CEO Patrick Tillieux on what it took to get OSN back on the road to recovery

BACK IN BUSINESS

RAMADAN MUSALSALAT
The inside scoop on how productions have fared this year

VOX POP
MEDIA LEADERS DISCUSS THE IMPACT OF COVID-19
Welcome

Ramadan Mubarak to all our readers. What an unusual Ramadan this one will be especially for the entertainment industry that relies on this period to make most of its annual revenue! But I have some good news. Despite the lockdowns, broadcasters have managed to announce several premium shows, which means some of them have been completed. And just as we head to press, there are reports that governments may relax movement restrictions for production houses so they can complete their shoots for the Holy Month. In the meantime, we have all the scoop on completed shows, incomplete ones and who secured programmes in our exclusive Ramadan Q&A with Heba Korayem.

Interestingly, with the lockdown, most company heads are also stuck in town. We took that opportunity to ask analysts and senior executives representing different sectors of the media and entertainment industry to discuss the impact of covid-19 and business models and shifting consumer behaviours they have observed. We bring you some fascinating insights from those conversations in this edition as part of our Vox Pop.

Of course, one obvious observation is that while cinema has taken a temporary hit, TV and streaming seem to have seen a significant spike in viewership with OTT claiming a large part of the pie at the moment. As one executive pointed out, this makes the case for SVOD much stronger now in this market, where PTV has maintained supremacy. Not everyone, however, has been able to monetise this as advertisers are treading with caution and consumers are wary of spending on entertainment. Still, some streaming services have said their subs have gone up by 30-35%, OSN claimed its subs tripled last month.

The addition of Disney+ Originals to OSN was a fantastic strategy that may have given the platform the boost it needed. This brings us to our cover story this month with Patrick Tilleux, CEO of OSN, who took the reins of a floundering company 15 months ago and has put it well back on the road to recovery. It is a story of hope and positivity, and a strong reminder to all of us that we shall overcome!

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Patrick Tilleux, CEO of OSN

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May 2020 | www.broadcastprome.com | 3

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Inside this issue

05 NEWS
Regional players reveal Ramadan lineup; Jordan Media City upgrades with Pebble Beach Systems; Al Arabiya rebuilds studios; Rajoty announces Arabic platform; Al Kass chooses Nevion; Weyyak collaborates with STV Bahrain; BeIN launches cinema service; StarzPlay signs deal with Warner Bros; OSN and Integral partner; Twitter announces new shows; new appointments; and more

14 RAMADAN NOTES
Heba Korayem talks about the strategies regional players have adopted this Ramadan to cope with the challenges caused by COVID-19

18 COVER: IT’S PAY TIME!
OSN CEO Patrick Tillieux on how he got the floundering pay-TV network back on track through new initiatives and partnerships

24 VOX POP - COVID-19
Media industry leaders share insights about the economic impact of COVID-19 and their response to the situation

30 BEHIND THE SCENES
Director Anastasia Mikova and colourist Stéphane Azouze talk about the making of the documentary Woman

34 PRODUCT LAUNCHES
A look at the newest products primarily intended for an NAB 2020 launch

40 OPINION
How to stay ahead of the competition with an effective OTT strategy

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Jordan Media City (JMC) has ordered a significant expansion to the Marina automation solution at its Amman headquarters, expanding on its current solution from Pebble Beach Systems that is already in place. The system to be deployed is a 12-channel expansion to the current six-channel HD/SD fully redundant playout system. This features automatic media management from a near line store and a DIVA archive, all of which is managed by the Marina enterprise-level automation and content management application using a single database.

“We are proud to strengthen our partnership with JMC as they migrate all of their channels to Marina,” said Samir Isbaih, Pebble Beach Systems’ VP of Sales ME and APAC. “With more than 400 channels already on air in the MENA region, Marina is the most modern automation platform in the market and continues to transform the playout capabilities and the service agility of users. It continues to be actively developed and features a number of enhancements – including Arabic language support – which were specifically developed for the Middle East.”

Radi Alkhas, MD of Jordan Media City added: “Our years of experience with Pebble Beach Systems’ technology and their responsive and knowledgeable team of engineers gave us the confidence to migrate all our channels from Neptune to the Marina platform.”

Ruptly boosts MENA services with new Arabic-language platform

Global multimedia agency Ruptly has unveiled an Arabic-language service platform for clients to access content tailored to the MENA region. The company first announced plans of expansion last March during CABSAT 2019 and has spent months developing the platform, which offers regional and local stories. Ruptly also has platforms for English, Russian and Spanish-speaking clients. Ruptly CEO Dinara Toktosunova said: “This service recognises the importance of providing Arabic-language content and facilitates its customers globally. It also highlights our commitment to delivering value to our clients as we continue to grow in the region.” Ben Diab, MEA Content and Territory Manager at Ruptly, remarked: “This is a fully localised, comprehensively populated website and live platform. We are now more accessible and able to cover the stories that matter to our Arabic-speaking clients. We will keep on listening and enhancing this new service.”

Ross Video completes Coiron buyout

Ross Video has acquired US-based technology company Coiron to develop a suite of popular applications for use with the XPression family of real-time motion graphics systems. With the acquisition, Coiron’s CEO Carlos Vasquez will now become part of Ross Video’s graphics division as Technical Product Manager for the Ross Virtual Solutions group.

New CCO at Shahid

MBC Group has appointed Jakob Mejhløe Andersen as Chief Content Officer (CCO) of its VOD platform, Shahid. Andersen will be responsible for the overall content strategy for both Shahid and its premium offering, Shahid VIP, whilst ensuring that the network’s over-the-top (OTT) offerings are strong across the MENA region. Previously, Andersen was CEO of NENT Studios UK, where he was responsible for building the entity into a leading integrated content studio with a focus on storytelling excellence and high-end productions.
Al Arabiya revamps, unveils new look

Al Arabiya unveiled a brand-new logo, identity and graphics across its TV and digital platforms last month as part of a larger revamp across the network's studios that included the deployment of new set designs and technology aimed at offering viewers a more immersive experience.

As part of the project, Al Arabiya's four studios were rebuilt and three new studio locations created for its social media shows. The studios have been distributed across the newly-built newsroom and across not only our television screens but also our social media and digital offerings.”

The entire set has been designed by New York-based ClickLooping Design, Fadi Rad, Head of Creative at Al Arabiya Network said: “We are relaunching with new studios, a new design and more importantly, taking advantage of new technologies that will take the viewer into the next generation of journalism across not only our television screens but also our social media and digital offerings.”

The newly revamped Al Arabiya facility in Dubai.

Two and a half years in the making, Al Arabiya’s four studios were immersed experience.

The deployment of new set across the network’s studios that included a larger revamp across the media and digital offerings.”

ZEE5 offers Bollywood films in Arabic for free

ZEE5 has made Bollywood films in Arabic available for free exclusively for Middle East audiences. Bollywood films dubbed into Arabic include Toilet: Ek Prem Katha, Padman, Veere Di Wedding, Commando 2, RaOne, Welcome, Bareilly Ki Barfi and classics such as Mr. India and Pardes. The launch of Arabic dubbed films comes as an extension of the ZEE5 Global campaign to encourage the consumption of our Arabic content and values of the UAE.

The list includes local and regional dramas, regional comedies, Ramadan competitions as well as daily news programmes, all of which will run from 3:00 pm until 2:00 am. The channels will also air informative and educational content focused on highlighting the history and values of the UAE. In addition, Emarat TV will continue to provide special coverage and the latest updates on COVID-19 through a daily airing of the UAE government media briefing sessions, as well as through the Al Arabiya Al Masaalah and Al Arabiya Al Manara.

Deezer launches podcasts in MENA

Deezer has launched a number of podcasts for MENA listeners.

Users can access the English and Arabic podcasts in Deezer’s new ‘Shows’ tab which includes content in over 15 categories such as music, self-help, health, history, business and news shows. In Arabic, users may listen to documentary series Dom Tek, news podcast Al Majaz, interviews with Al Empire, B’Hob, 1001 Nights, sports podcast Man2Man and the Yalla Podcast.

In English, users can listen to BBC Global News Podcast, Oprah’s Super Soul Conversations, Pop Culture Happy Hour and Women Win. New research has revealed that there are 5.1 million regular listeners in Saudi Arabia, with one in four women (21%) listening to podcasts every week, according to marketers MENA in collaboration with 4DIC.

Weyyak collaborates with STC Bahrain, eyes ME expansion

Weyyak and ZEE5 Entertainment’s Arabic VOD streaming platform, has collaborated with STC Bahrain as part of its ongoing expansion with TPlay Mobile, its telecom aggregation partner and digital payment enable Weyyak aims to have long-term aggregation deals with TPlay in multiple countries, allowing users to choose their preferred mobile service provider for quick and easy subscription payments. The OTT platform also launched with other telcos in the UAE, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Jordan in collaboration with TPlay.

Cinema Aki! and Mubi launch free films

Dubai-based independent film house Cenastra Aki! has partnered with VOD platform Mubi to offer a 70-day free movie streaming starting April 2. While Cinema Aki!”

Cinema Aki! and Mubi launch free films

Dubai-based independent film house Cenastra Aki! has partnered with VOD platform Mubi to offer a 70-day free movie streaming starting April 2. While Cinema Aki! and Mubi launch free films, the films will be for free for three months. This will give viewers a chance to watch films offline on their iOS or Android devices. Films will be hand-picked each day and available to watch for a whole month. There will be 30 titles from a rotating selection to choose from.

BeIN Media Group unveils e-cinema service and Ramadan shows

BeIN Media Group has launched a cinema streaming service that offers films for the price of one cinema ticket ($11). More than 20 new movies are being released on beIN On Demand under the Cinema category in April and May. The lineup includes The Song of Names, Into the Labyrinth and Hope Gap. The platform has also announced a new line-up of content during the month of Ramadan. New drama specials from beIN include Lebanese titles Del Gash and Ghb, Egyptian series Hob Omry and drama-comedy series Cinemaeyat.

BeIN will also host exclusive cooking shows on beIN Gourmet and Fatastat. Programmes to look out for include Fatastat Shu’ibih El Arf Season 2, Al Ma’ Hayat Season 2, and The Queen of the Abalone.

Special programmes for children on beIN’s Jeem TV and Barama Channel include Season 2 of Maya Al Bee, Misho al Rabot, Wusayyut, season 10 of Houroun wa Roussam, season 3 of Voltron Legendary Defender and Sahab Al Ayat.

StarzPlay signs exclusive deal with Warner Bros.

StarzPlay has announced a multi-year deal with Hollywood studio Warner Bros. The deal will see StarzPlay bring new and exclusive content franchises from Warner Bros. to the MENA region including DC series such as Batwoman, Doom Patrol, Swamp Thing and the Harley Quinn animated series. Episodes of other award-winning TV series from Warner are also expected to stream shortly after they premiere in the US. The new deal also covers premium boxsets such as Supernatural, Castle, Pennyworth and Young Sheldon, and library titles like The O.C. Fringe and Two and a Half Man.
Al Kass Sports Channels picks Nevion for SDI to IP transition

Al Kass Sports Channels has chosen Nevion’s flagship products VideoPath and Virtuoso to connect its main facility with three other broadcast facilities across the country through a flexible IP-based media network infrastructure. The Nevion Virtuosos are used for real-time IP adaptation and transport protection for video, audio and data, and provide encoding and decoding capabilities for both HD and 4K/ULHD video feeds. VideoPath provides deterministic routing of all media and data streams in the IP media ring network and keeps track of bandwidth allocation on each link within the network. The new solution will initially provide reliable ultra-low latency IP transport for uncompressed and compressed HD-SDI, DVB-ASI, intercom and data between the sites over a ring network topology. It will also be geared in the future to handle 4K UHD, HDR and SMPTST-2110 to support Al Kass’ plans.

Samir Younes, Consultant Engineer at Al Kass Sports Channels, said, “Nevion has played a significant role in our move from SDI to IP. The new IP-based network is allowing us to get more from other facilities, improving the quality of our transmissions and enabling us to create a more economical, future-proof proposition, including much greater scope for remote production.”

ViacomCBS completes Miramax transaction

ViacomCBS has completed its acquisition of a 49% stake in Miramax from both Media Group for $375m. BeIN retains a 51% stake in the company. Miramax’s current leadership will continue in their existing roles. ViacomCBS paid around $150m while closing the deal and has committed to invest $225m for new film and TV productions. In addition, Paramount Pictures has entered into a long-term distribution agreement for Miramax to develop, produce, finance and distribute new projects based on Miramax’s IP.

Hulu founder Jason Kilar joins WarnerMedia as CEO

Hulu founder Jason Kilar will take over as CEO of WarnerMedia, effective May 1. Kilar will report to John Stankey, President and Chief Operating Officer at telecoms company AT&T, which owns WarnerMedia. Previously, Kilar was the founding CEO of Hulu and SVIP at Amazon. Kilar was CEO of Hulu from its start in 2007 until 2013. Also, Kilar was co-founder & CEO of video streaming service Vessel from 2013 to 2017.

Huawei unveils video streaming service

Huawei has unveiled a streaming service app in the UAE offering a range of Arabic and global content. Users can access the new service by logging into Huawei Video with their Huawei ID and browse, search, playback and cache online videos. The app comprises a library of more than 10,000 hours of Arabic content and millions of videos.

Bollywood’s Eros merges with STX

Eros International has merged with STX Entertainment to form a combined venture, dubbed Eros STX Global Corporation. The new company is projected to release approximately 40 feature-length films, including seven sequels to prior hits and 100+ originals of episodic content this year. The transaction is expected to close in Q2 of 2020.

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Insys and To-Do Media bring Arabic content to mobile devices

Insys Video Technologies and To-Do Media have partnered to deliver video content to Arabic-speaking users across the world. Insys developed the backend platform for the H+ video service, which runs on Amazon Web Services (AWS). Home Plus Network (H+) is an Arabic content aggregator that works with regional content providers to gain access to a global audience. Customers can access thousands of hours of Arabic content through H+ on Huawei mobile devices. Insys Video Technologies provided the tools and backend infrastructure for H+ as well as integrating it with AWS Elemental Media Services to ensure reliability and easy scalability. Insys created a dedicated interface to enable video delivery to Huawei devices. To-Do Media can upload content and manage the H+ platform using the Insys VT administration panel. The H+ platform was deployed using AWS CloudFormation, which simplifies provisioning and management on AWS. Videos are transcoded on ingest using AWS Elemental MediaConvert, making them ready for distribution. Insys also integrated a complete content management software solution to enable To-Do Media to apply metadata to all video content, thus improving discovery. With the AWS Elemental Media Integration, To-Do Media can insert individually targeted advertising into the video stream without sacrificing broadcast-level quality of service and allowing a seamless viewing experience. Anmar Hares, CEO and Founder, To-Do Media, commented: “Enabling local content owners with a managed platform to reach a global audience is important, and with this new service, we bring a wide range of engaging content to Arabic speakers across the Arab world. Having the support of Insys was key to helping us launch fast while integrating seamlessly with AWS Elemental Media Services and the Huawei video platform.” Piotr Czekała, Co-founder and CTO, Insys Video Technologies, added: “The combination of our development expertise and Amazon Web Services allows To-Do Media to ensure a reliable video service that can scale fast as consumer demand grows.”

**OSN and Intigral seal multi-year deal**

OSN has signed a landmark deal with Intigral, the media arm of STC, for its Home and OTT service, Jawwy TV. The multi-year partnership sees Intigral secure first and exclusive access for the first few months to a new entertainment channel called OSN Mix. This channel will feature a selection of OSN’s best series, movies, kids and factual entertainment programming. Besides OSN Mix, Jawwy TV subscribers will have access — as part of their telecom bundles — to OSN-branded channels ranging from “Tahala” and “ART” channels offering Arabic productions, to Turkish series, kids entertainment and documentaries. Hamoud Al Rumayan, CEO of Intigral said: “Jawwy TV is home to the richest selection of entertainment and we see a bigger collaboration happening with OSN. The addition of OSN to our large portfolio of content not only enhances the attractiveness of our proposition but also caters to the needs of our beloved clients in KSA and other regional markets.” Zahra Zayat, Senior VP, Digital, OTT and Tokyo of OSN, remarked: “Intigral’s Jawwy TV is the perfect fit for our premium content. This is just one step towards nurturing this very special partnership and more exciting announcements will be shared soon.” OSN content is now available to Jawwy TV customers in KSA, whilst STC subscribers in Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman and Saudi Arabia can access OSN through a range of bundles and offers. Subscribers of STC, Mobily 4 and 5 will be able to watch OSN’s shows and entertainment programmes on the Jawwy TV app.

**Sharjah Broadcasting Authority announces Ramadan 2020 lineup**

Sharjah Broadcasting Authority has a line-up of more than 90 programmes for its radio and TV channels during Ramadan. The package will include 11 religious, 28 social and cultural programmes, and 20 entertainment dramas and soap operas, in addition to entertaining competitions, and a variety of radio shows and segments. Al Wousta TV will run three new programmes covering the region’s historical landmarks, social topics, oral history and a traditional food show, in addition to two TV dramas. Sharjah Radio’s daily morning talk show Al Atheer will continue throughout Ramadan. The Holy Quran Radio in Sharjah will offer 15 Ramadan-focused programmes and segments. The English-language radio station Pulse 95 Radio will air a daily talk show titled Night Karak, covering news, sports and inspiring stories with competitions every Wednesday. HE Mohammed Hassan Khalaf, Director General of SBA said: “In times of crisis, the media’s role and efforts must multiply to meet the demands of the public. SBA is committed to providing audiences quality and creative content through our TV channels and radio stations during Ramadan.”

**Etsalcom and Atfy to offer premium services in Bahrain**

Bahrain-based iTele Etsalcom has signed a deal with Atfy Home Entertainment, a licensed partner for pay-TV service providers, to launch its premium entertainment services in Bahrain. According to the deal, Etsalcom will offer a range of premium services during the lockdown period. Atfy Home Entertainment is the licensed partner in Bahrain for both Media Group, OSN, MBC, Arwa, MyHD and Trax. CEO of Etsalcom Rashid Al Sinan, said: “As countries around the world implement measures to safeguard their people and communities, we want to do our part.”

**Cannes Film Festival delayed indefinitely**

The Cannes film festival has been postponed indefinitely as France extended lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic, festival organisers said in a statement. Earlier, the festival had been postponed to June, July this year owing to the lockdown and other preventive measures.

**Spaceontoon and Shahid embark on live streaming partnership**

Spaceontoon and Shahid have partnered to bring Spaceontoon’s exclusive and classic kids’ content to MBC Group’s video streaming platform. The partnership is expected to help both parties reach a wider audience. Kamel Weiss, Strategy and Business Development Director of Spaceontoon said: “We are so impressed with the way Shahid has enhanced premium Arabic content in the region, which has been our approach and focus over the past 20 years. We have always been proud of the Arabic-language content that we have delivered over the years. This partnership underscores our commitment to offer our audience the best works, all of which are dubbed into Arabic.”

**Netflix ropes in Haifaa Al Mansour to direct The Selection**

Netflix is set to adapt Kiera Cass’ book series The Selection with Saudi filmmaker Haifaa Al Mansour on board to direct the feature. Al Mansour, KSA’s first female director, made waves with Wadjda, Mary Shelley and The Perfect Candidate.

**Bibysa Media has announced that its Arabic animated comedy and action series Mansour has surpassed one million subscribers on its YouTube Channel with over 500k views since launch. Mansour has gained particularly strong viewership in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Egypt, the UAE and Kuwait. Mansour targets children between the ages of 4-9, focusing on key values such as the importance of family, creative thinking, and imagination. The series was originally created by Rashid Alhammadi, the award-winning Executive Producer of the cartoon, and was seed-funded by Mobadala Investment Company. It was produced in partnership with twofour54 and Cartoon Network Studios Arabia. Mansour is currently available on Shahid VP and its YouTube Channel.”
Intigral to air exclusives on Jawwy TV

Intigral has contracted regional production companies I See Media Services, GoldenLine and Proto for some of the new original drama productions that will be showcased on Jawwy TV this Ramadan. New productions such as AlDrieat, Yaman, Hawa, Ijah Khaleeji’s, Ejaz, Bint Al Wald will be shown on Jawwy TV platforms in addition to the recently produced drama series Taya ya Gedo. Ramadan shows from production house Wide。

PRO

Football specialist, pan-Arab dramas, and productions such as Darwisheet by offering productions from the Arab world.

Commenting on the development, Intigral’s CEO Hamoud Al-Rumayan highlighted the importance of this step in providing high-quality productions that satisfy Arab viewers’ tastes and enrich their culture.

He extended his greetings to Jawwy TV subscribers on Ramadan, promising to present the best shows and dramas as well as an enjoyable experience during home-quarantine imposed due to the outbreak of coronavirus pandemic.

Radio veteran Cameron Plant dies

Cameron Plant, a well-known radio professional, who served as Group MO of Dubai-based radio station Shock Middle East from December 31, 2018 to November 2019 and has previously worked with ARN, was found dead at a hotel room in Melbourne on April 11. Plant was instrumental in launching ‘the two ads only per commercial break’ campaign at Shock ME. He also had plans to launch more radio stations at Shock ME to address different groups of listeners in the UAE.

WWE video streaming service launches in the Middle East

WWE Network’s WWE video streaming service – has been launched in the Middle East. Now, users can stream all WWE live pay-per-view events, including WrestleMania, on their TV, game consoles, phones, and other connected devices. WWE Network costs $9.99 per month, and the first month is free for new subscribers.

Twitter announces six shows in partnership with media partners

Twitter has announced the launch of six short weekly shows in Arabic in collaboration with CNBC Arabia, Harvard Business Review Arabia, Kooora, Sky News Arabia, Sayidaty and MBC Group. The shows have been created in response to feedback from Twitter users on what topics would interest them on the platform during the coronavirus outbreak.

On Sundays, CNBC Arabia will wrap up regional and global market performances in its show Markets In A Week while Harvard Business Review Arabia will discuss on Mondays, the new business models that are emerging today because of the coronavirus as part of its show Adapt and Learn. Football specialist Kooora will bring on Tuesdays the latest football news regarding all leagues and championships, with information on the players’ status to show how they are spending their days during the lockdown. Wednesdays are dedicated for Sky News Arabia to focus on COVID-19 and the most trending topics while Sayidaty will come in on Thursdays with Saudi influencer and life coach Turki Qashlan to discuss the physical and mental challenges people face in a lockdown. On Fridays, Twitter has also collaborated with MBC1 to bring a show called Celebrities at Home that will shed light on how celebrities are spending their time in isolation and will highlight the lives of many heroes on the front lines like security guards.

“Twitter has worked very closely with our content partners to bring these shows as these partnerships are the cornerstone of our business model,” commented Kinda Ibrahim, Director of Media Partnerships at Twitter MENA.

“Our partners see this as an expansion of the business and this gives us the opportunity to collaborate with them and create compelling content on Twitter as the need changes. This is why we are launching a programming grid with topics that we have learnt are relevant to our platform users based on research,” she pointed out.

Hanaa Hamzeh, Director of Programming & News at CNBC Arabia wished to partner with Twitter to provide audiences with a weekly market wrap show. "Ali Jaber, Group TV Director of MBC Group, remarked that this joint initiative with Twitter ‘falls in line with our strategy of multi-platform, multi-touch points delivery, especially during these critical times of Coronavirus outbreak’.

Samah Safa, Business Development Director at Kooora.com noted this new programme on Twitter “will primarily help all football fans to keep up with their favourite teams and players” and the developments of the current and upcoming football seasons.

The survey conducted by Twitter in Saudi Arabia and the UAE on how people are coping with COVID-19 showed that 89% of Saudi and UAE participants are witnessing change to their daily routine. Respondents from both countries said they spent most of their lockdown time on streaming services and social media. Both sets of respondents mentioned that they looked increasingly for news on the local and global economy and uplifting messages. In terms of topics of interest, while both Saudi and UAE participants expressed a common interest in entertainment, sports and consumer technology, Saudi and UAE respondents expressed a preference for e-commerce.

The survey also showed that 88% of Saudi and 93% of UAE respondents expressed a common interest in entertainment, sports and consumer technology. In terms of topics of interest, while both Saudi and UAE participants expressed a common preference for topics relevant to users on our platform to strengthen our position in the region and push more regional and Arabia to focus on COVID-19 and the most trending topics while Sayidaty will come in on Thursdays with Saudi influencer and life coach Turki Qashlan to discuss the physical and mental challenges people face in a lockdown. On Fridays, Twitter has also collaborated with MBC1 to bring a show called Celebrities at Home that will shed light on how celebrities are spending their time in isolation and will highlight the lives of many heroes on the front lines like security guards.

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Ramadan has traditionally been the most important revenue-generating period of the year for the TV industry in the Middle East. This year, however, the lockdown has severely impacted productions leaving some incomplete. Despite this, will production houses and broadcasters be able to deliver on their promises this year? We ask Heba Korayem, content market specialist at Mena.tv, to shed light on the situation.

As someone who engages closely with Arabic TV channels and production houses, how would you describe the general sentiment in the content market? The trend caused by the pandemic is rather ironic. There has been a global surge in demand for entertainment content, fuelled by the lockdown, but the existing supply has not been able to match it. In the space of four weeks, platforms like OSN reported a 39% rise in consumption on its linear platform and a 100% increase in streaming consumption since March 1 while MBC1 reported a 50% jump in audience around that period. These figures match what’s happening on a global scale, with Nielsen reporting a 36% jump in TV viewing minutes in the USA.

On the supply side, numerous production houses, how would you describe the existing supply in the market, says Heba Korayem. This year has seen media companies share some of their shows owing to incomplete productions causing a dearth of supply in the market, says Heba Korayem.

Do you foresee the projections for Ramadan changing this year considering the pandemic? If we look at seasonal trends from previous years in terms of Arabic series, you’ll find that in the past couple of peak seasons, series from the Levant, particularly Lebanon, have been on the rise in both quality and quantity. In fact, they surpassed Egyptian productions for the first time last year, recording a 34% increase in the share of Ramadan drama since 2017. An ongoing political revolution in Lebanon and a pandemic will most likely cause a sharp decline this year in terms of output, but on the bright side, an improvement in quality could be the positive outcome of a situation like this. Khaleiji productions have also seen a 44% rise in supply over the last three Ramadan seasons according to the mena.tv annual Ramadan report, but supply is expected to slightly decline this year.

“We have seen some revised line-ups. For production companies, this period harked the toughest. In terms of what to expect, we can break the Ramadan series down into four broad categories, based on dialect and audiences. Egyptian, Levant, Khaleeji (Gulf) and the Maghreb. Travel restrictions seem to have affected the pan Arab / Levant series the most primarily because the lead actors and actresses could no longer travel between Egypt and Lebanon” Heba Korayem, Client Director, Mena.tv.

Do you think production houses will be able to complete their productions owing to the lockdown? Up until a week before Ramadan, getting pandemic-related official information from production companies was close to impossible due to the sensitivity of the situation. Given that many of the free-to-air broadcasters in MENA generate more than 50% of their annual revenues from advertising during the 30 days of Ramadan, releasing any information prematurely can have dire consequences for all parties involved. Acquisition contracts worth millions were already signed and advertising spots on broadcaster grids had already been reserved.

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As someone who engages closely with Arabic TV channels and production houses, how would you describe the general sentiment in the content market? The trend caused by the pandemic is rather ironic. There has been a global surge in demand for entertainment content, fuelled by the lockdown, but the existing supply has not been able to match it. In the space of four weeks, platforms like OSN reported a 39% rise in consumption on its linear platform and a 100% increase in streaming consumption since March 1 while MBC1 reported a 50% jump in audience around that period. These figures match what’s happening on a global scale, with Nielsen reporting a 36% jump in TV viewing minutes in the USA.

On the supply side, numerous production houses, how would you describe the existing supply in the market, says Heba Korayem. This year has seen media companies share some of their shows owing to incomplete productions causing a dearth of supply in the market, says Heba Korayem.

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Cedars Art has postponed some of its titles stating that five of its titles are more than 75% complete but still cannot be released on time. Two out of three of its Magtech series will be released as planned, while four out of its five scheduled Pan-Arab dramas will be postponed, including Season 4 of its award-winning Al Hayba series. Cedars Art will also be releasing Disney’s hit format Goldbel Go!’, starring Egyptian TV icon Nadya el Hendy, Nahlia Obeid, Samia Ayoub, and Hala Fikhaer. Also, a talk show-style programme hosted by Egyptian star Ahmed El Sakka will be released on MBC1.

Ramadan productions in Egypt seem to be the least affected by the pandemic. Special permissions were granted to the country’s main production house, Synergy/United Media Services (UMS) for shooting, although social distancing and sanitation guidelines had to be followed strictly. Also, Egyptian series have, over the last two years, been operating on tighter budgets which means all scenes are shot locally. Airport closures, therefore, did not impact the production houses.

So far, 13 of UMS’ Egyptian dramas have been confirmed, and around five have been postponed due to time restrictions. All UMS productions are exclusive to Egypt’s Watch it digital platform and are also shared amongst Egypt’s various FTA channels in a similar pattern to last year - leaving non-Egyptian digital platforms struggling to source Egyptian titles. A couple of Egyptian production companies have managed to release one or two titles to the regional market - for example, Sharjah Media’s Al Khwair Al Fawakhir; and Uhyan Drama Broker, in addition to its own popular comedy titles such as Jalsa.

What are some of the productions that haven’t been completed or are half way there?

Eagle Films has so far confirmed two Ramadan series – the Khaleeji programme A Million Riyals and Lebanese title Adam’s sons. Three others in the pipeline have been postponed. Government-imposed restriction of movement in Lebanon compelled all shoots to be suspended for more than a week but it appears that the rules will be relaxed with special permits being granted for shooting. At this point, Eagle Films remains hopeful that it will be able to continue shooting during the month of Ramadan.

and Dubai TV for Gulf audiences. From Egypt, the Al Nihaya trailer has been trending heavily on social media. This will be airing on Egypt’s FTA channel ON Drama, and is promoted by its producer Synergy as the Arab world’s first-ever sci-fi series. In the shocking two-minute video, we see humans on the brink of extinction in the year 2120 as wars rage and Artificial Intelligence life takes over. Social media sentiment is that the apocalyptic context of the show is relevant to the current global crisis. Its YouTube video attracted 1.6m views in just one week. Even though introducing a new genre during Ramadan has always been viewed as a huge gamble, to Synergy’s benefit, the show is perfectly timed within this year’s context.

A closer look at some of the other region-specific channels shows some interesting adaptations that we haven’t seen in previous years. However, with the production house officially postponing these titles, Ro’ya TV has replaced these hit Lebanese titles with Egyptian dramas Sultanet al Moezz and Shuhad Ayouz as well as Syrian Drama Broker in addition to its own popular comedy titles such as Jalsa. What are some of the productions that haven’t been completed or are half way there?

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Shajib TV, for instance, revealed that they have scaled down their drama acquisition budgets. Instead, they have prepared unique game/trivia shows for which they’re able to offer winners higher cash prizes than previous years. Game shows promoted by Shajib TV involve audience engagement via social media or call-in. They have cancelled their show phy Repasome, which used to be shot live outside around Iftar time. Jordan’s Ro’ya TV had previously announced three hit titles from Cedars Art including Al Hayba, 2020, and Awad Fatsh by Haifa Wahbe.

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OSN is on the rebound. Right in the middle of a global lockdown that has stumped broadcasters both regionally and worldwide, the pay-TV operator, which lay low in 2019 with several phases of mass redundancies, made a raft of new announcements last month that indicate it’s back in the game. Alongside a brand-new logo and a vastly revamped streaming platform, OSN played its trump card last month with the announcement that it has bagged the exclusive Middle East rights to all Disney+ Originals. With that, OSN’s CEO Patrick Tillieux, who had previously declined all press briefings since he took charge in November 2018, sat down for his first candid chat with "BroadcastPro ME".

Tillieux, who hails from Belgium, does not shy away from the question that is on everyone’s minds – the mass redundancies at OSN that saw the operator’s workforce shrink from 2500 odd people to its current strength of under 900. “The whole of 2019 was about transforming and rebuilding OSN. Part of that was reducing our headcount drastically. That was a very painful thing to do because we had to let go of a lot of good people, but we had no other option,” Tillieux explains.

Interestingly, Tillieux has spent the last 25 years of his career within the broadcast industry where a number of his roles involved building and reshaping major TV operations although he has a Master’s in Civil Engineering and did a brief stint in construction in Saudi Arabia before moving into media. In recent times, Tillieux has been on the boards of several organisations and continues to be on the board of PLAY, Poland’s largest telecom company. He was CEO of SBS Broadcasting Europe from 2003 to 2009, prior to which he held senior positions at ProSiebenSat.1 Media AG, CANAL+ Holland, CANAL+ Flandres among others. More recently, he was on the OSN board from 2016 before he was invited to lead the network as CEO when Martin Stewart exited the company.

“Of course, at the time, we couldn’t talk, we couldn’t walk because we were in ICU and were working intensely on repairing and reinvigorating OSN. It was a radical evolution; radical because we had to go to the core of things and revisit all our strategies. We needed to evolve to keep up with what was happening in the current times. That included renegotiating all of our rights that were primarily designed for our linear platform to cover our streaming services as well. We also had to look at our cost structure all the way from the basement to the attic and that meant letting go of people as well. But the one thing that has stood OSN in good stead is the trust we have built over the years with studios, telcos and its customers. It was important to capitalise on that now and create a fundamental transformation within the company. On the customer front as well, there was a dire need to evolve. I believe that’s what we have done now,” he says.

Within that context of transformation and evolution, OSN announced an expanded content offering last month that includes its DTH and streaming platforms. In fact, Tillieux admitted that OTT was previously neglected by the operator and that from now on, streaming would become an integral part of the company’s strategy.
Patrick Tillieux, CEO, OSN

“Meanwhile, the documentaries and again, this is exclusive and a dual carriage deal, meaning it is on our DTH platform and on streaming. We also have all the exclusive content from MGM, Universal, Paramount and most of the major Hollywood studios. You could argue that OSN was going through a difficult time but the fact that Disney still came back with us is testimony to the confidence they have in us that we will do a good job. We have also let go of the name Warner for our streaming service. All our services will now come under the overarching OSN brand and any additional services will go under this name. Our new logo as well retains its red colour but it’s much lighter and more dynamic and reflects the evolution we have gone through,” he says.

Tillieux is said to have started the conversation with Disney back in August 2019 and the deal was finalised at the Oscars. “Due to technicalities and the time needed to load up the assets, what we have done in the past year...”}

“...and curated content. There’s more on the way, we are told. “We have been doing business in just one way, which is linear and not taking care of our streaming business. So, we felt we had to shake things up dramatically especially in terms of rights with the dual approach of looking after our DTH and streaming viewers. This is what the deal with Disney was about,” explains Tillieux. “On top of that, we already have 100% of everything on HBO, whether they are the miniseries, the documentaries and again, this is exclusive and a dual carriage deal, meaning it is on our DTH platform and on streaming. We also have all the exclusive content from MGM, Universal, Paramount and most of the major Hollywood studios. You could argue that OSN was going through a difficult time but the fact that Disney still came back with us is testimony to the confidence they have in us that we will do a good job. We have also let go of the name Warner for our streaming service. All our services will now come under the overarching OSN brand and any additional services will go under this name. Our new logo as well retains its red colour but it’s much lighter and more dynamic and reflects the evolution we have gone through,” he says.

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“OSN has been the lighthouse of great entertainment in the past and we will be the same going forward”
Does the coronavirus pandemic paint a completely bleak economic picture or have new strategies and business models emerged from the situation? How have media companies benefitted from or been impacted by the lockdown, and how have industry leaders responded to it? Senior market executives and analysts from various facets of the media industry share their insights with BroadcastPro ME

The crisis associated with the coronavirus outbreak will have a profound impact on our lives, our economies and our societies even after it dies down. Within the TV & Online Video business, it might appear that TV (FTA & pay) will benefit from the lockdown. The reality is different. The postponement or cancellation of all major sports programming will deliver a heavy blow to pay-TV as the whole edifice of pay in many countries is constructed (not exclusively but primarily) on the back of premium sports rights. BeIN Media Group, in the MENA region, MultiChoice in Sub-Saharan Africa and Sky in the UK are easily recognisable examples of this reality. But it will not be just sports broadcasters who will suffer; entertainment operators will bear the burden too. If the recent financial crisis of 2008-09 can teach us anything, it is that pay-TV business revenues had taken a plunge in most of the affected countries. During this time, consumers will be reluctant to upscale their investment in entertainment giving priority to the fulfilment of more basic needs.

The data we have from the first weeks of the lockdown all indicate a substantial growth in TV and online video consumption. In China, the average daily number of cable TV and IPTV viewers nationwide increased by 23.1% from December 2019 to mid-March 2020, with total viewing time rising by 41.7%. In the US, pay TV operators such as AT&T TV and DIRECTV have experienced live viewing to be up 15% and free VOD up nearly 25% comparing the third week of March with the same week in February. VoD services have steadily increased their viewing time shares on televisions over the past four weeks. Similar trends are emerging from some major West-European markets like Spain, Italy and France. News and information programming is heavily on the rise, while other content genres experiencing an upsurge are: kids content, family and general entertainment, as well as TV series and films. Consumption in online video (OTT) platforms is booming (both AVoD & SVoD) as well as video traffic over broadband networks (fixed & mobile), although a part of the traffic growth is attributed to educational and e-learning platforms and in business video conferencing.

Pay-TV operators have implemented a wide range of tactical moves, which OMHA has started tracking since the outbreak of the pandemic: and here’s a list of them:

• Offering extra entertainment content for free to sports-package or premium package subscribers.
• Granting financial incentives such as credit in dollars or local currencies to subscribers for purchasing films on the pay-TV operator’s TVoD platform.
• Offering financial incentives such as discount or giving one or two months of subscription for free.
• Launching flexible tariffs such as monthly passes.
• Creating tailor-made packages with kids and family content.
• Offering new clients the option to subscribe to your OTT service instead of satellite or cable, due to the inability of technical personnel to access households for installing equipment.
• Bundling one service with other premium services or offering a bundle (3-play, 4-play) at discounted prices to retain or attract new subscribers.

“News and information programming is heavily on the rise, while other content genres experiencing an upsurge are: kids content, family and general entertainment”

Marc Antoine d’Halluin CEO, MBC Group

In these uncertain times, it has become clear that we have to find ways to adapt to the “new norm” and it has become more important than ever to provide an outlet for our viewers, be it the latest news, or entertainment via our linear TV channels or through our Shahid VIP OTT platform.

Therefore, MBC Group continued to engage its key business objectives, out of which talent remains our number one priority. I am impressed by our talent’s ability to take on the many challenges the COVID-19 pandemic has created and operate flawlessly despite having to do it remotely in many cases. This demonstrates how important it is to have the right people for your organisation.

Having the right talent also results in the production of compelling and culturally relevant content for linear TV, OTT, digital and other platforms. This content captures the lion’s share of the MENA audience, a trend MBC has been witnessing this month, as the majority of productions for Ramadan have been nearly completed ahead of the lockdown.

Our content during this top viewing season is extremely compelling. Amongst our other key objectives is producing more premium local content – ranging from short to long-form – that’s up to international standards and is able to travel across geographies and platforms. Shahid and Shahid VIP have seen significant spikes in viewership. In fact, their cumulative OTT audiences were multiplied by three over the last two months, with the Shahid VIP segment experiencing a phenomenal 10x audience growth. Premium, exclusive and original Arabic content attracted big audiences but this time, with the quality of our relaunched digital app, they became loyal.

This year’s Ramadan is one we have never encountered in our 55-year history and, according to our Shahid and Shahid VIP data, we have never encountered in current times, and so despite the economic downturn caused by the pandemic, we still have to operate as normal. It is unusual, however, that this current period has been challenging in terms of advertising – whether in the region or between our clients and ours – but the outlook is optimistic; we believe that the markets of Saudi Arabia (and the rest of the GCC) will inevitably regain their momentum and upward trends. During these times, and after, MBC Group will continue to deliver the best content for the region’s trailblazing brands, across multi-platforms.

There is a downside to having more content however, and that is the increased likelihood of it being pirated. It is very tempting to share our Ramadan content. Therefore, it will be our priority to support the intellectual property rights (IPR).

“We’re being cautiously optimistic; we believe that the markets of Saudi Arabia (and the rest of the GCC) and Egypt will inevitably regain their momentum and upward trends”

Constantinos Papavassilopoulos
Associate Director Media, Consumer at OMDIA

Its Impact on the Media World

TV operators such as AT&T TV and DIRECTV have experienced live viewing to be up 15% and free VOD up nearly 25% comparing the third week of March with the same week in February. VoD services have steadily increased their viewing time shares on televisions over the past four weeks. Similar trends are emerging from some major West-European markets like Spain, Italy and France. News and information programming is heavily on the rise, while other content genres experiencing an upsurge are: kids content, family and general entertainment, as well as TV series and films. Consumption in online video (OTT) platforms is booming (both AVoD & SVoD) as well as video traffic over broadband networks (fixed & mobile), although a part of the traffic growth is attributed to educational and e-learning platforms and in business video conferencing.

Pay-TV operators have implemented a wide range of tactical moves, which OMHA has started tracking since the outbreak of the pandemic: and here’s a list of them:

• Bundling one service with other premium services or offering a bundle (3-play, 4-play) at discounted prices to retain or attract new subscribers.
• Creating tailor-made packages with kids and family content.
• Offering new clients the option to subscribe to your OTT service instead of satellite or cable, due to the inability of technical personnel to access households for installing equipment.
• Bundling one service with other premium services or offering a bundle (3-play, 4-play) at discounted prices to retain or attract new subscribers.
• Offering extra entertainment content for free to sports-package or premium package subscribers.
• Creating more premium local content – ranging from short to long-form – that’s up to international standards and is able to travel across geographies and platforms. Shahid and Shahid VIP have seen significant spikes in viewership. In fact, their cumulative OTT audiences were multiplied by three over the last two months, with the Shahid VIP segment experiencing a phenomenal 10x audience growth. Premium, exclusive and original Arabic content attracted big audiences but this time, with the quality of our relaunched digital app, they became loyal.

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of content creators and production companies, because IP is the core of what we are about at MBC. We continue to be fully behind the anti-piracy drive led by the authorities in Saudi Arabia and beyond. We are navigating strange times, with adversity and uncertainty creating not the most pleasant of challenges. But our strength has been in being able to adjust and recognise the opportunities that we can work with at present. It’s important for us not to compromise on quality. It’s equally important for us to continue delivering the best media and entertainment experience in MENA, bar none.

Mid-March, when most organisations started ‘work from home’, we saw an upswing in content consumption. Initially, it was witnessed over news channels, then movie channels and general entertainment, unfortunately, sports content took a massive fall. Kids’ entertainment grew exponentially while infotainment grew by a small percentage. The average time spent on news and movie channels has gone up by over 30%. Entertainment channels have seen an increase of 20% to 30%. We have seen more viewers coming in and more viewing in what was previously non- prime time. We have also seen a surge in male viewership in general entertainment channels, previously the domain of women. Prime Time lockdown is a time of reckoning in content because it is spread almost across the whole day. Most entertainment channels brought out some classics from their archives to create afternoon and morning bands, and most networks had new programming grids. There has been a surge in OTT viewing too, with both Weyuk and Zee5 seeing more than 50% growth in viewing and Zee5 witnessing a spike in subscriptions. Viewing across both South Asian and Arabic linear or OTT platforms saw growth in both viewership and subscriptions. Did this viewership bring about a cheer within the content industry? Unfortunately, no as many of the grassroots workers in content production are daily wage or project-based earners especially within the South Asian content market. Zee and other broadcasters as well as content production houses in India have set up special cells and funds to help workers in India. The same holds true for the Arabic content production market. Our Arabic co-productions are slated to commence mid-June if the lockdown is lifted. What concerns us is that there is no valuation to this surge in viewership as ad spends have dropped drastically. Radio, outdoor and print advertising may have dropped by more than 50% to 80%. Cinema advertising and event sponsorships are down by 100%. Did all this move to TV, OTT and Digital? The answer is no.

“Today, people are questioning the impact of streaming services on this century-old industry. Streaming popularity does not mean that people will be less inclined to go to cinemas once the crisis is over”

Debbie Stanford-Kristiansen CEO, The Novo Cinemas

The global closure of cinemas has led to an enormous uptake of streaming services. Many are wondering how this will affect exhibitors when they reopen. At Novo Cinemas, we emphatically believe customers will flock to cinemas once again. Cinemas have proven over the years to be extremely resilient. From TV to DVD, there have been several shifts in opportunities to view film content, but exhibitors have paid careful attention to these shifts and looked to solutions, which cannot be replicated at home. Luxurious seating, enhanced food and beverage options, screen size and sound are examples of the cinema experience. Today, people are questioning the impact of streaming services on this century-old industry. Streaming popularity does not mean that people will be less inclined to go to cinemas once the crisis is over.

Manoj Mathew Territory Head MENAPT, ZEE Entertainment

“...to deliver the right information to inform people and save lives. Early indicators show that our viewers are interested in COVID-19 specific programmes as they look for credible, timely and accurate news resources. Among the virus-related programming we’ve launched in the last period is an interactive Facebook Live Show that allows people to ask questions and hear from our guest experts. Innovation in how we engage with our viewers and deliver the news across all platforms has been key to increasing engagement.”

David Clark CTO, Sky News Arabia

As professionals in the media field, we have a fundamental and powerful responsibility to deliver the right information to inform people and save lives. Early indicators show that our viewers are interested in COVID-19 specific programmes as they look for credible, timely and accurate news resources. Among the virus-related programming we’ve launched in the last period is an interactive Facebook Live Show that allows people to ask questions and hear from our guest experts. Innovation in how we engage with our viewers and deliver the news across all platforms has been key to increasing engagement.
Moreover, as a leading news organisation, we were well equipped to deal with the requirements for remote working. Over the past few years, we have invested heavily in cutting-edge technology and mobile journalism training. This gave us an advantage in dealing with these unprecedented circumstances brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and made it relatively easier for us to adapt to remote working.

We had been fortunate enough to be trialling several products to enable our business to further contribute without massively increasing our infrastructure footprint.

In the weeks leading up to the lockdown, we were trialling many cloud-edit solutions and ultimately decided to go into a full POC with Blackbird. This workflow enabled our teams to cut live feeds remotely for repackaging and increase our digital content output and we have so far seen a significant increase in our digital content. The growth of Sky News Arabia on digital and social engagement has been substantial. We had also been trialling HP RGS (remote graphics software). While our initial trials of RGS were to utilise the technology to continue using our on-premise infrastructure and workflow for editing, we also identified another useful way of utilising the software to allow our creative teams to work remotely. HP RGS allowed the team to work remotely, while our VYRT infrastructure and license remained on-premise.

Sky News Arabia also utilises several cutting-edge Video over IP technologies including LiveU, Djero and TVU and we have been actively working between technology and editorial teams to increase our utilisation of IP news gathering versus satellite. The main objective was for ease of use and deployment; however, as we actively worked with the software, it also allowed us to react quickly with live talent and live locations during these times of lockdown. As a result, in the weeks after lockdown, Sky News Arabia doubled its contribution over IP and significantly increased the usage of Skype and Zoom to connect to live talent in the region and across the globe.

Our number one priority has always been the health and safety of our employees and we have put business continuity plans in place that safeguard the well-being of our people and allow us to continue bringing credible, timely and accurate news to our audiences. The recent addition of HP RGS has made it relatively easier for us to adapt to unexpected circumstances brought on by the lockdown, we were trialling many cloud-edit solutions and ultimately decided to go into a full POC with Blackbird. This workflow enabled our teams to cut live feeds remotely for repackaging and increase our digital content output and we have so far seen a significant increase in our digital content. The growth of Sky News Arabia on digital and social engagement has been substantial. We had also been trialling HP RGS (remote graphics software). While our initial trials of RGS were to utilise the technology to continue using our on-premise infrastructure and workflow for editing, we also identified another useful way of utilising the software to allow our creative teams to work remotely. HP RGS allowed the team to work remotely, while our VYRT infrastructure and license remained on-premise.

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During these unprecedented times, Facebook is helping people stay connected to their family and friends and find new ways to take part in unique experiences. Live, in particular, is enabling content creators to support one another and share important moments in real time. Since its development, we have seen over 8.5bn broadcasts on Facebook to date. In light of the current pandemic, we’re seeing a significant increase in both Instagram Live and Facebook Live usage.

With cancelled shows and social distancing, artists, public figures, broadcasters and publishers are connecting with their communities on Facebook.

People are also finding creative ways to connect – from virtual concerts to live museum tours, cooking demonstrations, live zoo safaris, and fitness sessions.

Facebook Live is being used to celebrate and commemorate key moments in peoples’ lives. Couples are using it to exchange vows, while families are using it to celebrate graduation ceremonies and other milestones.

**“Spiritual broadcasts have experienced a significant increase, with many local churches and mosques using Live to connect with their religious communities remotely”**

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The number of people in EMEA tuning into spiritual live broadcasts increased by more than 2x (i.e. doubled) since the same time in March.

As we approach the holy month of Ramadan, we are also starting to see that people have turned to Live as a way to come together for iftars and suhoors with their loved ones.

We’ve also seen uplifting videos, like live concerts featuring A-list artists from across the MENA region hosted by Rotana Music, as well as educational content by Layalina (Tawt) and MTV Lebanon. The viral trend, brought on by the #TogetherAtHome hashtag, has so far generated over 6,000 videos and 16m interactions on Facebook’s platforms.

Over the course of the coming weeks, we will also see the release of new video content through our partnerships with publishers and content creators for Ramadan. This includes the development of over 3,000 videos, with 850 videos exclusive to Facebook as part of #RamadanR baggagePart. Among others, Tawt will be launching seven original shows on Facebook Watch across their lifestyle pages including Layalina, Aksh and Aldinby.

Following their on-demand premieres on Shoof, four new shows drama episodes will be aired on Facebook as part of their Ramadan programming. We’ll also see exclusive behind-the-scenes interviews and after shows aired on Facebook Watch by Chantima Group as part of Entertainment Tonight Bit Arabic televised Ramadan content, alongside clips and highlights from original broadcasts.

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Strategic Partner Manager for Media Publishers in MENA, Facebook

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Christopher Elkins
CEO, MUSO

For audiences, disruption brings new opportunities for discovery. Now, as lockdown becomes the new normal, this seems to be the moment to press reset, seek out new shows and films and dive into older content missed the first time around.

All of this is playing out right now in the trends across tens of thousands of TV shows and films we’re tracking. Demand for all forms of content across the free, unlicensed global ecosystem MUSO measures has increased, often dramatically.

We reported the initial COVID-19 impact in February, as demand in China dropped by more than 30% across just a few days. Data for March is now showing those trends globally, and specifically, ways in which they are changing. By genre, for instance, demand for family-oriented content initially rose - but what next? 2012’s Contagion and this year’s Best Picture Oscar winner, Parasite, both saw huge jumps in piracy streaming visits from January to February and the latter saw a 240.04% rise during the start of the pandemic. Viewing habits have time-shifted – traditional weekend demand spikes now flattening through the week for many regions. This is a trend we’ve already seen in MENA for March.

Different genres are trending across different regions and within markets, and the world is looking to see how viewing habits of MENA audiences will evolve. Broadcast and film studios are responding and reacting in different ways internally to the data. Content acquisitions and commissioning teams are greasing around resources - initially the short term need to optimise scheduling. But now, these teams seem to be transitioning internal thinking towards recovery steps - production development and delivery post-COVID, and seizing development opportunities emerging from its disruption. Data and the trends that are surfacing are going to be important in helping the industry to leverage short-term buoying needs. But, more than that, it is the R&D and development work that will be key to defining how quickly, and successfully, media businesses come out the other side.

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They say that the progress of a country is measured by the way its women are treated. *Woman*, a documentary that premiered at the Venice Film Festival last September, powerfully captures the personal stories of 2,000 women across the globe. Anastasia Mikova, one of the film’s directors, and colourist Stéphane Azouze share some behind-the-scenes stories on what went into the making of this film.

**Woman**

*Woman* is a large-scale film project that gave voice to 2,000 women from 50 different countries, has made waves globally. Directed by Ukrainian-born film director and journalist, Anastasia Mikova and French film director Yann Arthus-Bertrand, this documentary looks at women across the world and its personal stories.

Women beautifully lays bare the various physical, mental, emotional and psychological nuances of women across the world and looks at various topics that impact them. Freelance colourist, Stéphane Azouze, who has previously worked with Mikova and Arthus-Bertrand as DIT (Digital Imaging Technician) on an earlier project titled *Human* graded this film on Baselight.

The two directors began working on the project four years ago, before the #MeToo movement and the Weinstein affair and were not surprised by the events that unfolded.

"I have been doing documentaries for many years and in some countries, 10 or 15 years ago, it would have been almost impossible to find a woman who would be able to share her story and intimate experience in front of a camera," explains Mikova. "We, seeing more women ready to be heard, made a big difference and we thought the time has come to create a window for them. And that’s where this project began."

Mikova and Arthus-Bertrand have worked together for 12 years. "A project like this takes three or four years," Mikova says. "It’s a very long time, so it creates quite a strong relationship across the team." Having spent the first year in planning and preparation, over the next two years they shot almost 2,000 interviews, in 80 sessions and 50 countries. Mikova did as many of the interviews as she could, but had a trusted team of female journalists, only women, to support her as well as several camerawomen and cameramen – one of which was Mikova’s husband, Dmitri Vershinin, who worked on *Human* and *Women* and was already comfortable with the interview format the two directors wanted.

They also worked with local female journalists in every country to find the women to interview and prepare each shoot in advance.

"Once you have 2,000 interviews with women, many of whom have opened up for the first time in their lives, the challenge is to go deep into yourself to determine which ones you should use," she says. "We would gather topics – like sexuality, motherhood, empowerment, education or work – then we would listen for hours and hours to make a selection on which we all agreed.

"That first version was maybe one hour 45 minutes was really difficult, because we had to lose so many interviews that we really wanted to keep. It took us almost a year to come up with the final editing, which is long for a documentary. Thankfully, we were chosen to premiere the film at The Venice Film Festival, which gave us a deadline to work towards. If not, I’m afraid we’d still be editing the film today!

"It was like they had been waiting for this moment their whole lives – things that they had kept inside for many years could finally be released. It was so powerful and so incredible."

Anastasia Mikova, director and journalist

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"The nature of the content means that the filming style is extremely simple and intimate. "We set up simple studios, sometimes in incredible locations like in the middle of the desert," Mikova explains. "It was always the same thing: you see just a face, on a neutral background, with one light, all very minimalist."

"Armed with this material, the directors turned to freelance colourist Stéphane Azouze, who was the first assistant to the director, recalls. "They were proud and quite at ease talking in front of the camera. But the women at first would be quite suspicious – why were we asking all these questions?"

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Peter Lindbergh and filmed by French cinematographer Caroline Champetier, which featured women of all ages undressing in front of the camera, confronting us to real women’s bodies: young, old and some of whose bodies show the serious effects of illness. These intimate images were shot in the studio set-up: very bright and close to the backdrop.

“There was no question of using make-up: we wanted the women to be as natural and realistic as possible,” says Azouze. “But, on the other hand, if they came to the interview with make-up on, we let them be.”

“We wanted the colourist to see the natural beauty of all these women, and the natural aspect of who they are. We really wanted to portray the feeling that these were real women,” explains Mikova.

The first challenge for the grade was to bring all the content together and to accommodate some difficulties of the C300 on wide shots. “Some shots did not correspond to the pre-set we had agreed, which in turn meant that working in the specified Canon log colour space did not work and I had to choose another starting base by hand,” Azouze recalls.

One thing that did please Azouze was the ability to compensate for the C300 without generating a lot of noise. “It works very well on Baselight. I was amazed: on some shots, I usually have to do a noise reduction pass, I didn’t have to with Baselight,” he says.

The nature of the documentary meant that there were few grading ‘tricks’, but it was necessary to add some interpretations into the grade. “Champetier / Lindbergh’s sequence is almost black and white. The woman who testifies immediately before it cries and turns red during the interview; she was very emotional. So, I animated with several keyframes to desaturate gradually to arrive on something that moved naturally into this black and white sequence, so there is not too much of a break,” says Azouze.

“Then I noticed that this black and white sequence came out looking green, despite there being no green in the image. This is a well-known problem of persistence of vision. You have a succession of coloured images (mainly faces in close-ups) so your eyes accommodate to it. When you switch to black and white, it comes out green – it’s crazy!”

Azouze completed the grade in one of the Baselight suites at Mikros Image in Paris. “We wanted a master for theatre, which led us to projection and Mikros.”

The grade took 25 days in the summer of 2019, plus an extra block of five days to cover a complex end credits sequence with a montage of all 2,000 faces.

“I used Film Grade and Base Grade a lot, along with Texture Highlight and Texture Equaliser. I love the tracking, and on the creativity and finesse level, I feel I can go further with Baselight,” he says.

Stéphane Azouze, colourist

Mikova supervised the finish. “It came with the flow,” according to Azouze. “I made proposals at the very beginning, and she guided me on colours and on renderings of certain people. We ended up together for the final grade, but the base was largely there. I feel like I’m going further on Woman with Baselight,” he adds. “The look overall is quite desaturated, because Anastasia wanted something subtle – that we do not focus too much on the clothes, that the skins do not catch the eye too much. The stories are not always cheerful, so we tried to remain discreet and true.”
Broadcast from home with Blackmagic Design’s new ATEM Mini Pro

Blackmagic Design has announced the launch of the ATEM Mini Pro, a new low-cost live production switcher designed for broadcasting from home. This switcher has all the features of the ATEM Mini but comes with extra features for recording, streaming and monitoring. It includes a new hardware streaming engine to allow direct streaming via its Ethernet connection to YouTube Live, Facebook and Twitch. Support is included for recording the stream directly to USB Flash drives in H.264 in addition to support for recording to multiple disks for continuous recording. The new $195 model also includes a multiviewer on its HDMI video output that allows all inputs to be viewed on a single monitor, as well as live status recording, streaming and the audio mixer.

The Atem Mini switchers simplify multi-camera production for live streaming to YouTube, Skype or Zoom, with switching between four high-quality video inputs. They can also connect a computer for PowerPoint slides or gaming consoles and feature a built-in DVE for picture-in-picture and other effects. The switchers also have a USB that works like a webcam for use with any streaming software, plus HDMI out for projectors. The large source buttons ensure that they offer a presenter the ease to operate the switcher. Buttons are included for audio mixing and on the ATEM Mini Pro. There are also buttons for recording and streaming control and output selection. Also included is a still store for titles and graphics that is accessible via the Ethernet video output that also has achromatic key for green/blue screen work. “What’s been surprising is the types of work customers have used the Atem Mini model for; we never expected it to be used for such large events,” said Grant Petty, Blackmagic Design CEO. “So now with this new Atem Mini Pro model, we are making this easier because customers can stream via the Ethernet, while at the same time record to files on a USB disk, all while monitoring all cameras, media and status on a single HDMI video monitor.”

Brainstorm announces Suite 4

Brainstorm Suite 4 is a major upgrade to Brainstorm’s InfinitySet, Aston and eStudio solutions that includes a number of features designed to enhance content creation and output. Besides tighter integration and control of Unreal Engine, Suite 4 includes features like simultaneous renders, multiple outputs and additional hardware support.

Suite 4 gives InfinitySet and Aston greater capabilities to create high-quality photorealistic content, irrespective of whether they are real-time graphics, virtual sets, augmented reality or broadcast workflows. Suite 4’s key feature is Layers which changes how Aston and InfinitySet deal with broadcast workflows, providing additional playout possibilities. With Layers, Brainstorm Suite 4 can now deliver several outputs from a single instance, in both Aston and InfinitySet, or combine several outputs in a single one as required.

InfinitySet 4 also comes with major updates to its rendering features as well as the management and compatibility with Unreal Engine. InfinitySet now features an Unreal-native behaviour, so InfinitySet users can achieve anything Unreal Engine provides in a workflow fully integrated into Unreal. Also new is the InfinitySet Unreal Engine Controller, a new module that directly controls Unreal Engine from InfinitySet’s own interface, adding a user-friendly, live production-oriented control interface. This controller provides additional compatibility for video hardware devices not available in Unreal Engine, including support and driver updates for video boards and virtually any tracking device. Aston 4, Brainstorm’s 2D/3D CG and playout solution, also comes with a number of enhancements like shader-based 2D fonts and the ability to open multiple projects simultaneously for playout. The Aston family of applications is also enhanced with the addition of Aston Multichannel, which allows Aston to provide extended playout possibilities, including playout of multiple channels from a single workstation or from different workstations, which can also be combined with multiple simultaneous projects.

**Fujifilm brings focus with new Fujinon 8K broadcast lenses**

Fujifilm has announced the development of two new 8K broadcast zoom lenses, both capable of producing dynamic 8K ultra-high-definition images. The Fujinon HA6X15.2ESM (HP6X15.2) box lens reaches the world’s longest 8K focal length of 1,000mm while also reportedly featuring the world’s highest zoom magnification of 10X. The two new lenses are HFR27X7.6ERD (HP12X7.6) and HFR21X7.6ER (HP66X15.2) box lenses. The 8K series from Fujinon now comprises seven lenses designed for two camera formats. The 8K 125” Three Sensor Bayonet-Mount Series includes the HA6X15.2ESM box lens, the HP7X7.6ERD portable lens, the HFR7X7.6ESM box lens, and the HP7X7.6ESM box lens. The 8K PL Mount Series includes the SK8X12SM portable lens, the SK7.6X17SM portable lens, and the SK2X36SM box lens.

**Stellar lighting from ARRI**

ARRI has announced an updated version of its Stellar lighting control app, allowing users to control third-party products. Stellar 2 is designed to control luminaires from other manufacturers including Litegear, Astera, and Kino Flo. With Stellar 2, the correct DMX addresses can be assigned to the luminaires in only a couple of steps. If any fixture needs to be swapped out, possibly due to malfunction, it can be easily exchanged without affecting the setup. A re-scan will detect if the fixture has not been a part of the setup before. With Stellar 2, users can now group fixtures with different CCT ranges. Users may apply their personal value as the default intensity by simply storing it as a favourite in the app settings. The intensity will also remain at this same level throughout all models. If a fixture can provide these RDM functionalities, temperature and additional information can be displayed in the fixture setup. Other enhancements include improved connectivity handling, presets that apply on different fixtures, and minor usability, layout, and stability improvements.

**Fujifilm bringt Fokus mit neuen Fujinon 8K-Broadcast-Objektiven**


**ARRI Stellar Lighting**

Calrec Launches IP-based virtual mixing console

Calrec has launched Type R for TV, a virtual mixing console that integrates with station automation systems for virtual working practices.

The console is compatible with station automation systems including Ross Overdrive, Sony ELC and Grass Valley Ignite. It offers fully automated programming and the new Type R has three different panel options. If broadcasters prefer a physical surface then banks of faders can be added, or adaptable soft panels like Calrec’s Large Soft Panel (LSP) and Small Soft Panel (SSP) may be used. Calrec’s Assist web UI offers easy access to the virtual desk on almost any device. Assist works over TCP/IP and has minimal control lag, which makes minor adjustments easy and quick to do. Type R for TV aims to fulfil the rising demand for automated audio consoles in smaller news operations, according to Calrec’s Director of Product Management, Henry Goodman.

NewTek brings spark to IP with new converters

NewTek brings spark to IP with new converters that are designed to enhance the production workflow. The company has announced two new Spark IO converters. Spark Plus IO converters are designed to be in service quickly with the entire setup over one Ethernet cable. A web-based interface allows easy configuration and monitoring from a desktop or mobile browser. The Spark family of converters are compatible with systems, devices, and applications that support NDI technology.

GV ups the game with GV STRATUS One Pro

Grass Valley has launched GV STRATUS One Pro, a production suite for content creators, that is designed to enhance the production workflow. The company has announced two new additions to the GV STRATUS One product family, alongside the new GV STRATUS One Express. Production teams can now harness more storage, processing power and rendering abilities to deliver compelling content to multiple linear and digital delivery platforms. It features automated rules engine and social media management tools to manage, organise and distribute content to a variety of platforms. GV STRATUS One is easy to deploy and includes more than 500 hours of 100Mbit SDI ingest and playout TC1 for a configuration-free NDI experience.

Telemetric releases OptiQ Monitor cloud service for live ABR quality monitoring

Telemetric has released OptiQ Monitor, a multi-cloud monitoring service. It enables real-time deployment of live ABR quality monitoring at scale in over 70 geographic regions, designed to give broad visibility into the performance of live OTT channels delivered through CDN partners. OptiQ Mon is for content owners, broadcasters, event operators, and sports leagues that have already put in place the infrastructure required to support their live streaming channels but have no monitoring infrastructure, especially post-CDN.

“OptiQ Monitor is a cloud service that radically changes the approach for on-demand monitoring & analytics, delivering real-time performance and quality insights of OTT channels. Now, customers can spin up a multi-cloud hosted service in an automated and orchestrated fashion,” said Kenneth Haren, OptiQ Product Manager at Telemetric. OptiQ Monitor is a Telemetric cloud that customers can leverage to manage provisioning, configuration and data collection of monitoring products deployed globally. When a user hits ‘go’ the OptiQ Monitor service automatically starts monitoring live streaming channels. OptiQ Monitor enables users to integrate video monitoring without needing to modify anything in their existing delivery chain. OptiQ Monitor allows customers to measure the real-time performance of their OTT channels at the CDN edge for every variant currently across disparate regions. The service features a REST API for automation and integration, unlocking on-demand access to network performance and analysis data that can be combined with other performance matrices in a comprehensive view.

Broadcast Pix goes live with StreamingPix

Broadcast Pix goes live with StreamingPix, a live production and streaming solution designed to produce professional content. StreamingPix leverages some of the same features automated rules engine, and social media management tools to manage, organise and distribute content to a variety of platforms. GV STRATUS One is easy to deploy and includes more than 500 hours of 100Mbit SDI ingest and playout TC1 for a configuration-free NDI experience.

Digital TV technology provider Mirada is promoting its Iris multiscreen technology and custom launcher for Android TV Operator Tier.

The technology solution is an end-to-end ecosystem of products enabling pay TV operators to provide an engaging viewing experience across all devices. It aims to help audiences find and consume content through the use of advanced content discovery tools, personalised and consumption-based recommendations, across set-top boxes, smartphones, tablets, game consoles, smart TVs and media streaming devices. With Mirada’s custom launcher, the company says operators can offer the same quality user experience powered by Iris, along with all the benefits of the Android environment, including access to third-party apps like Netflix.

“We have 25 years of experience empowering all types of pay TV operators with our advanced and competitive multiscreen products, we are now looking to explore new business opportunities and partnerships in the MENA region. We’ve previously worked in this region with clients such as Etisalat, and we are currently following up on a number of opportunities with pay TV operators in MENA. We will also be looking to attract more interest from other operators within the region, in addition to distributors and System Integrators to create new business opportunities together,” commented Antonio Rodríguez, VP Business Development at Mirada.

www.mirada.tv

www.calrec.com

www.broadcastpix.com

www.broadcastprome.com
Netherlands-based Primestream, a provider of automation software solutions for media production, has introduced Xchange Media Cloud, a 100% cloud-based version of the company’s Xchange media asset management (MAM) platform for remote video production workflows. Xchange Media Cloud can be set up within hours to store, access, produce, and manage media assets remotely. Targeted for video, sound, graphics, creative, and visual effects teams in broadcast news, enterprise video, and other media operations, Xchange Media Cloud looks to enable cloud production workflows from start to finish. The cloud-based solution offers integration with Adobe Creative Cloud software applications including Premiere, After Effects, and Photoshop, with Xchange Media Cloud soon to allow teams to browse, search, edit, and organise content from any location. When combined with the Primestream Workflow Server and ingest modules in the cloud, the solution aims to provide the ability to record and monitor incoming live cloud streams including HLS, NDI, or RTSP.

Robe Lighting has created a patented 6:1 Hot-Spot Lens System for the new ESPRITE and T1 Series of LED profiles. The new lens system accessory was created in response to feedback from Robe’s customers including Lightswitch, a company that provides creative lighting solutions for live events. The Hot-Spot optical device fits perfectly into one of the rotating gobo wheel slots of the new ESPRITE and offers designers the option to literally have a drop-in peak field reflector. What makes this product special is that it now provides the flexibility to have both a peak field distribution or a flat field beam distribution depending on the application at hand.

The new Robe Lighting ESPRITE LED is a fully featured automated luminaire that has a fast-change, low-cost, transferable light engine which ingeniously solves the problem of performance longevity for 12G/6G/3G HD-SDI. This allows operators to check chroma levels beyond the BT.709 or DCI-P3 gamut. To the best of my knowledge, the ESPRITE LED now is the only fixture on the market which offers this type of functionality and doesn’t make the peak beam reflector an after-market decision.

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Ncam augments reality with new Mk2 product suite

Ncam Technologies, a developer of real-time augmented reality technology for the media industries, has announced the availability of its Mk2 product suite which includes Mk2 Camera Bar, Mk2 Server and Ncam Reality 2020 software. The Mk2 Camera Bar is now smaller, lighter, and can be used with a job, Steadicam, wire cam, and drones. The next-generation software now runs on the Mk2 Server and can be mounted on the camera or rig itself, offering wireless tracking on a standard RF camera link to enable remote production of AR graphics. The new Ncam Reality 2020 software offers simplified operation, hybrid feature extraction, wireless-readiness functionality and doesn’t make the peak beam reflector an after-market decision.

Traditionally with moving optics, an even stage wash has been accomplished by using a fixture model that only does a peak beam field or one which offers an interchangeable peak beam reflector for arc sources. The challenge with this is the amount of work behind it as you have to dissemble the light in the shop creating inventory management challenges, and anything that costs money to the shop, costs money to the show.

Seeing the need for fixtures that could provide designers with both the peak beam field and the flat beam field desired, automated lighting manufacturers have struggled to develop an ideal solution. Wanting a better option in lighting technology, he turned to Czech Republic-based Robe Lighting who catered to this need as they released their latest automated LED luminaire.

To the best of my knowledge, the ESPRITE LED is the only fixture on the market which offers this type of functionality and doesn’t make the peak beam reflector an after-market decision. From a designer’s perspective, having the opportunity for the ESPRITE to come with this design offers us the ability to pick and choose the type of beam field distribution ideal for the lighting design and for any type of utilisation and maximum flexibility,” added Heatherstone.
Staying ahead of the competition with an effective OTT strategy

“To successfully own a share of the OTT pie today, companies need to deliver consumers the content they want, on their preferred device.”

Subscriptions to VOD services globally are expected to top 947m by 2024, leaving content owners and licensees considering the many paths to executing their OTT experiences.

This can be leveraging massive content libraries, creating direct-to-consumer (D2C) offerings, or using VOD content to create more targeted linear channels. Today, broadcasters must meet viewers’ changing appetites, as competition is growing with higher viewership numbers.

To stay competitive, companies need to organise their strategy into five parts: content, technology, monetisation, marketing and operations.

With content, there are four main consumption screens: connected/disconnected TVs, smartphones, tablets, and personal computers. While all content types can be watched on every device, each has unique qualities that consumers prefer, so all screens should be accounted for in a strategy to optimise viewing experiences and engagement.

There are four factors to consider: One is the audience’s media preference. We need to understand which devices consumers are watching content on. In late 2019, the Middle East saw video views increase 138% for smartphones while the global smart TV market will be valued at $253bn by 2023.

Last year, the Middle East also saw a double-digit growth in video views on connected TVs. OTT platforms and services need to be adaptable and safe. News-based broadcasters need to push content out at scale, at peak times, while also securely and confidently protecting content. This means using platforms that have advanced security features like DRM, watermarking, domain and IP restrictions, and geo-restriction.

A number of factors also go into successful monetisation models. With a strong existing audience, SVOD is a safe option, while for a region where content piracy is rampant, AVOD is better.

The budget also matters as SVOD traditionally survives by unique, often original, content, so they have a high cost of customer acquisition and retention. Most also require a large marketing budget to engage customers in new content.

Other models to consider include hybrid (both a premium ad-supported service and subscription), transactional VOD and TV Everywhere.

Once a marketing strategy is achieved, retaining a loyal audience is important. As online marketing strategist David Meerman Scott said, “Loyalty is key,” referring to “turning fans into customers and customers into fans.”

As Scott points out, organisations must cultivate true fans and this involves going beyond superficial online communications and becoming more than your product or offerings.

The final bit is operations. For example, who is going to run the platform — an insourced or outsourced team? If outsourced, firms need to establish the support protocols between multiple vendors and determine whether it’s better to go with less vendors to maximise complexities. To successfully own a share of the OTT pie today, companies must deliver the content consumers want, on their preferred device.

While content and technology play big roles in achieving this, monetisation, marketing and operations will help get a company across the OTT finish line.

Rick Cordeiro is Director of MEA, Brightcove
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