With new technologies and bold strategies, Clue Media forges a new path for reality TV in the GCC
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Broadcast Solutions Middle East – Your Partner for Broadcast and Media Solutions

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One of our latest projects: We implemented a modern and innovative broadcast control infrastructure to broadcast all sermons of the new Sharjah Grand Mosque.

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The Sharjah Grand Mosque, which is the UAE’s second largest mosque and can accommodate 25,000 worshippers, has taken delivery of a state-of-the-art broadcast system from Broadcast Solutions Middle East and Ross Video.

When planning the building project, the Sharjah Government Planning Department appointed the Sharjah Broadcast Authority (SBA) as a consultant. They, in turn, approached Broadcast Solutions ME for the delivery of a broadcast system to support the mosque’s calendar of Islamic events.

“There was a clear view that the AV system needed to be easy to operate with minimal human resource,” remarked Salah Ayoub, Project Manager, Broadcast Solutions ME. “There was also an obvious requirement that the system blend in with the interior of the building.”

Ross Video offered a white version of its PIVOTCam compact camera (12 of which are used around the mosque) and added the full broadcast equipment to the mosque’s list of hardware and software tools. Broadcast Solutions ME built a camera mount to ensure the cameras could be fixed discreetly around the prayer hall and building. The control room on the first floor is used to manage the cameras and to edit, store and air the content created.

The various AV sources and destinations are put together using a series of Ross Ultrix-FR1 routing/AV processing solutions, with Ross openGear racks providing modular signal processing and distribution. All graphics content is courtesy of Ross Video’s XPression graphics engine.

Broadcast Solutions ME implemented a 36-input Ross Carbonite production switcher. Ross Video equipment in the signal chain includes a pair of large Carbonite multiviewers, and SHC-9642 SDI to HDMI converters from Ross feed into Blackmagic Design SmartView4K systems for audio monitoring. The entire AV system was specified, designed and installed within a tight timeline.

“We pulled out all the stops to meet the date, and the opening was a great success. We’ve since been able to take some time to improve the workflows, ensuring the operators and staff are completely at ease with the system. I’m very proud of what we have delivered here, both for Broadcast Solutions and Ross. It’s a flagship installation in the region. I have no doubt that this system will help SBA and the mosque to deliver compelling content to worshippers and the wider community for many years to come,” said Ayoub.

Radio Simba in Bungoma, one of Kenya’s radio stations covering western Kenya and the greater Rift Valley region, has chosen Lawo to broadcast its content. Radio Simba purchased its studio equipment from Byce Broadcast, Lawo’s distributor and SI partner in Nairobi.

Lawo’s crystal mixing console and Compact Engine mixing platform, connected to a standard-based AES67/TRAIENNA AoIP network, Ossianic control of source selection, EQ and other options are displayed on an easy-to-use graphical interface powered by Lawo VisTool GUI Builder software. Radio Simba’s second studio employs Lawo ROLAY VRX software, a virtual mixing solution that runs on standard PCs and includes voice processing, mix-minus, AutoMix and more, with a multitouch-enabled graphical interface. Byce Broadcast was responsible for the concept, project planning, installation and commissioning of Radio Simba’s studies. The new studios were completed and went on air in November 2019.

Lawo’s line of physical and virtual radio solutions includes the ruby radio console, sapphire, sapphire Compact and crystal mixing surfaces, crystal CLEAR and ROLAY virtual radio mixers, and advanced VisTool GUI-builder software.

Kenya’s Radio Simba broadcasts with Lawo technology
MBC rebrands Shahid, announces new original productions and partnerships

MBC Group unveiled a new version of its video on demand (VOD) service, Shahid, at an exclusive event held at the Dubai Opera in Downtown Dubai last month. It was also an occasion for the network’s new CEO, Marc Antoine d’Halluin, to make his first official public address since taking over in January. Shahid’s brand new slogan, “It’s Our Time,” took centre stage, illuminating the Burj Khalifa. The platform took the opportunity to announce its plans to launch new Original productions and partnerships. While Shahid Originals will focus on local and regional productions including long-form content such as drama series as well as short-form content, Shahid Premieres will focus on first-look exclusives from cinema and television.

Shahid also announced partnerships with Disney, Fox and Spotify, which will see the formerly Arabic-only music streaming platform add Western entertainment and music to its service. Shahid will now live stream MBC’s top-rated channels and include a catch-up service. Shahid MD Johannes Larcher promised that this was only the beginning, with more content planned over the next few years.

Commenting on the revamped model for Shahid, MBC Group Chairman Waleed Al Ibrahim commented: “As we look ahead, we strive to take control of our narratives, showcasing our stories through the very best in original series and other media content, produced and marketed via MBC Studios. We are proud to provide the region with a digital platform that is on par with the best in the world.”

Placing MBC Group’s investment in perspective, d’Halluin added: “During the past 10 years, MBC has acquired and produced approximately 46,000 hours of Arabic-language content, valued at an estimated $1.3bn. This is broken down into 26,000 hours of media, entertainment and other content, plus 20,000 hours of TV series, which includes about 600 dramas. We will spend four times that investment within the next two years into Shahid.”

Nigeria bans exclusive sports broadcasting rights

The Nigerian government has prohibited exclusively for sports broadcast rights, Communications Week reported last month. Minister of Information and Culture Alhaji Lai Mohammed said the regulations would prevent the abuse of monopoly. Mohammed said the regulations are contained in the report of the committee set up to define how to implement the recommendations approved by President Muhammadu Buhari. The minister stressed that breaking the monopoly would increase the reach and maximise the use of premium content by all broadcasters.

Disney drops Fox name, rebrands it as 20th Century Studios

The Walt Disney Company is dropping the name ‘Fox’ from the 20th Century Fox assets it acquired last March, Variety reported last month. The film studio will be called 20th Century Studios, and Fox Searchlight Pictures will become simply Searchlight Pictures. Disney has already begun phasing out the Fox name from company email addresses and several posters for upcoming features. The new branding will first be seen on Searchlight Pictures’ Downhill, a drama/comedy which hits theatres on February 14. The Call of the Wild, an adventure film starring Harrison Ford, will be the first film with the 20th Century Studios name when it hits theatres on February 21.

Introducing ATEM Constellation 8K!

The next generation 8K switcher with 8K DVE, 8K SuperSource, 8K chroma key and 8K MultiView!

The new ATEM Constellation 8K is an Ultra HD live production switcher with so many features, you can combine them to make a powerful 8K switcher! You get 4 M/E, 40 x 12G-SDI inputs, 26 x 12G-SDI aux outputs, 4 DVEs, 16 Keysers, 4 media players, 4 multi viewers, 2 SuperSource and standards conversion on every SDI input! Then you can combine everything for a powerful 8K switcher!

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You get 40 independent 12G-SDI inputs, with each input featuring its own dedicated up and cross converter. That allows 1080p and Ultra HD sources to be up-converted to 8K on all inputs. You can even loop out audio from SDI inputs 1 to 30 to MADI digital audio outputs, so you can hand off the audio from switcher sources to an external digital audio engineer for mixing.

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With a built-in Fairlight audio mixer, the ATEM Constellation makes it possible to do complex live sound mixing. You get a massive 156 channel, for the biggest audio mixer in a live production switcher! Each input features 6 band parametric EQ, compressor, limiter, expander, noise gate and pan. Plus you can mix with an external Mac/Windows compatible panel or full Fairlight Audio Console.

Includes 8K MultiView with Audio Meters

The built in multi viewers let you view multiple sources in a single monitor. You get 4 independent multi-view outputs that can be individually customized or transformed into a single full resolution 8K multi-view when you switch to 8K. Each multi-view can be set to 4, 7, 10, 13 or 16 simultaneous views. Each view also has on-screen status including a custom label, VU meters and tally.

Learn more at www.blackmagicdesign.com/ae

*SRP excludes duties, shipping and sales tax.
Etisalat’s E-Vision taps into Synamedia for OTT services

E-Vision, a subsidiary of Etisalat Group, last month selected the Infinite cloud-based platform, powered by Synamedia’s video network technologies, for its new multi-country, multi-tenant OTT service. The platform is already live in Egypt and will launch soon in Saudi Arabia.

E-Vision’s cloud-based service provides operators in the MENA region and Pakistan with a platform to launch and run multi-screen, multi-language OTT services. It includes cloud DVR and supports advanced content aggregation, search and recommendations, for a highly personalised user experience proven to drive viewer engagement. Additional supported features include pay-TV, SVOD and AVOD business models and the pre-integrated Evergreen Revenue and Customer Lifecycle Management platform for comprehensive subscriber management and frictionless billing.

Commenting on the development, Humaid Rashid Sahoo, E-Vision CEO, said: “We have worked closely with Synamedia’s teams to develop a platform which is secure and capable of a full end-to-end solution.”

Yves Patlines, Synamedia CEO, added: “With our cloud-based platform, E-Vision lets its OTT customers focus on building a sustainable, profitable business faster.”

Facebook appoints new Director for MEA & Turkey

Facebook appointed Derya Matras as Regional Director for the Middle East, Africa and Turkey markets last month. Matras will lead Facebook to serve businesses and communities and to grow the company’s economic and social impact across the region.

Before joining Facebook, Matras was VP of Dogan Media Group, the largest media conglomerate in Turkey. She has also held management consulting leadership roles at McKinsey & Company, advising the private sector and governments globally, especially on digital economy.

Riedel acquires Embrionix

Canadian IP video processing solutions provider Embrionix was acquired by Riedel Communications last month. With this acquisition, Riedel hopes to strengthen its expertise in IP-enabled hardware and software and further broaden its portfolio of video solutions. The deal gives Riedel access to engineering talent in the Embrionix workforce, the majority of it comprising engineers specialising in leading-edge IP and video technologies.

Founded in 2009, Embrionix provides miniaturised, high-density IP gateways, IP signal processors and converters for broadcast video applications. Since introducing the use of small form-factor plugable (SFP) modules for signal processing early in its history, Embrionix has been granted more than 20 patents for its technologies.

Riedel Communications has grown to become a leader in distributed intercom and video network solutions and has been pursuing a networked approach to video infrastructures for more than a decade with its real-time media network, MediorNet. Commenting on the acquisition, Thomas Riedel, CEO, Riedel Communications, said: “Riedel can offer Embrionix all of the benefits of a comprehensive global sales and support infrastructure. Embrionix has access to unique technologies and proprietary knowledge that will be instrumental in our quest for innovation in the field of video infrastructures.”

Renard Lavoir, CEO of Embrionix, added: “As a hybrid IP environment, Riedel’s MediorNet is trusted by customers as a bridge to the IP world. Our high-density IP gateway and processing solutions will greatly enhance the MediorNet ecosystem and expand its application areas, making it more powerful than ever. We are thrilled to continue the Embrionix success story as a member of the Riedel family, and I am happy to be part of this journey.”

Dubai-based filmmaker Jonathan Ali Khan dies at 59

Award-winning natural history filmmaker and long-time Dubai resident Jonathan Ali Khan died last month due to pneumonia complications. He was 59. He had been working on marine conservation in the UAE for the past 25 years, and was also working on a new project, reports suggest.

His works include the series Arabia’s Cycle of Life, which reached over one million viewers in the MENA region, and a recent documentary on Arabian sharks that was screened on the Discovery channel.

Red Sea International Film Festival backs five Saudi women directors for regional film project

The Red Sea International Film Festival announced last month that it was backing five Saudi women directors for an anthology film. The project will have its world premiere at the inaugural festival in March 2020 and will be a significant platform for new Saudi voices. The five shorts are shot in the Kingdom and focus on women behind and in front of the camera. Apart from the five directors, women have lead roles across the production.

The Saudi directors involved in the project are Hind AlAhfahad, Jowaher Alammari, Noor Alameer, Sara Mester and Fatima Al-Banawi. Award-winning Palestinian filmmaker Suha Arraf is the screenwriting supervisor. They were selected following a pitching process, with the Red Sea International Film Festival working with Saudi production company Cinepolis to attract a diverse range of stories. The final five projects were selected for their engaging narratives and strong female leads, with their stories representative of the distinctive voices found across the Kingdom. Commenting on the anthology film, Festival Director Mahmoud Sabbagh said: “We believe in film’s capacity to advance diversity and integration. Supporting innovative new works is central to this mission. There is no better way to work towards this than by creating opportunities for Saudi filmmakers to tell their own stories. This project provides powerful first-person accounts of contemporary life in Saudi, from Saudi women, at a time of fascinating change.”

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Cineom strengthens position in MENA as ARRI distributor

India-headquartered media solutions company Cineom Broadcast DMCC, which set up ARRI operations in Dubai last year to provide sales and support for ARRI products to end users in the MENA region, has announced on the occasion of its first anniversary that it has successfully delivered and serviced several new and pre-owned ARRI cameras and lenses to rental houses, freelance professionals and production firms in the region. Cineom owners Vineyak Deo and Shailesh Parab claimed that the company is currently the “only authorised ARRI distributor for the Middle East”.

“We were very flattered when ARRI – Germany approached us to serve as their distributor in the MENA region, in addition to India, where we have successfully distributed ARRI products for the last six years,” commented Deo. “In the MENA region, we decided to offer full-fledged service for ARRI products to cater to market needs. Our strategy over the last year has been very successful.”

Parab added: “We are one of three non-ARRI subsidiaries around the world who own an ARRI authorised service centre for camera systems and lenses, in India and now Dubai. We are authorised to carry out advanced level servicing of the camera systems along with sensor replacement and calibration, which is akin to a factory service. In India, we service ARRI cameras, lenses and lighting. In Dubai, we currently carry out camera services but will soon be able to service lenses as well.”

Nitin Panicker, who heads business development at the company, added: “With factory-trained engineers, investment in a state-of-the-art service facility and a well-stocked inventory of all essential spares, we ensure that every camera is fully repaired and aligned for the best performance. Clients need not take their cameras to Germany for repairs.”

The Dubai office has sold a number of ALEXA MINI LF and ALEXA MINI cameras to key rental houses and freelancers in the UAE, such as Action Film, filmQuap Media and Filmgate Productions, as well as to rental companies and production houses in Morocco, Kuwait, Tunisia and Mauritius, revealed Panicker. The ALEXA ALEXA MINI LF is a large-format small camera approved by Netflix for 4K UHD shoots.

“There is a huge demand for the MINI LF cameras and the Signature prime lenses around the world, with a long waiting time. We have predicted the demand and pre-ordered the MINI LF so that MENA clients do not have to wait long for delivery. We also stock demo equipment to ensure users can experience the products they should want to do that before making a purchase,” Panicker commented.

He added that Cineom has also seen “significant demand for certified pre-owned cameras, lenses and accessories in this market” and has catered to this need.

Cineom has concluded more than US $2.7m of business in the region, with close to 70% of it being related to ARRI, said Deo. “We have sold more than 27 brand-new and pre-owned cameras along with lenses and accessories in the MENA region in the last 12 months, including 10 ALEXA MINI LF cameras.”

In October 2019, the Public Authority for Radio and TV (PART) of the Sultanate of Oman deployed AVIWEST technology to broadcast live coverage of the Majlis Al-Shura elections, which take place every four years. PART relied on the AVIWEST PRO3 Series to successfully deliver live HD video to Oman TV over 3G/4G networks, providing the country with real-time updates and election results.

PART selected the AVIWEST PRO3 Series HEVC bonded cellular transmitters, QUAD antennas and StreamHub transceiver to broadcast live from any location. ApexTV served as the distributor, ensuring a seamless product deployment. When on the go, PART’s remote teams needed compact and portable video delivery solutions, ensuring they could instantly broadcast live. The latest generation of AVIWEST’s HEVC bonded cellular transmitters, the PRO3 Series, provided the broadcaster with a lightweight solution that could be mounted directly on professional cameras or carried in a backpack.

Said Al Shoq, Director General of PART, said: “The AVIWEST solution offered us an affordable way to stream live, high-quality video successfully from any voting centre in the region.”

Nicola Aita, Sales Manager at AVIWEST, remarked: “With 110 different voting sites around the Sultanate of Oman, there was a large ground to cover during the election. Our live video solution is lightweight and compact, so it’s perfect for mobile newsgathering.”
Operative plans ambitious MENA move

Operative, which has been a software partner for more than 300 of the world’s top media brands, including NBCU, CBS, ABC, AT&T, STARZ, Star India, Seven Australia and Sky, hopes to increase its brand presence and product awareness in the region “through participation in industry events and focused field customer engagements”, according to Said Bacho, Senior VP, EMEA, who assumed the role last year and leads Operative’s International Sales & Marketing team. “The ultimate objective is to turn Operative into the go-to partner for all content, rights management and airtime advertising revenue for media companies in the industry,” Bacho’s appointment is part of Operative’s efforts to expand its business internationally and to drive the next phase of Operative’s growth in EMEA and international markets. Explaining how Operative hopes to empower media houses in the region, Bacho commented: “Broadcasters in the region are looking for ways to monetise their content across multiple delivery platforms. With more OTT and streaming service platforms being launched in the region, we have the perfect content and airtime solutions to help our customers streamline the processes by which they schedule, manage and sell their content, and ultimately help them make more money.”

Explaining how Operative’s growth in EMEA and to drive the next phase of Operative’s growth in EMEA and international markets.

SPI/FilmBox renews partnership with Turkey’s D-Smart

Media entertainment company SPI/FilmBox renewed its partnership with Turkish digital platform D-Smart last month to include an additional two years of broadcasting rights for FilmBox, FightBox, Fast&FunBox and DocuBox channels. The new agreement will ensure that the channels, along with VOD content from select SPI channels, will be made available through D-Smart’s OTT platform, D-Smart GO. Additionally, D-Smart GO subscribers will also be able to access SPI/FilmBox’s FashionBox, which provides content on fashion trends. Commenting on the new deal, Murat Muratoglu, Head of Distribution at SPI International, said: “We are proud to be able to provide our customers with what they want and are excited to extend our distribution to digital with D-Smart, one of the biggest players in the Turkish market.”

OSN to broadcast new Turkish drama series The Choice

OSN last month acquired a licence to broadcast new Turkish drama series The Choice in the MENA region. The drama made its debut in Turkey on Star TV in January. The Choice follows an unemployed professor who, in order to save his son’s life, concocts what turns out to be one of the biggest financial frauds in the world. The thirteen-episode series is produced by Ay Yapım and was picked up by OSN earlier in December from the exclusive distributor MADD Entertainment. The series is available in Turkish with Arabic subtitles, and is also dubbed in Arabic.

OSN will air the episodes within a week of their Turkish broadcast.

Digital 6000

Better performance, quicker setup, immediate payoff: Digital 6000 was developed to exceed the expectations of audio professionals and business managers alike. Our new professional wireless series delivers reliable performance in even the most challenging RF conditions. Intermodulation is completely eliminated by Digital 6000, enabling more channels to operate in less space. Discover more: www.sennheiser.com/digital-6000
With the ongoing production of season nine of *The Million’s Poet* and the recently concluded season eight of *Prince of Poets*, Abu Dhabi production house Clue Media is looking to set new standards for reality TV shows. In an exclusive interview with Shifa Naseer, General Manager Karl Moussawba and Executive Producer Marianne Salameh speak about how reality TV shows have evolved in the GCC under their watch.
A live competition show, The Million’s Poet is an initiative to revive Nabati poetry, one of the oldest genres of Arabic verse. The stage is set with the coveted red chair, symbolising the designated place for a poet. The 48 contestants, chosen from various Arab countries, perform while seated on the red chair and are judged by three experts. This is the hook of the TV show which has gained a considerable fan base across the Arab world. Prince of Poets, which has completed eight seasons so far, follows a similar pattern with a focus on traditional Arabic poetry. For the past two seasons, the shows have been under the umbrella of Clue Media. With headquarters in Abu Dhabi and another office in Dubai Media City, Clue Media is a privately-owned production company under the React Group, which specialises in marketing, communications, event management and production. As the production rights for The Million’s Poet and Prince of Poets were made available by the Committee for Cultural Programs and Heritage Festival, the Abu Dhabi firm pitched for the two shows and won, after strong competition from three other production companies. Marianne Salameh, Executive Producer, Clue Media, tells BroadcastPro what happened next. Salameh, who worked with two TV channels in Lebanon and other international shows such as Dancing with the Stars and Celebrity Duets before joining Clue Media in 2017, says research is one of the key factors driving their willingness to pitch for a show. “When we pitch for any show, we look at two major aspects: the content and how it will be presented to the audience. Our content and production teams perform extensive research in both fields to bring the best technologies that are being used on similar international TV shows. For this purpose, we also attend technology exhibitions in Holland. We followed the same process for The Million’s Poet and Prince of Poets.” Typically, Clue Media tends to produce reality shows with a specific focus on cultural content, especially within the GCC. “Market research shows there is a demand for it,” says Salameh, who is responsible for overseeing the productions from beginning to end. “A good investment is a package that includes the idea, the set design as well as the interest of each market. For example, we don’t pick poetry shows for the Lebanese market because we know it is not their point of interest – unlike the Gulf region, where poetry plays an important role and has a huge fan base,” she says. “To that end, last year Clue Media produced the first season of its own original Shalla Arabic poetry singing competition, Al Mankous, alongside Prince of Poets. “Al Mankous is a TV format that was purely developed in-house, from the content and production all the way to the construction of the sets and the execution of the project. The TV show came into being after the idea was pitched by our client, Committee for Cultural Programmes and Heritage Festival – Abu Dhabi,” says Karl Moussawba, GM of Clue Media. “When we pitch for any show, we look at two major aspects: the content and how it will be presented to the audience” Marianne Salameh, Executive Producer, Clue Media. “We produce all kinds of content but prefer unscripted formats. Like any other production, there is always a fun side and a challenging side for this genre. The unscripted formats are very exciting to work on because they challenge you continuously in a live on-air scenario and each situation keeps us on our toes. However, there is zero tolerance for errors in a live environment and the team must always be 100% prepared to intervene within seconds to resolve any issues that crop up. But that pressure is exciting for those who are passionate about these kinds of productions.” Given that Clue Media’s goal is to set itself apart from other players in the market, leading-edge technology plays a huge part in these productions. “We strive to bring something new to every production that comes under our wings,” says
Karl Moussawba, GM, Clue Media

“"We need to satisfy both audiences - those in the auditorium and those watching the show on TV. We have succeeded in doing that by using new techniques that have set us apart from the competition”

Clue Media usually has 60-65 crew members on set to produce a live TV show, reveals Moussawba.

Moussawba. “We are constantly on the lookout for great formats that we can buy, either to produce or to distribute within the region.”

Both claim the production standards of The Million’s Poet and Prince of Poets improved when Clue Media took over.

“When we landed the two projects, they were already successful and popular in the region, with a loyal audience. Prince of Poets had already reached season six and The Million’s Poet was at season seven. So, it was a challenge to take these projects and come up with new ideas to entice our viewers. We focussed on introducing a new image, a new approach to filming, directing, creating special reports about the contestants, interactions between contestants in the audition episodes, and new technologies,” says Salameh.

Moussawba adds: “Since we are in the show business, we need to satisfy both audiences - those in the auditorium and those watching the show on TV. We have succeeded in doing that by using new techniques that have set us apart from the competition.”

Clue Media introduced augmented reality in real time while shooting Prince of Poets and a holographic screen for season eight of The Million’s Poet. “We were the first production company in the region to use augmented reality live on air in a weekly show,” says Moussawba.

The holographic screen at the back gives a 3D look to the stage. “The transparent screen absorbs 78% of the light, giving a sharp and vivid effect of any 3D elements projected,” says Salameh, adding that the result is wonderful on-set cinematography for both the live audience and people watching on screens.

The production house also uses patented technologies such as Cable Cam, Robot Cam and Tracker Cam, which offer refreshing new angles on shoots.

“Using technologies during live shows is always risky because at the end of the day, you are dealing with machines and at any point, it can crash. That is why we do rehearsals before the live shows and make sure to test everything before we go live,” reveals Salameh. “That way we’re able to test everything. The presenters can master the script, the director and I can see the flow of the episode.”

Clue Media constructs its own elaborately designed sets with at least 14 cameras, curved LED screens, extravagant props, 3km of LED strips for lighting, and Madrix LED strips which can also be used as a display screen.

“We introduced Madrix to the set design for the season nine of The Million’s Poet,” says Moussawba.

“We have more than 2,000sqm of warehousing space since we are among very few production houses that operate with our own equipment, from LED screens to light and sound equipment, to set fabrication and technology.”

Clue Media constructs its sets in...
conjunction with Redpill company, part of the React group. “We are different from other market players. In their TV shows, the set for an audition tour is always minimalistic, but we make sure that even the audition set is designed with equal importance as the prime set,” explains Salameh. The Million’s Poet involves a GCC tour to look for contenders for the poetry competition. The timeline for production depends on the size of a project; shows like The Million’s Poet and Prince of Poets take six to eight months of preparation, notes Moussawba.

For Clue Media, it is imperative that the production sets and the content reflect Abu Dhabi’s rich culture. For instance, the stage for The Million’s Poet is inspired by Qasr Al Hosn in Abu Dhabi, which is the oldest stone building in the city and over the centuries has been home to the ruling family. However, despite the elaborate planning, both Moussawba and Salameh agree that it was logistically challenging to produce Prince of Poets and Al Mankous around the same time last year, with a one-day interval between them.

“The challenge was designing a set that could be switched overnight and a team that was working around the clock to cater for both shows from A to Z” Karl Moussawba, GM, Clue Media

“Designing a set that could be switched overnight and a team that was working around the clock to cater for both shows from A to Z was not easy,” notes Moussawba. “It was a challenge – and we thank God that we were able to achieve it.” Karl Moussawba, GM, Clue Media

“A good investment is a package that includes the idea, the set design as well as the interest of each market” Marianne Salamé, Executive Producer, Clue Media

with no mistakes on air,” adds Salameh.

None of this would have been possible without a strong and reliable team, the duo agrees. “One of our greatest assets is our team. The members have been carefully chosen with ample experience to speak for them,” says Moussawba.

Salameh adds that they hire people who are completely invested in the productions. “For me, it is not only important to be good at your job, but be accountable for it by showing commitment, dedication and responsibility. We look for people who make us feel that they are part of the team even if they are freelancers.”

High-end shows managed by excellent teams, however, require high-end budgets, which are critical to production quality. “It is obvious that in any production there is a fixed cost that we all know and we budget for. However, the challenge is how smartly to budget for contingencies and navigate around the potential minefields to make every production a profitable one,” reveals Moussawba.

“We make sure to stick to our standards even if we have to dip into the company’s pockets sometimes. Our CEO never refuses when it comes to paying for an idea that uplifts the show,” remarks Salameh.

The most expensive show that Clue Media has produced to date is The Million’s Poet. “It remains one of the most expensive shows done in the region. However, our aim remains beyond financial returns; we are happy when we wrap a successful season that was highly appreciated by the client,” says Moussawba.

He adds that with so much money going into production, the pressure to avoid mistakes increases tremendously, which is why Clue Media usually has 60-65 crew members on set to produce a live TV show. Apart from its shows and TV advertisements, Clue Media also has other TV formats, including The Four, Cooking Box, Dream Job, Switch and Men’s Salon. With season nine of The Million’s Poet currently airing and the total prize value going as high as US $4m, Clue Media has been diligently working towards raising the bar for the show, employing innovative and creative approaches, from colourful lights and quality content to advanced technologies and creative designs. Based on the show’s fan base, their efforts seem to be bearing fruit.

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Clue Media has introduced new technologies like the Madrix strips and the Trackie Cam to enhance their shows.

Clue Media looks at the content and how it is presented to the audience before pitching for a show, says Salameh.
GETTING AHEAD OF THE GAME

From playing professional football to developing unique software-based technologies that have taken the world of sports broadcasting by storm, Mohammad Ali Abbaspour, founder and CEO of Sponix Tech, has come a long way. In an exclusive interview with Vijaya Cherian, Abbaspour takes us through some of the ideas that have catapulted Sponix Tech to fame.

A young UK-based technology company, backed primarily by Arab investors, is setting a few world’s by developing next-generation sports technology solutions that are being fine tuned for global deployment. Sponix Tech tested one of its point-of-view (POV) innovations during the last season of the UAE Pro League, in conjunction with the UAE Pro League Committee (PLC). The company is now making waves worldwide for a raft of software-based innovations in sports broadcast that are scheduled for roll-out this year; and last month it was also chosen from many companies to be part of the Qatar Sports Tech roll-out this year; and last month it was also chosen from among 1,400 companies to be part of the Qatar Sports Tech Programme, which works with both Sports and the World Cup Committee to develop new sports technologies.

Sponix Tech was founded in 2018 by CEO Mohammad Ali Abbaspour, an ex-professional football player and IT management specialist. It initially started in Dubai, and some of the ideas for its solutions originated in the emirate, but the team eventually registered an office in the UK. “Sport and technology were always the two big elements of my life,” says Abbaspour, who is currently pursuing a PhD in IT management. “Around eight years ago, I stopped playing football and graduated with a master’s degree in IT management and decided to focus on sports technologies. Since then, we have developed some sports technology products, but we started to make real progress when we consciously decided to develop technologies designed specifically for the sports broadcasting market.”

The company now boasts 17 technical experts in various fields including computer vision, artificial intelligence, machine learning, image processing and programming.

“We have a great team at Sponix Tech, and each of us has made significant contributions to the technologies we have created. In 2014, we developed a unique personal trainer solution for athletes that included both software and hardware. It is a motion detection-based solution that helps athletes increase their performance and decrease injuries during their exercises.”

The most recent innovation is a POV technology that helps produce immersive content derived from the views of the players and referees. It was successfully used to produce an immersive shot during the UAE League Cup Final in March last year. “We produced a POV shot from the first goal of the match, and it was broadcast live from the main channels of the country like Abu Dhabi Sports and Dubai Sports,” says Abbaspour, who admits the idea came from seeing Intel’s True View technology at work. “The unique aspect of True View and POVs is that they provide the most complicated to achieve was POVs, and this is why we are proud of what we have achieved. In fact, our output quality and the processing time is the same.”

Sponix Tech’s USP is that its solutions are entirely software-driven. “Producing this kind of POV angle and content for a 36-camera installation typically requires huge investment in infrastructure within the stadiums. By comparison, Sponix Tech just needs a high-quality feed from the match to create this, and it is entirely software-based, requiring no installation at stadiums. This is what makes our technology unique. It took some time for us to arrive at the algorithms and code the software, but now we have a solution that uses only a broadcast feed and can produce immersive content for any stadiums worldwide.”

The solution is a blend of computer vision, artificial intelligence, machine learning and image processing, says Abbaspour. “With this, we can now bring new and unique angles from the field to sports fans. All we require is a high-quality feed of the match.”

The most recent innovation is a software-based technology within the next couple of months.

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Mohammad Ali Abbaspour, CEO, Sponix Tech
match. In that case, we will produce
POV shots from that moment as well
and these are all immediate. Also,
our solution does not interrupt the
workflow of the production team in
the stadiums. It is easily integrated
with the broadcasters’ feeds.”
Abbaspour adds that other POVs
are also in the offing. “Right now, we
can produce unique videos from the
view of the players and referees. We
are now working on other features
like revolving the referee positions,
semi-motion POV and so on.”
Sponix Tech is presently finalising
contracts with some of the biggest
leagues and clubs in Europe and
hopes to have signed three of
them by the end of March. For
instance, at the beginning of the
year, it finalised a deal with Benfica
TV to produce immersive replays
for Benfica home matches in the
Portuguese Primeira League.
“For leagues, we can produce
immersive content during the
competitions. These videos can be
broadcast live as replay during the
matches. Also, for clubs, we produce
unique immersive content for their
apps, TV channels and social media.
Right now, only the Manchester
City app is able to offer this content
after their home matches. This is
because they have installed Intel’s
True View technology at the Etihad
Stadium, but as I mentioned, this
requires significant investment.”
This is only one of many sports
broadcast innovations emerging
from the Sponix Tech stable, with
in-house solutions being developed
for other sports like ice hockey
and cricket. More importantly, the
company is gearing up for a special
launch within the next two months:
a 360-degree software-based
technology that will be finalised in
March and requires only existing
camera feeds from within stadiums.
Sponix Tech is simultaneously
working on a software-based digital
billboard replacement (DBR) solution
that can add virtual advertisements
during sports live events in real time.
“Right now, only a few companies
worldwide can do this, but they need
to install sensors, specific
billboards and specific cameras. Our DBR technology
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Mohammad Ali Abbaspour, CEO, Sponix Tech

Mohammad Ali Abbaspour says Sponix Tech is now looking to develop technologies for hockey and cricket as well.

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Mohammad Ali Abbaspour, CEO, Sponix Tech
This is the time when budgets are being planned. For the average content creator, there are several items that could make 2020 a good year – starting with that amazing new Mac Pro, the new RED 8K camera and some additional terabytes in the storage pool for all that 8K media that you’ll be shooting. Also, the IT guys think it may be smart for us to offsite some critical data, so perhaps it’s time to think about cloud storage.

The Cloud Conundrum

On-premise back-up and archival systems have been commonplace in media production since before centralised storage was a thing. The available technology 15 years ago in AIT and DLT recorded data to tape at about the same speed as files upload to the average cloud storage today. In the age of low-capacity ATA/IDE hard drives, this wasn’t a big problem. In 2019, we saw HDDs closing in on 20TB each and tape cartridges (now LTO8) at 12TB capacity uncompressed. Since LTO generations always double in capacity, we’re due to see a 24TB cartridge soon. Cloud, on the other hand, is limitless. Seems like a good resource to have, but consider the cost of ‘limitless’. Even though you only pay for what you use, there is little to no economy of scale. When buying an LTO system, the drive and robotic library come at a large up-front cost, but as you use it, the price per TB goes down because you’re just buying the cartridges.

It’s common to consider the nice round number of 100TB as the point of convergence between cloud and LTO, at least when deploying a small-scale library system. That number may decrease in the next generation of LTO, as you will be able to reach 100TB with only four tapes and large libraries may not be required. Still, the idea of an externally managed, disaster-proof (multi-site replicated) store of data is very attractive, especially if your company normally flexes with the changing workload. A big back-up system to manage your big back-up jobs will sit idle in slow times. Cloud back-up costs you nothing if you delete the uploaded material at the completion of the job. It’s an OpEx, not a CapEx – you decide it’s not worth the ongoing cost, shut it off. We’ve all seen large investments justified in this way. However, it’s still the speed that brings some thoughtfulness to the conversation. In the early days of tape-based back-up, entire networks were rarely more than a few terabytes. With today’s increased media file sizes, and with the average speed of cloud upload at about 1TB per day, how long will it take to run a full back-up of your storage systems? How much data does your facility ingest and generate in a single day during busy times? When you need to get that data back, how long are you willing to wait?

The Storage Hierarchy Workflow

Tiered storage management is big business in the enterprise world. Use of complex algorithms to cache the most-used objects and shuffle off the seldom used ones to slower media is a tenet of good enterprise storage dataflow. In content creation, however, this can leave some things to be desired. Front-end caching for speed in media production needs to represent a lot more of the capacity of the overall system because the file sizes are so much larger. When elements needed immediately fall outside that speedy cached capacity, it can be disastrous for a screening or supervised edit session. As a result, tier 1 storage is large and files are seldom moved unless they’re sure to be reused for an extended time. This workflow lends itself to the cloud in an interesting way.

Assuming the ‘warm’ category of the cloud storage account, there is no faster tier 3 for random file just buying the cartridges.

Cloud offers several benefits in terms of speed, efficiency and cost compared to a traditional LTO storage, and can help solve problems in production that would usually call for an on-site investment in hardware, says Jim McKenna of Facilis. Cloud is on the list very attractive, especially if your company normally flexes with the changing workload. A big back-up system to manage your big back-up jobs will sit idle in slow times. Cloud back-up costs you nothing if you delete the uploaded material at the completion of the job. It’s an OpEx, not a CapEx – you decide it’s not worth the ongoing cost, shut it off. We’ve all seen large investments justified in this way. However, it’s still the speed that brings some thoughtfulness to the conversation. In the early days of tape-based back-up, entire networks were rarely more than a few terabytes. With today’s increased media file sizes, and with the average speed of cloud upload at about 1TB per day, how long will it take to run a full back-up of your storage systems? How much data does your facility ingest and generate in a single day during busy times? When you need to get that data back, how long are you willing to wait?

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access. Cloud is a medium that can be used for deep archive while still maintaining instant access to the video and audio files that may be needed in production. This offers a workflow in which the entirety of a production shoot can be uploaded via an on-premises cloud cache, maintaining tier 1 access of all assets on the cache until after the initial rough cut.

Media can then be managed (moved) into an alternate location on tier 1, where it resides for the duration of the extended editorial process, and the remaining production assets are flushed from the disk but remain on the cloud location. The flushed files maintain their same locations in the directory structure on cache but take up no disk space.

The savings in tier 1 capacity can be realised immediately, and redundancy is achieved for all the production assets on cloud storage. The best part is, the shots that weren't used in the initial rough cut are all still available and restoration of the high-bitrate master is only moments away. Add an asset management interface that saves preview clips of the uploaded assets for offline viewing, and the workflow comes together quite nicely—random access to needed assets in a familiar interface, through a common directory structure, without taking up space on expensive tier 1 storage.

Who's Who in Cloud

Since we’re only discussing the usage model of cloud as storage, not cloud computing for image processing, analytics or virtual machines, this shouldn’t be an easy choice, right? But it’s never easy with the cloud.

Search something like ‘best cloud storage’ and weed through the dozens of consumer-focused services that simply rebrand someone else’s storage with a new device continuous synchronisation and collaborative features, to name a few. These consumer and SME-focused services want to be your end-to-end solution, so they often don’t have the common interfaces (APIs) to live inside a larger workflow. For cloud storage to be usable in an enterprise or rich media content creation environment, it must be compatible with the internal network and have some ability to be integrated within the company applications.

Narrowing down the list to a few services that are pointed toward professional environments and integrate well within these environments yields some familiar brands and some new faces. Amazon and Microsoft have focused on corporate environments the most, making them the top choices for many facilities. The AWS S3 interface has been adopted by some other cloud storage providers (like Wasabi) in order to leverage the existing compatibility that many media management applications have with AWS. Other providers chose to create their own interface, like Backblaze B2, considering this to be a more streamlined and less costly way to interface with cloud storage.

Regardless of how you get to the storage, these services all have one thing in common—you pay by the GB/TB. In some cases, you only pay for what you’re currently using, while in some cases you pay for any data uploaded, with a standard retention period thereafter.

In most cases, you’ll also pay for download or egress (because you may not always be downloading—you may be moving or copying within the cloud). Egress cost can put a damper on the random access of media within the workflow outlined above. More importantly, it can have a big impact on the monthly bill, and the finance department doesn’t like inconsistent costs.

The Wasabi method of calculating pricing eliminates the egress cost but replaces it with a mandatory retention period of 90 days. If you upload a file, you’re charged for that file storage for at least 90 days, no matter when you delete that file. This period is well within the range of retention for most data placed in cloud storage, so the savings in egress cost make this solution worth a look.

The Bigger Picture

Cloud can’t be everything to everyone, but it can help solve certain problems in production that would ordinarily call for on-premises hardware investment. For the big data producers in our industry, tape-based localised archive and back-up solutions may make sense, unless external file access and business continuity protection are higher priorities than cost. For those who want to integrate cloud for the purpose of structured tier 1 offload with random access, look for the companies that integrate the right cloud service into your content creation environments and offer the accountability that they’ll work for your specific need.

Jim McKenna, VP of Sales & Marketing, Facilis

"Cloud is a medium that can be used for deep archive, while still maintaining instant access to the video and audio files that may be needed in production"
Nahla Al Fahad is an Emirati film director with several achievements under her belt. Apart from being part of the jury for the UAE Entertainment Experience, she is Director of Content for Expo 2020 and is in the process of making her first feature film. In an exclusive interview with Shifa Naseer, Al Fahad talks about various projects including her Oscar-nominated documentary *The Tainted Veil* (2015), her production company, and her experiences and aspirations as a woman film director in the UAE.

Over the past decade, the Middle East has seen the emergence of a more mature indigenous film industry, and with it a raft of budding filmmakers and directors whose awareness and innovation have transformed the way people watch movies in the region. Women, in particular, have taken the film industry by storm with their resilience and talent. Emirati film director Nahla Al Fahad is one such force to be reckoned with – she is one of the UAE’s most recognised female directors with a long list of TV commercials, popular music videos and corporate documentaries to her name.

“I started my career back in 2002 as an executive director in the private sector,” says Al Fahad, explaining that her passion for media, innovation and filmmaking drove her. “Becoming a filmmaker didn’t take much time because I knew from the beginning that it is my passion. From a young age, I have always been connected to TV productions, animation and music, so I didn't stop to think about what to study and what to invest in.”

Since then, Al Fahad has come quite far. In 2018 she got a place on the American Film Showcase workshop at USC (the University of Southern California), which specifically focuses on documentary filmmaking.

“It was a big step up in my career. I have worked on many documentaries, one of which was commissioned by the National Media Council in collaboration with Sky News. It was about the participation of the UAE in the Yemen war. It was a short documentary.

“Two years ago, I travelled to the US to film a documentary on the UAE students in Arizona, LA, Washington, DC and Virginia. The documentary is available to watch on YouTube. It was in collaboration with the US Embassy and Ministry of Foreign Affairs.”

However, the jewel in her crown is *The Tainted Veil*, a documentary that was one of 124 feature films considered in the Documentary Feature category for the 88th Academy Awards in 2016.

The Tainted Veil is a historical documentary shot across nine countries, including France, Turkey, Egypt and the UAE. The 78-minute film looks at the hijab’s place in today’s world, how it is perceived and why people choose whether to wear it or not. Produced by Anasy Media in Abu Dhabi, the film was co-directed by Al Fahad, who worked alongside American director Ovidio Salazar and Syrian director and producer Mazen Al Khayrat.

“In 2014, I was approached by Salazar, who is the one who travelled around the world and took interviews from people, to look at the material and write a story. We spent an entire year with director Al Khayrat and the producer of the film, Sheikha Alyaziya bint Nahyan bin Mubarak Al Nahyan, daughter of the Minister of Tolerance, Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak Al Nahyan.”

Sheikha Alyaziya was the one who came up with the idea, says Al Fahad. “We worked for almost a year developing the story, picking the right interviews, and creating this journey from one country to the next.”
When she has bigger projects, she relies on the large freelance talent pool in the UAE. “I deal with a lot of freelancers. I have my network of producers and directors.”

Being a filmmaker is a challenge. It is an even bigger challenge being a woman filmmaker, says Al Fahad. In particular, gaining the trust of producers and sponsors has taken time.

“It took me around four to five years to gain the trust of producers. It wasn’t an easy journey.”

Today, Al Fahad represents Emirati and Arab women on several international forums. She believes there is huge scope for women in this industry.

“We have many examples of women who have achieved so much and made their names in the film industry. Compared to the Western market, it is quite different perspectives”

Nahla Al Fahad, film director

The idea for the film was conceived during a visit to a social centre in Sydney, Australia when Al Fahad saw an old man staring out of the window in one of the rooms. “I stopped and looked at the man, staring outside the window, when the story came to me.”

The film explores the complex relationship between a young man, staring outside the window, and his estranged grandfather, followed by a reunion after many years.

The Emirati director says the film covers interviews with scholars, artists, young Muslim women in France who face issues in the country due to hijab laws, and ordinary people. It shows how people react to the hijab and shares stories from Western women who choose to wear it. “We also interviewed an Egyptian woman who chose to take off her hijab,” says Al Fahad.

The Emirati director says the hardest artistic choice was for her hijab, “says Al Fahad. In particular, gaining the trust of producers and sponsors has taken time.

“We had a couple of brainstorming sessions to develop last year’s National Day video. I thought it would be more special when musicians play the UAE’s national anthem on their authentic instruments. That’s why I picked countries like the Philippines, China, Sweden, India, the UAE, Saudi and Jamaica.”

Al Fahad also directed a video released for the Year of Tolerance. “Since 2019 was chosen as the Year of Tolerance, we had a chance to develop a video for it.”

The Emirati director runs her own production studio, Beyond Studios, which has a close-knit team of 40. Most of the revenue she requires to run her passion projects comes from the studio’s projects and events.

“We were not here to influence viewers. We wanted people to arrive at their own conclusions based on different stories that we showed. Our aim was to offer different perspectives.”

Nahla Al Fahad, film director

The film is relatively new and picking up now.”

She says it is important for her to be part of international film festivals, as the experience helps gain the confidence of producers and this, in turn, helps with funding. “I want to show the audience that we have amazing stories to tell the world. We just need to produce it and make sure we have funding.”

She is currently preparing for her first feature film, as part of the final journey of the UAE Entertainment Experience project. She is also working on a short film about a Saudi girl living in Dubai who is confused by the American and Saudi culture.

Al Fahad has also been working on a feature film named Maryam which revolves around a young woman’s relationship with her estranged grandfather, followed by a reunion after many years.

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The team decided that the tone of the film was not to dictate any perspectives but to allow the audience to take from it. “It’s not about right or wrong but about how you see the different views of both Muslims and non-Muslims regarding the hijab.”

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The film covers interviews with scholars, artists, young Muslim women in France who face issues in the country due to hijab laws, and ordinary people. It shows how people react to the hijab and shares stories from Western women who choose to wear it. “We also interviewed an Egyptian woman who chose to take off her hijab,” says Al Fahad.

The Emirati director says the hardest artistic choice was for her hijab, “says Al Fahad. In particular, gaining the trust of producers and sponsors has taken time.

“We had a couple of brainstorming sessions to develop last year’s National Day video. I thought it would be more special when musicians play the UAE’s national anthem on their authentic instruments. That’s why I picked countries like the Philippines, China, Sweden, India, the UAE, Saudi and Jamaica.”

Al Fahad also directed a video released for the Year of Tolerance. “Since 2019 was chosen as the Year of Tolerance, we had a chance to develop a video for it.”

The Emirati director runs her own production studio, Beyond Studios, which has a close-knit team of 40. Most of the revenue she requires to run her passion projects comes from the studio’s projects and events.

“We were not here to influence viewers. We wanted people to arrive at their own conclusions based on different stories that we showed. Our aim was to offer different perspectives.”

Nahla Al Fahad, film director

The film is relatively new and picking up now.”

She says it is important for her to be part of international film festivals, as the experience helps gain the confidence of producers and this, in turn, helps with funding. “I want to show the audience that we have amazing stories to tell the world. We just need to produce it and make sure we have funding.”

She is currently preparing for her first feature film, as part of the final journey of the UAE Entertainment Experience project. She is also working on a short film about a Saudi girl living in Dubai who is confused by the American and Saudi culture.

Al Fahad has also been working on a feature film named Maryam which revolves around a young woman’s relationship with her estranged grandfather, followed by a reunion after many years.

The idea for the film was conceived during a visit to a social centre in Sydney, Australia when Al Fahad saw an old man staring out of the window in one of the rooms. “I stopped and looked at the man, staring outside the window, when the story came to me.”

The film explores the complex relationship between a young man, staring outside the window, and his estranged grandfather, followed by a reunion after many years.

It wasn’t an easy journey.”

It took me around four to five years to gain the trust of producers. It wasn’t an easy journey.”

Today, Al Fahad represents Emirati and Arab women on several international forums. She believes there is huge scope for women in this industry.

“We have many examples of women who have achieved so much and made their names in the film industry. Compared to the Western market, it is quite
woman and her grandfather, both victims of circumstances. “It has a lot of complicated emotions. I wrote some scenes of how old and young people are different in many things. The clashes that happen due to the generation gap are what I’m highlighting in the film.”

It has not been a rosy ride for Al Fahad but despite her share of setbacks, she also believes in resilience and not giving up. When she needs a break, she turns to travel and photography, both of which give her the dopamine she needs. For budding filmmakers, Al Fahad has some advice. “We are all in a hurry to be part of film festivals and expensive camera crews. Instead, we need to learn and write good and authentic stories. My advice is to be real. Be you. Don’t try to imitate others. Believe in yourself and your ideas. Don’t be shy. Be proactive.”

She received two scholarships from the American Embassy to attend workshops in the US. “My first course was part of an exchange programme which took me to New York, Washington, DC, North Carolina and Los Angeles. I did intensive workshops in filmmaking where I met some of the big names in Hollywood. During these workshops, I had the opportunity to visit the academies in Los Angeles. I also attended a couple of film festivals like the SilverDocs Film Festival and the LA Film Festival.”

She says these are necessary to build knowledge and gain exposure about filmmaking. “You should take courses if you are willing to transform what you already have and show it to the audience in the best way possible. So it’s good to have such degrees.”

Al Fahad is currently pursuing a doctorate in Innovation and Media at Derby University in the UK. “She doesn’t just give advice, she also takes it, having attended several workshops over the years to enhance her knowledge. She calls HH Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum her inspiration and her mother, Nasa, her biggest role model.”

Al Fahad has been the recipient of many scholarships to attend workshops, which she believes are very important for a filmmaker.
Esports has evolved to take the form of hugely popular multiplayer competitions between professional players, individually or as teams. Some of the most eminent championships harness popular titles played at home, such as Fortnite, League of Legends, Counter-Strike and Call of Duty.

According to a report by Newzoo, a market analytics company, 380m people worldwide watched esports in 2018 and it is estimated that the total audience grew to 454m viewers last year, with revenues of $1.1bn, up 22% from 2018. Prize pools for esports championships also reached a jaw-dropping $160m in 2018 and are expected to have grown by 25% to $200m in 2019.

With esports snowballing in popularity, the biggest production players are clearly the gaming workstations, which are based on IT and IP technologies by their very nature, says Matt Allard.

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The gaming industry has reached somewhat of a crescendo, and with such huge global popularity, professional gamers are now watched and followed by millions of fans all over the world, with viewership and video gaming growing at an exponential rate. The increasing availability of online streaming media platforms like YouTube and Twitch have become central to the growth and promotion of esports competitions, with these services allowing viewers to watch as their favourite gamers play in real time from anywhere in the world, and have become the places where popular gamers build their fan base.

With this growing popularity in mainstream culture, esports is now a developing area of study in education and is attracting big-name partners. Degrees are being offered in Gaming Programming, Game Art, Game Design and even Esports Management. Staffordshire University in the UK has created the world's
first full esports undergraduate degree, a combination of the business school curriculum and computer game design.

As to the technical enabling of esports growth, the winner is clearly IP. The best production players are the gaming workstations, which are based on IT and IP technologies by their very nature. Plugging these systems into a standard network is not only less complicated but contributes to reducing the overall facility cost. For successful esports production, video, data and distribution up to 4K UHD has to be accounted for. Large numbers of simultaneous high-definition computer sources over the network have to be mixed in real time along with camera sources, graphics and audio. This means the foundation of the system has to be flexible and adaptable to making changes as needed. To be future-ready, the only answer is to incorporate IP-based transport.

Moving high-bitrate live video over distances by IP can be much faster and more affordable than the alternatives. With IP connectivity, systems and devices can be plugged into a standard 1G or 10G Ethernet network and connected to each other, which permits every device, its inputs and outputs, to be available for use with production and distribution, without having to directly connect them, or even have them near one another. This approach provides more production options and makes the process simpler, which leads to substantial enhancement of the quality and creativity of esports productions and their delivery to viewers.

IP-based standards exist to enable compatible products to share video, audio and data across a local area network. Using refined encoding and communication systems, devices and applications can identify and communicate bi-directionally with one another over IP and can encode, transmit and receive multiple streams of high-quality, low-latency, frame-accurate video and audio in real time. IP standards can support any combination of video aspect ratios, frame rates or resolutions along with multi-channel audio. The biggest production players are based on IT and IP enabling of esports growth.

The digital media production system all connected so that everything communicates directly over the network. Easily accessible from any compatible desktop or mobile device, anywhere on the network. IP monitoring of multiple video and audio sources at any position on the network. The digital media production system has to be simple to set up, with a minimum of new equipment necessary. Simplicity means being able to incorporate IP technology into any new or existing system, in all production roles. Some of the simplest and cheapest IP systems can help manage production is IP technologies are easy to deploy and solve a number of challenges for esports production. Special cabling is not needed to send signals around a facility. IP-based production allows organisations to expand and achieve new capabilities that would not be possible using a legacy approach.

“Using IP for media acquisition, processing and delivery is really the only effective way to efficiently produce esports events”

Matt Allard, Product Marketing Manager, Vizrt Group

“Large numbers of simultaneous high-res computer sources over the network have to be mixed in real time along with camera sources, graphics and audio”

Matt Allard, Product Marketing Manager, Vizrt Group

be mounted overhead and directly in front of players to capture the nuances of intense gameplay.

Using standard IT interfacing, gaming workstations can be simultaneously connected over the network as video sources. Game consoles such as Xbox, Nintendo Switch and PlayStation can also be added to the network, with IP converters making these and other HDMI video devices into production sources. Switching for all cameras, gaming PCs and consoles, along with video clips, graphics and audio, are combined into an IP-capable digital media production system.

In addition to the players, there are often presenters at desks delivering analysis and colour commentary during productions. Presenters can have their own PCs to select and view any source over IP. A separate spectator PC can display the output of any of the 12 different gaming systems, along with a separate output that provides a third-person view of the gaming. Events are almost always streamed over IP, often to several places at once, including Twitch, YouTube and Facebook.

Standard managed IT switches pull all the IP streams together, with the cameras, PCs and production system all connected so that everything communicates directly with each other straight away. Using IP for media acquisition, processing and delivery is really the only effective way to efficiently produce esports events. Available IP technologies are easy to deploy and solve a number of challenges for esports production. Special cabling is not needed to send signals around a facility. IP-based production allows organisations to expand and achieve new capabilities that would not be practical using a legacy approach.

IP connectivity is currently the best method to achieve the technical enabling of esports growth.
“Broadcasters must leverage robust IP networks for more reliable delivery of low-latency, broadcast-quality live video”

Building smarter newsrooms in the cloud

With every broadcaster wanting to be the first to break a story, news production teams struggle to acquire, produce and broadcast content in a timely manner. Enter the cloud-based infrastructures helping newsrooms create agile workflows and establish collaborative production processes.

Today, anyone can be a content creator, with consumers now empowered to create more content than ever before. Cisco forecasts that by 2025, live video will make up 17% of all video traffic on the internet – and the Middle East and Africa will experience the highest mobile data traffic growth of any region, increasing by 56% by 2022. With the proliferation of high-quality cameras on smartphones and social media platforms, broadcasters need not rely on professional cameras and OB vans to capture and produce content for live on-air distribution. Assets from professional cameras and OB vans are being complemented by drones and connected devices, resulting in impactful, attention-grabbing stories.

Harnessing the rise of citizen journalists and enriching content acquisition

With the advent of new technologies and social media, IHS Markit estimates that the number of citizen journalists will increase by 140% a year from now until 2025, and this rapid growth is reshaping the production studio for direct live broadcast, or recorded in the cloud. Such features allow media networks to source external contributions from the fields to provide remote interviews, call-ins or live footage of a major incident from either a mobile reporter or an eyewitness in the vicinity. Crucially, in time-critical situations, WebRTC does not require contributors to download a dedicated app.

Cloud supports content acquisition from unlimited concurrent live feeds, including professional cameras, encoders, smartphones and online sources (HDMI, RTMP, MPEG-TS, WebRTC, SRT, HLS, MP4-Dash) anywhere in the world. Therefore, to acquire content from citizen journalists and enable seamless live reporting from any device, newsrooms are now making the transition to cloud-based infrastructures.

Optimised production through cloud-enabled curation and syndication

Cloud helps newsrooms speed up broadcast production drastically while reducing the costs associated with satellite syndication. As streams from multiple inputs are ingested, they are collated in the MCR with a continuous playback multicast. The use of metadata simplifies content creation for editorial teams, as they can filter contributors and explore sources through configured inputs such as professional cameras, mobile contributions and geolocations.

Platform-agnostic content distribution

Once the content is collated and curated, the cloud enables newsrooms to distribute live signals simultaneously to unlimited destinations in terms of online and traditional broadcast infrastructure (newscasts, mixes and switchers), or directly to social media for fresh, multifaceted news reporting. Unlimited output distribution means broadcasters will have the ability to significantly increase audience reach through a single broadcast. As news broadcasters start to move towards cloud-enabled IP-based workflows and distribution models, they need to consider the transport solutions available. It is unacceptable for any media organisation to have a stream go down during a live broadcast. Therefore, broadcasters must leverage robust IP networks for more cost-effective and reliable delivery of low-latency, broadcast-quality live video.

As live video traffic and mobile usage continue to grow, news broadcasters need to evolve their workflows and processes to harness the rise of UGC. Cloud technologies will help newsrooms enrich content acquisition by tapping into citizen journalists to source hyper-local content and enable instant live deployment without the need for complicated and timely set-ups. Cloud also offers the flexibility and cost-efficiency that newsrooms need in order to continue to produce and break news stories across multiple platforms at the same time.

Andreas Jacobs is co-founder and CEO of Make.TV

With the rise of live video traffic and mobile usage, broadcasters must leverage robust IP networks for more reliable delivery of low-latency, broadcast-quality live video. The next stage is to explore how the cloud can help newsrooms achieve this goal.

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