcription requirements for delivery of its Truth Teller app.

**Pain-free delivery**
The cloud helps. It can smooth the rough edges of delivery on large scale projects. Through the technology of virtualisation, real machinery, such as servers and routers, can be built in seconds, networks in minutes and complex software solutions – including machine-learning intelligence – can be licensed from any number of third-party providers.

In some cases, cloud platform companies can make the impossible possible simply because of their ability to scale effectively, or because of proprietary tools that can be easily integrated. The Washington Post’s national politics editor Steven Ginsberg, having grown tired of politicians’ unchallenged ramblings, had the idea of building a resource that could verify the authenticity of verbal statements instantly. Unfortunately, this required the transcription of countless hours of legacy audio and video content to make it text-searchable. If not for a cloud provider’s software tool that was designed for just that purpose, The Post’s Truth Teller app may never have become a reality.

Here in the GCC, where innovation is an everyday demand, stories such as these are bound to hit home. Most households in the region are multi-device domains, increasing consumption of content and, subsequently, marketing opportunities for content owners. There has never been a better time to consider what a cloud-based delivery platform can do for you.

> **“Wider distribution should not come at the expense of the proper licensing and protection of intellectual property, otherwise the end-game – monetisation – is forfeit. Any platform you build should integrate robust digital rights management and content encryption”**

Onur Ozdemir, Azure Media and Apps Lead, Microsoft Middle East & Africa.

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Juanjo Carmena, CDN Sales Lead and App Innovation at Microsoft EMEA.

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BroadcastPro ME celebrated six years of success at its anniversary party on May 16, 2016 at Habtoor Grand, Dubai Marina. We bring you some snapshots from the event.

More than 150 industry professionals joined BroadcastPro ME to celebrate our sixth anniversary at XL Club, Habtoor Grand, Dubai on May 16. We extend our thanks to lead sponsor Selevision, who is also the title sponsor for our Golf day on October 17 and our Summit and Awards, which is scheduled to be held on November 15, 2016. The 2016 event is now officially titled the “ASBU BroadcastPro Selevision Summit and Awards 2016”.

A big thank you to Gulf International, who has supported us every year by sweetening our anniversary with Lindt chocolates. A big thank you to our prize sponsors – BSA, U-To, Sennheiser and EMEA Gateway/Teletsream for the lovely selection of Apple and Samsung prizes as well as Senheisser and KEFF headsets.
Racecourse Media Group produced, distributed and broadcast the Dubai World Cup this year, with technical support from Timeline Television. BroadcastPro ME takes a closer look at how the world’s richest horse racing action reached more than 100 territories worldwide.

UK-based broadcast technology company and service provider Timeline Television teamed up with Racecourse Media Group (RMG) to provide a complete broadcast solution for the 20-fixture Meydan horse racing season, including the Dubai World Cup Carnival and the Dubai World Cup races and finals.

This was the first time that RMG, a multi-faceted rights and production business, produced and distributed the event. RMG’s direct-to-home channel, Racing UK, has shown the Dubai World Cup races every year.

This year, RMG’s distribution network saw the Dubai World Cup reach more than 100 territories worldwide. It was shown live in Australia, China, Japan, the UK, Ireland, France, North America, the Caribbean, Russia, Singapore and the MENA, as well as in all of Eurosport’s 70-plus international territories.

Timeline facilities and crew supported RMG’s production, course coverage and client broadcasters’ needs in delivering the racing action live to audiences around the world.

Commenting on the partnership between Timeline TV and RMG, Seb Vance, Director of PR and Communications at Racecourse Media Group, says: “Timeline seamlessly transposed their expertise and operational excellence from Ealing to Dubai, hitting every deadline we have set with confidence and authority.”

Timeline TV installed two large galleries for the crew to produce the world race feed live on-site. The race gallery provided the core race coverage through a suite of cameras and augmented the coverage by exchanging feeds with state

AT THE RACES

Racecourse Media Group produced, distributed and broadcast the Dubai World Cup this year, with technical support from Timeline Television. BroadcastPro ME takes a closer look at how the world’s richest horse racing action reached more than 100 territories worldwide.
broadcaster Dubai Media Inc (DMI). This output provided the World Race feed and was also used for the big screen and CATV (community access television) system on the course.

10 wired cameras plus four RF handheld cameras and two miniature RF cameras – one for the horse reporter and one for the stalls handler – were provided. Also deployed were two RF stalls cameras and two robotic mini cameras.

DMI deployed 40-50 cameras at different locations in and around the race tracks in Meydan. These included both wired and wireless cameras from Sony. The state broadcaster also provided aerial footage to other broadcasters operating from the course. There was a helicopter with Sony Cineflex to capture aerial footage and two SUVS followed the horses with a Cineflex camera each.

Adnan Nazmi El Afandi, OB Vans Manager at DMI, says that every year, the state broadcaster introduces something new and technically interesting to cover the event, which is watched across the world.

“We used two 12-camera OB vans on-site to capture footage for Dubai Racing Channel. 22 lens, 40, 86, 95, Ikegami Hi-Motion camera and wireless cameras including the super loop camera. Super loop cameras with wide-angle lenses were used to capture 1000 FPS shots.”

El Afandi explains: “We received camera output in the OB van and provided camera feeds to other broadcasters. Timeline

**Timeline TV** built two galleries at Meydan to produce the Dubai World Cup for broadcast across the world.

**Kit list**
- SAM Sirius router and Kahuna vision mixer to supply the world and event screen feeds
- Axon Cerebrum Control to control routing, associations, tallies and system control, including operator touch screens tailored to each operational position
- Riedel Artist talkback system
- Ten radio cameras on a site-wide RF network
- Sony cabled cameras
- EVS XT3 playback servers
- Downlinking services at Timeline’s Broadcast Centre in Ealing Studios, London

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used our aerial footage from the event, which we sent via 100m video cable between our OB van and Timeline’s gallery.”

Giving an overview of the technical infrastructure, Adrian Kingston, Outside Broadcast Project Consultant, Timeline Television, says Timeline TV used the existing fibre, SMPTE Triax and multi-quad audio equipment at the venue, to facilitate a comprehensive RF operation for talkback, radio mics and radio cameras, in addition to the usual cabled cameras and facilities.

“Our philosophy is to install powerful core components such as the vision mixer, matrix, audio mixer and talkback matrix, and then employ that power through control systems to deliver a flexible and effective solution. We can then deliver a seamless workflow for our clients allowing for complex and flexible operations to be delivered to friendly and manageable interfaces, which in turn reduces the number of operators required,” explains Kingston.

The systems integration was done by Timeline, using system integration engineers and the operational engineering team.

“This method was particularly important on this installation as the timescales were very short, so integration, acceptance and operational readiness had to work in parallel and seamlessly. Principally, this is the reason the team came out of the UK, as there was no time to explore available talent locally,” comments Kingston.

A key aspect of this operation was video footage for the race officials. A Hawkeye Smart Replay system was deployed for the stewards, allowing full flexibility in reviewing video content for rule infringement.

“We provided a solution for the stewards and Emirates racing authority, on-course TV

Project highlights

• Miniature RF Horse Cam allowed post-finish live interviews with jockeys

• Hawkeye Smart Replay, a season innovation allowing the stewards full flexibility in reviewing video content for rule infringement. Hawkeye’s Synchronised Multi-Angle Replay Technology (SMART) is an exciting new video replay and distribution technology that puts control of live video content into the hands of those who need it the most.

• SMART Replay provides TV match officials with every angle of an incident, allowing complete control of all broadcast feeds and enabling decisions to be made quickly and accurately either on- or off-site.

• ChyronHego Virtual Placement, giving virtual ties to course advertising. With no need to add any specialist camera encoders or lengthy calibration processes, virtual graphics can be placed into a scene within minutes of a set-up, ready for use in a multitude of applications. The system can be used in virtually any live broadcast scenario, from augmenting physical studio sets with virtual objects or live broadcast graphics and video feeds, to much larger scenes such as sports arenas, race tracks or landscapes. The aim throughout is to place virtual elements into a live scene to make them look physically real and in harmony with the environment they are projected into.

“Timeline seamlessly transposed their expertise and operational excellence from Ealing to Dubai, hitting every deadline we have set with confidence and authority”

Seb Vance, Director of PR and Communications, Racecourse Media Group
Racing Media Group

Based in the UK, RMG is a major deliverer of revenue – via media licence fees – to racecourse shareholders. It allows the racecourses to own, manage and exploit their intellectual property through a vertically integrated structure across all platforms, explains Seb Vance, Director of PR and Communications at Racecourse Media Group, Racing UK and GBI Racing. “The company has several joint ventures, such as GBI Racing [an international betting broadcast service] and Racecourse Data Company [data rights]. In addition, the 34 racecourses, under the name of Racecourse Media Services, have also grown revenues through Turf TV [a betting shop broadcast service in UK and Ireland]. RMG distributes 100% of profits to its racecourse shareholders to support the industry.”

Racing UK produces, broadcasts and distributes horse racing from 34 leading racecourses in the UK, including Epsom, Ascot, Newmarket, Goodwood, York, Cheltenham and Aintree. That means some of the world’s biggest fixtures, such as the Investec Derby Festival, Royal Ascot, QIPCO Guineas Festival, Glorious Goodwood, Welcome to Yorkshire Ebor Festival, Cheltenham Festival and Crabbie’s Grand National are all showcased on Racing UK. The channel also broadcasts the world’s premier racing events, such as the Kentucky Derby, the Arc de Triomphe and the Hong Kong Cup, which sit nicely alongside the Dubai World Cup.

“Our philosophy is to install powerful core components such as the vision mixer, matrix, audio mixer and talkback matrix, and then employ that power through control systems to deliver a flexible and effective solution”

Adrian Kingston, Outside Broadcast Project Consultant, Timeline Television
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Technology executives from some of MENA’s leading broadcast entities discuss the viability of IP, and the technical as well as geo-political challenges of building entire broadcast infrastructures in the cloud. Vibhuti Arora brings you a report of the roundtable discussion

In a roundtable discussion hosted by BroadcastPro Middle East in association with Pebble Beach Systems, the participants discussed the benefits and challenges of virtualising playout and broadcasting from the cloud. The discussion was moderated by Ian Cockett, CTO and Tom Gittins, Sales Director at Pebble Beach Systems.

The roundtable participants were Mohamed Abuagla, CTO/CIO, AJMN; Saleh Lootah, Head of TV and Radio Engineering, Dubai Media Inc.; Frank Kerrin, Director of Technology Support and Projects, OSN; Hasan Sayed Hasan, CEO, Master Media; Jaya Kumar, Manager, Playout – Operations, du; Mowafq Shammar, Projects Manager, Saudi Broadcasting Corporation; Mohamed Al Halza, Saudi Broadcasting Corporation; Nick Barratt, Senior Broadcast Manager, MBC; Omar Alzoubi, Senior Manager, Engineering Systems, Dubai Media Inc.; Afzal Lakdawala, Head of Planning and Projects, Dubai Media Inc.; Peter Van Dam, Director of Technology at LIVE HD Broadcast Facilities, Abu Dhabi Media; and Robert Sveb, Director of Global Technology Services, AJMN.

The discussion opened with an introduction to cloud and virtualisation, and the benefits and challenges of deploying an all-software infrastructure. Are broadcasters ready for it yet?

The panellists spoke about their cloud deployments, and it emerged that the region is still unsure about crossing over to public cloud. State broadcasters such as Abu Dhabi Media (ADM) and Dubai Media Incorporated cited their limitations in moving their media assets to the cloud or deploying a virtual infrastructure in a public cloud, while Al Jazeera’s Mohamed Abuagla recounted his experience with the public cloud.

Tom Gittins of Pebble Beach Systems put forth the first question to the panellists, asking them to comment on the technology path they will adopt in the current scenario in order to tap into the growing on-demand video market, and also asking whether OTT is a viable option in the MENA region.

MBC’s Nick Barratt said that the broadcaster’s video streaming service business is a success, with a constantly expanding subscriber base.

“On-demand is profitable for MBC and is growing. Most people have the ability to receive it. In the UAE and Saudi Arabia, on-demand is mostly viewed on broadband, while Egypt and the Levant users view it more on 3G and 4G because of a lack of proper broadband infrastructure in those countries,” said Barratt.

He went on to add that on-demand will remain a complementary delivery system and is not a replacement for linear TV.

“The future will be a combination of personalised linear TV based on VOD. Having said that, linear will stay for many years to come, but how we deliver it may change.”

Hasan Sayed Hasan pointed out that the linear TV is the dominant model of delivery of relevant content.

“Commercially, regionally as well as globally, online is not profitable yet. Viewers may be adopting OTT and VOD more, but linear still dominates and this is not likely to change in the near future. Each country in the Middle East has different viewer behaviour, and even the connectivity varies from country to country here. In the UAE, for instance, IPTV is strong because there is a robust fibre infrastructure. However, in Egypt, the Levant and North Africa, broadband is still weak and pay TV and satellite free-to-air continue to thrive there,” he explained.

Afzal Lakdawala agreed that a growing number of viewers...
are taking to mobile video on-demand, citing convenience and a lack of time as the key reasons.

“Watching TV is more of an experience; something that comes on TV may not appeal to the viewer in the same way as watching it on a smaller screen, smartphone or the tablet. The OTT space is getting crowded but the subscription numbers are still small in the region,” Lakdawala noted.

Hasan mentioned that linear channels are growing in the region, unlike in many other parts of the world, and 4K may just drive it further. Small devices can never replicate the experience of watching live sport or movies on a big screen. The panellists agreed that live sports continues to be a big driver for linear TV uptake, as 95% of sports content is still consumed live and viewers like to watch it on a big screen.

Cockett gave the example of Scandinavia, where practically no linear channels have been launched in a very long time, very different to the situation in the MENA region. Linear TV has been reduced to a miniscule offering, with viewing figures dropping compared to VOD – which is thriving, especially in Finland, which is leading the way in viewers migrating to online video.

The panellists agreed that despite the surge in OTT uptake, both linear and OTT will coexist and companies that own high-value content will explore different revenue streams in an on-demand environment – to make money.

“The question is where is the crossover line and how much linear will remain versus on-demand. People wanting immediacy will go with the live channel while those who want more in-depth analysis will resort to the mobile device,” Gittins summed up.

According to Abuagla, the nature of content will drive the way it is viewed.

“There is an urgency to deliver and receive news, for instance – people will watch it irrespective of the platform or experience. Age is yet another factor that determines not only what you watch but how you watch it. Mobile is the primary screen for the young generation today,” he said.

The discussion moved to another pertinent question: are broadcasters are making equal investment in linear and on demand. The panellists pointed out that RFPs in the region still centre on SDI requirements, which is not the case in many Western markets, where IP and virtualisation have taken prominence.

Cockett, at this stage, directed the discussion towards IP infrastructure, and its benefits and pitfalls. Commercial broadcasters offering a wide gamut of channels may consider the prospect of going over IP attractive, with a view to being able to launch new channels with much more ease and in less time.

Jaya Kumar of du said that most of the channels playing out from the du facility offer a mix of content and come from a variety of sources. “As a service provider, we need to deliver the channels in a cost-effective way and offer relevant content to the subscribers. We see a big advantage in playing out from the cloud and setting up a virtualised environment that gives us the flexibility to scale.”

Hasan mentioned that linear channels are growing in the region, unlike in many other parts of the world, and 4K may just drive it further. Small devices can never replicate the experience of watching live sport or movies on a big screen. The panellists agreed that live sports continues to be a big driver for linear TV uptake, as 95% of sports content is still consumed live and viewers like to watch it on a big screen.

“Commercially, regionally as well as globally, online is not profitable yet. Viewers may be adopting OTT and VOD more, but linear still dominates and this is not likely to change in the near future”

Hasan Sayed Hasan, CEO, Master Media
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“I have a private cloud running out of Doha and I also use public cloud assets. I believe in integrating these assets and using them to expand capability. Eventually, more workflows will be moving to the cloud”

Mohamed Abuagla, CTO/CIO, Al Jazeera Media Network

approach. We can do transmission and playout on virtualised systems, while for newsroom production and acquisition, we would still take the traditional route. The industry is not yet ready to go on IP for production,” said Sveb.

The discussion moved to addressing the downside of IP.

“IP is less reliable, and on the operational side it’s a headache for us,” said Abuagla.

Owing to a lack of reliable solutions in the IP realm, broadcasters prefer the more conservative traditional approach. It’s now not about money but about reliability, everyone agreed.

Cockett presented an interesting point: last year was a turning point in terms of broadcast technology deployments, with noticeable traction for IP.

“In the last 25 years, big service providers or national broadcasters have been building systems the same way – with an SDI router, video servers, graphics device – exactly the same technology was used by everybody. Since last year, however, we started getting RFPs that specified fully virtualised IP-only solutions,” he said.

Jaya Kumar agreed, saying that as telcos they have had virtualised a system; increasingly, clients are now asking for more cloud-based solutions.

Hasan further added that outsourcing a playout with a service provider or building your own cloud is more of a business decision than a technical one. High-value channels will not consider outsourcing these services, for security reasons.

As a probable solution, Abuagla suggested a hybrid system that utilises both private and public cloud solutions.

“I have a private cloud running out of Doha and I also use public cloud assets. I believe in integrating these assets and using them to expand capability. Eventually, more workflows will be moving to the cloud once we have that part of the chain ready.”

While security of media assets is a concern for some, regulatory and legal bindings also pose a challenge in deploying virtual solutions.

“A channel licensed in the UAE has to be played out from the UAE, and the same applies for channels licensed in Jordan, for example. Moving media assets into the cloud is not as simple as it may seem, as regulations may not allow that,” noted Hasan.

Omar Alzoubi and Peter Van Dam stated that as state broadcasters, they cannot move content with a third party.

Alzoubi drew the panel’s attention to other challenges associated with the cloud, including the lack of an end-to-end chain and connectivity issues.

Some services and specific applications can be handled and managed by the current cloud setup although there are challenges to this service such as security, safety and network connectivity, which are barriers in properly adopting cloud. This is because transferring large files into and out of the cloud is a fundamental issue as most file transfers were not designed to tackle security and management control,” he said.

Broadcasters, despite the numerous challenges involved in cloud deployment, have started the transition to the cloud. Barratt revealed that MBC is testing cloud deployment for some parts of its broadcast workflow, which will go live in the next 12 months.

“Several projects under the AJWT umbrella take the traditional approach. We can do transmission and playout on virtualised systems, while for newsroom production and acquisition, we would still take the traditional route”

Robert Sveb, Director of Global Technology Services, AJMN
Deciding on the right business model for cloud deployments is yet another challenge. Lootah said that as a state broadcaster, it is not easy for DMI to move away from capex to opex, as that involves a complete transformation of the business model.

Regional broadcasters, however, are adopting a wait and see approach until there is greater clarity on IP standards.

Alzoubi pointed out that SDI has reached its limit and 12Gbps over SDI is still under development. Ethernet, on the other hand, is still growing in capacity and can be expanded further to accommodate more complex content requirements such as 4K operations and more. IP is the way forward and broadcasters will have to move to a virtualised environment sooner or later to keep up with greater demands and to make the best use of existing systems.

SMPTE 2022-6 is an evolutionary standard, said Jaya Kumar: “It’s not fixed; we have to wait and watch until we have a standard that can cover up to 8K.”

Kerrin commented that having a transitional standard in software will not affect end users, as it will be completely upgradable. Why wait for a final standard, he asked the panellists.

Alzoubi responded: “The problem is not with a transitional standard, but the lack of a standard to cover the entire broadcast chain, as most open standards only cover a part of the chain.”

“Is IP a business requirement? Is replacing SDI with IP the way forward?” – the moderators asked the panellists.

Barratt commented that the key drivers for IP adoption are time and money.

“I have massive reduction in cost required to set up a new channel if I take the virtual path, which enables us to get a channel up in a matter of minutes as opposed to weeks or months – that’s a driver for me. If someone comes to me and asks for a 4K channel the next day, I can deliver it to them.

“We will see a transition when all of our workflows move to IP and virtual machines in 2017-18. I don’t see any disadvantage in that,” he reiterated.

In adopting IP, will broadcasters bring forward the end of life of SDI equipment and choose to switch that conventional equipment off?

Jaya Kumar said that du is using all three – SDI, IP and virtual machines – at the moment, but broadcasters cannot simply replace SDI with IP unless there is a business need to do so.

“ ‘In the last 25 years, big service providers or national broadcasters have been building systems the same way – with an SDI router, video servers, graphics device – exactly the same technology was used by everybody. Since last year, however, we started receiving RFPs that specified fully virtualised IP-only solutions”

Ian Cockett, CTO, Pebble Beach Systems

Nick Barratt, Broadcast Manager, MBC
Alzoubi’s view was that because IP is still not fully developed in live production and the standards are not quite clear, DMI will continue to use SDI.

A number of suppliers are offering hybrid technology to bridge the gap between IP and SDI, Kerrin pointed out.

“I feel that’s a step in the wrong direction. Don’t mix the two. IP has to be a new island that will gradually grow.”

Van Dam agreed, saying that SDI to IP is nothing like SD to HD.

“The two are very different; we could have simulcast in transiting from SD to HD, as they are both based on SDI. I don’t believe in hybrid. When you switch to IP, you just migrate and start with one channel then keep building, scale up,” he advised.

Cockett brought the debate back to the standards in IP, asking the panellists to comment on the scalability of standards.

Lakdawala said that it is too early to decide which way the standards will go.

“Big vendors have their own proprietary standards. I don’t see a high-level collaboration at the vendor level in developing standards. In the current scenario, we can’t commit to any standard, because if we do that, we can’t be sure if the rest of the vendors will accept it. Hence it has to be closely monitored for now, before complete implementation. IP is the way forward for higher resolutions but needs to be implemented in a hybrid environment to make use of the existing SDI infrastructure,” he said.

As the broadcast industry evolves, the skill-set of its engineering staff is changing too and leaning more towards IT skills. Sveb said that with growing IT needs, there is a broader range of vendors that are now in a position to offer services to broadcasters.

“We need our technology departments to be multi-skilled to handle SDI, BIT and IT requirements of our systems. BIT or Broadcast IT [computer-based broadcast systems from Avid, Vizrt, Peable Beach Systems and so on]. Our systems are a mix of these and work on hybrid architecture. Within each group, we have multiple vendors, which also require expertise to handle each sub-group. In future, we as an industry will not be able to maintain these.

“As discussed, at present, we can do playout and niche services in IP, but to have a full chain from camera to transmission is a totally different ball game. We will have difficulties to get talent to maintain these systems in-house. The real cloud approach will begin when we move production into the cloud. The ideal situation for us will be to take all of our processing somewhere else. As a vendor you will be able to interconnect, maintain security, provide the right skill-set and so on,” he added.

With changing needs of the broadcast business, the relationship between vendors and end users is changing too. There was a general consensus among the panellists on the fact that a move into a software environment leads to greater dependence on the vendor and diminishes the role of the traditional systems integrator.

Hasan commented that broadcast systems integrators do not add value to providing cloud services, as their business model and skill sets are based on reselling equipment and installing them on site. In an all-software, service-based, virtualised environment, it’s a partnership between the end user/the broadcaster and the technology provider.

**The problem is not with a transitional standard, but the lack of a standard to cover the entire broadcast chain, as most open standards only cover a part of the chain**

Omar Alzoubi, Senior Manager, Engineering Systems, Dubai Media Inc.

**“We could have simulcast in transiting from SD to HD, as they are both based on SDI. I don’t believe in hybrid. When you switch to IP, you just migrate and start with one channel then keep building ans scale up”**

Peter Van Dam, Director of Technology Services, LIVE HD
Saleh Lootah had a similar point of view: “Systems integrators usually take the easier way out and simply respond to what you have asked for. If your RFP is written in a manner that encourages creative inputs from SIs, you will get additional contribution to the project. We engage SIs to have a well-rounded solution to cater to our technology requirements when working with multiple vendors.”

Abuagla agreed and pointed out that SIs today are not offering anything new; their role has been reduced to managing SLAs. “The SIs will become application pluggers, not hardware pluggers, and they will be cloud brokers. There are 10 or 15 different big cloud providers; you can choose the one that suits you best, like buying real estate. “Instead of offering the best-of-breed implementations, they are incentivised by selling me more, not selling the best. My team has cut them out,” he said.

Hasan interjected by saying that at times the client specifies too much, rather than asking for suggestions from SIs. Abuagla added that in a cloud environment SIs will have no role to play, and the RFPs will be very different then. Lootah added that selecting the right people to work for you may be the way forward. “We usually pick and choose our SIs depending on our needs. Having worked on different projects, they are in a better position to objectively analyse the end user’s requirement and offer us the best solutions. As an end user, we don’t have that kind of exposure to multiple brands, hence the need to involve SIs. We choose the ones that are strong in file-based projects and expect them to be more hands-on with their solutions.”

However, future deployments, according to Alzoubi, seem to be heading into single-vendor solutions, provided the hardware is compatible with the environment.

According to Kerrin, the SI’s role will change drastically, with companies increasingly moving their applications away from proprietary hardware to software. In a multi-vendor software environment, an SI will give you the same ability, through a GUI, to select the plugins and where you want to run them.

There is another issue typical to software-based systems that may pose a problem for end users, Cockett pointed out. Unlike hardware, which is easily replaceable, fixing software issues will require going back to the original manufacturer and create the environment for a long-term partnership.

“Big vendors have their own proprietary standards. I don’t see a high-level collaboration at the vendor level in developing standards. In the current scenario, we can’t commit to any standard, because if we do that we can’t be sure if the rest of the vendors will accept it”

Afzal Lakdawala, Head of Planning and Projects, Dubai Media Inc.
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Saleh Lootah, Head of TV and Radio Engineering, Dubai Media Inc.

choose 4 HD or 6SD. Content is king,” he commented.

Kerrin, on the other hand, said that OSN is committed to doing 4K.

“We don’t want to mix it with our SDI infrastructure, and will create an island for IP.” SMTE 2022-6 and 12Gig pipe are still under review, and there isn’t anybody at the moment who will give a full IP solution for 4K. It’s on everybody’s road map; they are waiting for standards to be finalised. Not everybody has an HD TV; you will give a 4K offering to those who have a 4K screen.”

Van Dam said that his company is not ready for 4K yet but is preparing to virtualise and move to IP workflows. He also agreed that HDR is a more viable option and has more advantages than 4K.

“Until three years ago, we downconverted the HD footage to 4:3, whereas we have had HD trucks for the last nine years. It is an interesting technology but has a long way to go,” he said.

Jaya Kumar drew the panel’s attention to the connectivity aspect of delivering 4K.

“We are struggling to transport 4K within the premises, forget sending it outside. We need a proper delivery mechanism and an agreement on what file formats to use before we take on 4K.”

In addition, hosting 4K on satellite is still a challenge, which requires a full transponder with the current best compression technology available, added Jaya Kumar.

Abuagla said that the industry has to make a choice: whether to go after 4K or cloud.

“Transcoding 4K is a big issue. Going after 4K first, and then deciding to go on the cloud, will cost you much more in terms of storage. Costs are going to be 20 times more, and it will kill your cloud initiative. I have chosen cloud.”

According to Hasan, 4K is doable and it will end up with niche offerings such as live sports or even OTT, but one needs robust broadband to achieve that.

Van Dam, however, disagreed and said that the reality on the ground is quite different and they are far from 4K.

“We have just about started delivering 4K to clients, so we so we can’t jump on to the 4K bandwagon so soon.”

Gittins said that the industry is preparing for 4K with platforms and research and development in the field, but in most cases 4K channels are experimental.

SBC’s Mowafaq Shammari said: “It’s hard for us broadcasters to switch technology at the rate at which it is changing now. We have just about managed to move from SD to HD, and there are already talks about full HD to 4K and 8K. We need to give some time for technology to settle and reap its benefits before we switch to a higher one. I don’t think we can adopt 4K; by the time we finish deploying it, there will be something new.

“I see a high risk in choosing 4K now. If you need to rebuild systems for 4K, there will be many new technologies while you do that. Broadcasters need to assess first what the end user is gaining out of this.

“Viewers need to change monitors and boxes to see the new product. HD is mainstream and is easily available, which they can handle, but higher resolutions – I am not sure if they really need it,” he concluded. PRO

“‘It’s hard for us broadcasters to switch technology at the rate at which it is changing now. We have just about managed to move from SD to HD, and there are already talks about full HD to 4K and 8K’

Mowafaq Shammari, Saudi Broadcasting Corporation
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We have seen exciting technology launch for TV viewing in recent years, each promising to be the next big thing to reignite TV audiences. This includes the arrival of HD, as well as 3D, which succeeded in making a brief difference.

However, these technologies were not followed by the compelling content needed to keep audiences interested. Audiences across the globe were hungry for more varied content – and OTT gave them that avenue. Consumers simply turned away from traditional TV and looked for content online. The growth of the Internet and online video meant they had choices and thanks to the likes of YouTube, Netflix, and Amazon, compelling content to suit every possible taste was just a click away. What made it even better was that consumers could watch content on any device, anywhere, and anytime. The rise of on-the-go viewing followed and new apps made it possible to begin watching a programme on one device and continue where you left off on another and new trends in viewing emerged, such as binge viewing.

Providers such as YouTube are great at personalising the experience, recommending content based on your viewing habits or, perhaps in certain circumstances, based on what your friends are watching.

This competition initially threatened many broadcasters and content providers, unsure of how this sudden onslaught of online video services being offered anytime, anywhere would impact them. Not surprising, when you consider how sharply online video viewing rose across the globe.

According to Hub Research, 68% of U.S. consumers use a streaming subscription service to watch TV shows and movies. In the Middle East and Africa, the market has not seen the same traction but analysts predict that 2016 will be a considerable turning point for the region, with SVOD revenues expected to rise from US$124 million in 2015 to a whopping US$1.24 billion in 2021, according to Digital TV Research.

Far from resulting in the undoing of the TV industry, OTT forced content producers, cable networks, and broadcasters to become more relevant and creative – and as a result, more competitive.

At first, a number of the innovative broadcasters offered their own OTT services. Services such as Hulu allowed TV executives to understand how viewers searched, watched, and exploited social networks to control content. This made experimenting with fresh advertising and subscription models much easier.

Traditional broadcasters have existing customer bases and payment processes in place. In addition, there is brand loyalty with consumers. They have existing relationships with content providers, often able to offer high value premium content. And perhaps more importantly, they have the benefit of local knowledge and can offer local programming that is likely to have mass appeal in any given market. This is something that services like Netflix will never be able to offer to the same extent.

A number of OTT services have launched across the globe and the market is crowded in certain regions of the world. This is likely to follow the same pattern elsewhere too, including the Middle East, and many of the big players are already putting their stakes in the ground, such as Netflix with its recent launch in the market. With so much competition, it is obvious not all will succeed, but broadcasters remain in one of the best positions to do just that, as long as they get the right content, the right service, and the right functionality to keep consumers happy.

OTT, which was initially viewed as a distraction, then an annoyance, and finally a threat, ends up rescuing television from itself and proving that content is still king. Far from causing widespread cord-cutting, OTT has made traditional broadcasters and TV providers wake up and get creative. Ultimately, consumers are the ones who will benefit the most, with a massive choice of compelling content.

If, as some observers have noted, we are in the middle of TV’s Golden Age, it is thanks to OTT.

Roger Franklin is CEO of Crystal.
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