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Welcome

Just as we go to press, Dubai-based distributor Advanced Media has inaugurated its brand-new showroom. After starting its operations at Al Khaleej Centre back in 2003 and gradually expanding from one office to many in the mall, the distributor has made a bold and ambitious move to the more expensive Sheikh Zayed Road.

According to Advanced Media's owner, Kaveh Farnam, business has never been better and has returned to what it was in 2016. He says his sales for RED cameras have gone up. Without enough Komodos in supply, he had a back order of more than a hundred the last time I spoke to him. He says there has also been a lot of interest in DJI drones, ARRI cameras and other production equipment, indicating that production is ramping up in the region.

In the meantime, deployments may have been slower than usual but they have still been executed during this time.

Covid-19, for instance, didn't stop Bahrain's Ministry of Information Affairs (MIA) from forging ahead with its broadcast projects. In fact, at a time when most broadcast organisations in the GCC have been cautious about

investing in new projects, the MIA has gone into full gear with a number of tenders aimed at getting its radio and TV operations ready for a digital future.

After spending a whopping \$6.5m on refurbishing its entire radio facility and migrating it to a digital ecosystem as part of phase 1, the Ministry is gearing up for a state-of-the-art news facility, 40% of which is complete. Interestingly, unlike in the past, the MIA is also keen to monetise some parts of its facility. To that end, it has created state-of-the-art production spaces at its radio facility to rent out to third parties. It also intends to auction frequencies for players who want to run private radio stations.

Likewise, OSN chose this period to revamp its streaming app and MBC has transformed a well-known Adel Ibrahim play from black-and-white to colour, claiming this as a first in the Arab world. Some of these regional case studies will be discussed as part of our virtual BroadcastPro Tech Summit on June 14 and 15. Please do register to attend.

Vijaya Cherian, Editorial Director



On this month's cover...

UAE Pro League CEO Waleed Ibrahim Al Hosani flanked by colleagues Ammar Hina (l) and Malek Doughan (r).

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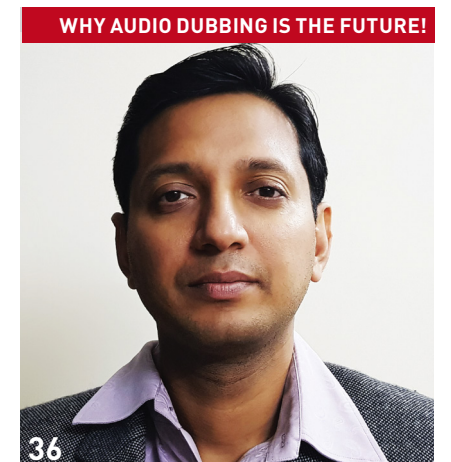
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June 2021



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In the Middle East and North Africa



Advanced Media relocates headquarters to Sheikh Zayed Road

Dubai distributor Advanced Media Trading, which represents more than 100 brands in the professional broadcast, AV and photography sectors in the MENA region, has relocated its operations to a brand-new location on the mezzanine floor of the Galadari Automobile Building on Sheikh Zayed Road, Dubai.

At a time when most companies have been cautious with their investments, the distributor's relocation from Al Khaleej Centre, Bur Dubai, where it launched its operations in 2003, has renewed people's confidence in the market. AMT also introduced a brand-new logo last month to reflect the strategic changes the company is undertaking to maintain its top spot in the market.

"We have a 1,500sqm showroom and offices at the new location to start with. Our workshop and



training programmes will also be held within this space. This move will allow us to undertake further expansion and bold transformation in the future," commented Kaveh Farnam, CEO of Advanced Media Trading.

"Our Al Khaleej operations ceased on May 31. Our new showroom on Sheikh Zayed Road was launched on May 31. Our warehouse location continues to remain the same. Our office and mobile phone numbers, as

well as email contacts, will also remain unchanged."

Alongside the new move, Advanced Media has also created a more dedicated space for its service centre, including a special space to service DJI products, for which the company will now be the exclusive MENA distributor. The service centre will be located beside its warehouse on 8th Street at Al Quoz Industrial area in Dubai. The company also recently announced that the

newly launched DJI Air 2S is now available for purchase.

"With this relocation, we have now ensured that our showroom and warehouse are very close to each other. We have also created a dedicated service centre for DJI, because their products are in big demand and have always been. We have seen a big boom in the market this year. There has been increased interest in drones and mirrorless cameras, which indicates that production is again ramping up in the region.

"We are also seeing a big demand for RED cameras in the region. This year, we sold more than 70 units since its launch and have a back order for more than 100 units. Likewise, the demand for ARRI cameras is high. There is a big demand in the market and our new showroom and facilities have been redesigned with these factors in mind."

Hany Bartella leaves Sony to rejoin Grass Valley as MENA MD



Grass Valley has appointed Hany Bartella as Managing Director for the Middle East and Africa. Leveraging 25 years of experience in the broadcast vendor community, Bartella rejoins Grass Valley to help drive its market presence and support customers in the region.

Bartella has had multiple roles with various

suppliers throughout his career, providing extensive experience across different industry sectors, including acquisition and live production, networking and infrastructure, post-production and playout. He joins Grass Valley's EMEA management team in a senior commercial role reporting to Tim Banks, Vice President of Sales, EMEA.

Prior to his appointment, Bartella was Head of Media Sales at Sony for the Middle East and Africa. He established a significant foothold in the region in his previous role with Grass Valley as Managing Director for the Middle East, during which he managed the restructuring of Miranda and Grass Valley offices for the combined company's local operations.

Eagle Films and Millennium Media join hands for Arab productions

Eagle Films Group has teamed up with Hollywood studio Millennium Media to produce four tier-one Saudi drama series with an accumulated production value of \$20m. Millennium Media is the home of several worldwide box office franchise hits, including *The Expendables*, the *Has Fallen* series, *The Hitman's Bodyguard* and *Mechanic*. Jamal Sannan, CEO of Eagle Films, commented that the move follows the company's success with five

Saudi-Khaleeji series and three Pan-Arab (Levant) series released this year. "We had an overwhelmingly high viewer rating during Ramadan 2021 for our pan-Arab series *Till Death (Lel Maout)* and the Khaleeji series *Sole Survivor (Al Najee Al Wahida)*." Jeffrey Greenstein, President of Millennium Media, added that his studio will bring renowned writers and directors to be part of this production. It will also use Nu Boyana Studio, its production facility



Jamal Sannan.

in Bulgaria with 18 sound stages, the biggest water tank in Europe and distinguished visual effects studios, for these four productions.

The first project in the pre-production phase is *Rally*, a crime-thriller series set in Saudi Arabia. Production is set to start in Q4 2021. Written by Hisham Hilal, the story revolves around a rally event in Saudi Arabia, and includes a twist. In parallel, Sannan has signed a deal with Khaleeji director Ali-Al Ali for a number of projects. The first project, *Walls of the Past (Sewar Al Madi)*, is a social drama and mystery series scheduled for production in mid-September 2021.

King Abdulaziz Order of Merit for MBC chairman

Sheikh Waleed bin Ibrahim Al Ibrahim, Chairman of MBC Group, has received the King Abdulaziz Order of Merit for his success in the media and broadcasting world. MBC was the first pan-Arab FTA satellite TV network when it was launched in 1991 by Al Ibrahim, still in his twenties, as a single channel out of London. Today, it carries an entire network with numerous channels and the Shahid streaming service. Al-Ibrahim is widely recognised for his contributions in the field of Arab media.



In 2011, he was named one of the top 50 figures in MENA's media, marketing and advertising industry. He was named the world's 66th most influential Arab personality by Gulf News in 2012 and has received the Knight award from the Arab League in 2006 among other awards. The King Abdulaziz Order of Merit is a medal awarded to citizens of Saudi Arabia and foreigners for meritorious service to Saudi Arabia. It is considered the highest civilian honour in the Kingdom.

Banijay Rights appoints new EMEA sales lead

Banijay Rights has promoted Claire Jago to the role of EVP, EMEA Sales and Acquisitions. She will be responsible for the team and activity across the entire region, reporting to division CEO Cathy Payne. Jago takes on the role following eight months as SVP, Nordics at Banijay Rights. Prior to the acquisition of Endemol Shine Group by Banijay, she was a Senior Sales Director for Endemol Shine International. Now expanding her remit, she will oversee the group's cross-genre sales and acquisitions strategy in the region, representing its 100,000+ hour-strong catalogue.

2022 World Cup announces Hisense as sponsor

Hisense has entered into a partnership with FIFA to become an official sponsor of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. The firm will be able to connect with FIFA's global audience, from on-site engagement opportunities to logo visibility across a range of FIFA platforms, for global advertising campaigns. The collaboration, which began in 2017 for the tournament in Russia, also gives Hisense the opportunity to present to customers specially-created VOD programming using past World Cup content, delivered through its integrated VIDAA smart TV platform. FIFA Secretary General Fatma

Samoura said: "I am confident that this collaboration will support the global objectives of both organisations and contribute to the success of what is sure to be an amazing event next year." Jia Shaoqian, CEO of Hisense Group, added: "Continued investment in world-class sporting events represents Hisense's determination in becoming a global brand. It helps Hisense build stronger relationships with its global consumers and accelerates the company's globalisation process. It also creates a solid foundation for Hisense to compete

with the world's most innovated and leading brands in order to become a premier brand worldwide." The 2022 World Cup will take place from 21 November to 18 December.



Rotana Media Group inks deal with Wide Khaliji

Rotana Media Group has signed a long-term deal with Arabic SVOD platform Wide Khaliji, to expand its viewership within the MENA region. The multi-year agreement grants Wide Khaliji the rights to distribute Rotana's entire portfolio of channels.

Ten of Rotana Media Group's premium TV channels, including Rotana Cinema, Rotana Drama and Rotana Classic, will be streamed in HD on Wide Khaliji. Hundreds of premium Arabic titles that are part of Rotana's portfolio and released annually will also be available on Wide Khaliji.

Jad Joubbran, VP Business Development & Partnership at Rotana, said: "Rotana continues to adapt its strategy with industry evolution. Launching our premium Rotana branded channels on OTT platforms that offer choices, scalability and are forward-thinking continues to be our focus."

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Film submissions open for inaugural Red Sea International Film Festival

The Red Sea International Film Festival has opened submissions for its first edition, which will now take place November 11-20, 2021. Filmmakers are invited to submit films from May 18 to August 18.

Established names and emerging filmmakers from the Middle East, Asia and Africa are welcome to submit their films to the Red Sea: Competition and Red Sea: Shorts Competition. Saudi filmmakers can also apply to screen as part of the New Saudi/New Cinema and Tajreeb. Submissions will be viewed and selected by the Red Sea International Film Festival team alongside seven other curated categories.



The festival will take place in the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Jeddah Old Town on the Red Sea coast. The 11 programme sections will feature contemporary international and Arab cinema, Saudi features,

shorts and experimental films, retrospectives, and future-oriented AR and VR experiences.

Films in the Competition category will vie for the Yusr Awards, chosen by an international jury, and the Red

Sea Golden Yusr Award for Best Film entails a prize of \$100,000. Cash prizes will also be given for Best Director (\$30,000), the Red Sea Silver Yusr Jury Prize (\$20,000), the Golden Yusr for Best Short Film (\$25,000), the Audience Award and Best Saudi Film. Other awards include Best Screenplay, Best Actor, Best Actress and Cinematic Contribution.

Apart from the four open categories, there are seven curated sections: International Spectacular, Arab Spectacular, Red Sea: Festival Favourites, Red Sea: Immersive Future, Red Sea: Treasures, Red Sea: Next Generation, and Red Sea: Episodic.

Hope film fest appoints Omani filmmaker as Programme Director

Hope International Film Festival (HIFF) has appointed Omani film director and producer Dr Khalid Al Zadjali as Programme Director for the first edition of the film festival, which will take place September 10-13 in Stockholm. Dr Al Zadjali said that he is happy to represent the festival, which has a unique concept that revolves around women, children and people with

physical and mental disabilities, and that noted Indian film personalities and other international celebrities will be invited. Short films and feature-length movies shot by professional or amateur filmmakers, with the above-mentioned concepts or themes, are invited to participate. Features should be at least 75 minutes long, while short films must be under 30 minutes long.

Turkish media regulator RTÜK warns Spotify over critical content

Turkey's media watchdog has warned Spotify to regulate its content in line with Turkish legislation. The Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK) said that it will consider removing or cutting all content found inappropriate – a term that is open to interpretation when applied to high-profile critical podcasts that attract large audiences. Spotify offers a relatively free space in a media environment in which

almost 90% of companies are related to pro-government conglomerates. Spotify was granted a ten-year operating licence by Turkey after applying on October 15, but its digital content is open to monitoring by the country's media regulator. Digital platforms are under the authority of RTÜK, as part of a regulation passed on August 1, 2019, and broadcast corporations cannot operate without a licence from RTÜK.



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New HDR grading tools, redesigned primary controls, AI based magic mask and more. The new HDR palette lets you create custom color wheels for targeted corrections, magic mask uses the DaVinci Neural Engine to isolate and track objects, and the color warper lets you morph colors in creative new ways! New DaVinci wide gamut image processing gives you even higher quality!

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Fairlight features a powerful new engine that supports up to 2,000 realtime tracks with effects, dynamic and EQ. The new context sensitive edit selection tools and updated shortcuts make it even faster and easier to use, especially if you're switching from another system. You can now reverse clips, analyze loudness, view transients, preview video, move automation and more!

Powerful New Edit and Cut Page Features!

A new metadata 'slate' view with bin dividers makes it easy to sort and find clips based on scene, shot, camera, and more! There's also new audio trimming on the cut page, AI based smart reframing for changing aspect ratio, a new portable proxy workflow that supercharges edit performance, render in place, timeline based syncing, compositing, keying, Fusion effects and more!

Fusion Effects, Titles and Transitions for Editors!

DaVinci Resolve 17 lets you save anything created on the Fusion page as an effect, title or transition that can be used on the edit and cut pages! New animation curve modifiers automatically retime animations when clip length is changed, there are new vector shape tools for motion graphics, shared markers, and audio playback with graphical waveform!

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Belgian-Moroccan directors to helm Warner Bros.' *Batgirl*



From left: Adil El Arbi and Bilall Fallah.

Belgian-Moroccan directing duo Adil El Arbi and Bilall Fallah, who led the Will Smith and Martin Lawrence movie *Bad Boys for Life*, are set to direct the Warner Bros. *Batgirl* movie, centring on Barbara Gordon, the daughter of Gotham City

police commissioner James Gordon. Christina Hodson, who wrote *Bumblebee* and Warner Bros.' *Birds of Prey* and *The Flash*, has penned the script for what is being planned as a HBO Max movie.

El Arbi and Fallah are the sons of Moroccan immigrants

and first met in art school in Belgium, where they began collaborating on student film projects. Their debut feature, *Image*, about a reporter who makes a documentary on Moroccan immigrants in Brussels, was released in 2014, and their 2015 film *Black*, a crime drama influenced by *Romeo and Juliet*, put them on the map.

Their other film, *Rebel*, about a Moroccan boy growing up in a tough Brussels neighbourhood who searches for his identity following his father's death, is currently in post-production.

Snapchat launches new Spotlight feature in MENA

Snap Inc has launched its new entertainment platform, Spotlight, across the MENA region. The new feature will bring the most entertaining Snaps from the Snapchat community all to one place and will become tailored to each Snapper over time based on their preferences and favourites. While anyone on the app can share their Snaps, Spotlight content is moderated and doesn't allow public comments.

Snap's earning programme will also be available in MENA, rewarding the creativity of local Snappers and giving them a chance to earn a share of millions of dollars every month. Hussein Freijeh, Snap Inc Middle East GM, said: "Our hope is that Spotlight continues to break down barriers to content creation and, by democratising both distribution and the ability to earn, encourages Snappers to be creative and express themselves."

Spotlight is now available in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, the UAE, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Palestine, Libya and Iraq.

Last Floor Productions joins forces with Shahid in MENA and Apple in India

Last Floor Productions (LFP), an Arab production company founded by three young artists and entrepreneurs, has partnered with Shahid for the production of two series, as well as with Apple in India to produce its launch films, and

is currently working with the Victoria & Albert Museum in London to produce films for the Jameel Prize.

The production startup was founded in 2019 with a focus on the creation of character-driven genre fiction. The aim

is to create stories from and about Arabs and the Arab world that are compelling to a new generation of viewers inside and outside the region. Accordingly, they have created LFP to be the home of scriptwriters, producers,

musicians and filmmakers.

LFP is presently on the look-out for new opportunities to take Arab culture worldwide, with the aim of training and hiring talented young people with similar goals and aspirations.

Vox Cinemas inks deal with Odex to distribute Japanese anime titles

Vox Cinemas has signed an exclusive deal with Japanese animation film distributor Odex to distribute anime movies across the MENA region. Six titles, including *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba the Movie: Mugen Train*, will be released theatrically across eight territories.

Toni El Massih, Chief Content Officer at Vox Cinemas, said: "Vox Cinemas is proud to be Odex's exclusive film distributor partner for the MENA, and we are confident that our expertise and knowledge of the market, coupled with their catalogue of content, will drive box-office growth. The pandemic has forced us to look to new regions for content, and with this deal we are taking a strategic step in adding even more great movies to our summer movie slate. There is a

huge appetite for the Japanese comic book genre in the region and we're excited to bring an impressive line-up of anime to the big screen, starting with the record-breaking *Demon Slayer*, which has received acclaim from critics and audiences worldwide."

Go Wei Ho, Managing Director, Odex Private Limited, Singapore, added: "Having more than 20 years of experience in the Japanese anime industry, Odex has worked with various cinema operators in Southeast Asia to build up the anime industry in these territories. Now, for its expansion into the Middle East, Odex is confident that working with Vox Cinemas will mark another significant milestone for [both companies] to develop the Japanese anime industry in the Middle East."

Mirchi Bahrain launches

Entertainment Network India Limited has announced the launch of radio station Mirchi in Bahrain. The aim is to expand its international presence and cater to the entertainment and music demands of the South Asian and Indian diaspora.

Mirchi Bahrain is a 100%

subsidiary of Indian radio station Mirchi, which has 73 frequencies across 63 cities. While Mirchi already has a presence in the UAE and Qatar, this is its first launch in Bahrain, taking over the 104.2 frequency to cater to more than 30% of the South Asian diaspora in Bahrain.

StarzPlay strengthens Ooredoo Tunisia partnership

StarzPlay has strengthened its existing partnership with Ooredoo Tunisia. Tunisian subscribers now have access to add-on packages, UFC and discovery+.

Raghida Abou-Fadel, Senior Vice President of Sales & Business Development, StarzPlay, said: "Our partnership with Ooredoo Tunisia underlines our commitment to provide our content for more people across the MENA region. Tunisia is an important market for us, and we are confident that our continued partnership will enable us to strengthen our market reach further." Mustapha Ben Ghachem,

Head of VAS and Content, Ooredoo Tunisia, added: "We are pleased to build our relationship further with the region's leading streaming platform, to offer additional value-added benefits to our customers. Consumers today seek easy and convenient access to

services, and bundling our packages with partners having the same DNA helps us to attract new customers as well as retain the existing ones." Subscribers opting for the XGO packages will have access to StarzPlay as well as its add-on channels at no additional cost.



New Panasonic TV models to feature Shahid app

Panasonic Marketing Middle East & Africa FZE (PMAF) has announced that its latest Android TV models, GX655, HX750 and HX650, now feature MBC's OTT platform, Shahid. Existing users will be able to find it either through

their launch screen or via Google Play. With the addition of the Shahid app, consumers buying the latest Panasonic model will have access to a wide range of exclusive and diverse content made in the region.



E-Vision revives TV Audience Measurement service in the UAE

E-Vision, Etisalat's TV arm, has announced a new initiative to identify its audience's selections, trends and desires from eLife, its IPTV service. For many years, the MENA TV industry has had to rely on telephone surveys for audience information, while broadcasters around the world have had access to people metering to measure and understand audience nature.

E-Vision has partnered with Dubai consultancy ChannelSculptor to manage the distribution and client support of the TAM system, which is accredited by an independent audit agency following testing and verification. Broadcasters, agencies, advertisers, consultants and industry experts will be able to



Olivier Bramly, CEO of E-Vision, subscribe to the data and log in to access a wide range of reporting tools.

said: "We are proud to be leading the way in the MENA region by offering exceptionally powerful audience analytics tools to industry professionals. By giving broadcasters insights about the interests and desires of our viewers, we are providing them with the tools they need to make their channels more relevant and attractive towards their viewers and more efficient towards agencies and advertisers."

Subscribers to the TAM system will now have access to detailed performance reporting for both TV channels and individual TV shows in TAM. Further functionalities measuring the performance of TV advertising will be released later this year.

Sawa Technologies and Triax partner

Sawa Technologies, a subsidiary of Sawa Group of Companies, has announced a strategic partnership with Triax, a global supplier of products and solutions for the reception and distribution of video, audio and data signals. As part of the agreement,

Triax will provide headend solutions and channel distribution systems including coax and IP. Triax products and solutions are used in homes, businesses and operator networks by broadcasters and satellite, cable and telecom operators.

Gravity Media appoints Abdelkader Zitouni as MENA

Gravity Media, a major provider of complex live broadcast facilities and production services to content owners, creators and distributors, has appointed Abdelkader Zitouni as its MENA advisor. He will be responsible for identifying and securing new

commercial opportunities by leveraging his in-depth market knowledge and close personal relationships with key MENA broadcasters and content providers. Prior to joining Gravity Media, Abdelkader was Director of Media Rights at beIN Media Group.

Republic Media partners with NKN

Republic TV, an Indian English-language news channel, has appointed NKN Media FZC as its exclusive ad sales partner in the UAE. This partnership offers advertisers and brands in the region an opportunity to team up with the news networks for the discerning South Asian diaspora in the region. This comes after Republic TV consolidated distribution with a Du carriage agreement. The channel is already available on Etisalat's TV platform, E-Vision.

Babeleye and Televes launch EPG service for MENA hospitality group

Babeleye has teamed up with Televes to launch a multilingual EPG service for a hospitality group with over 25,000 rooms in MENA. The new EPG will help hotel visitors find channels and programmes in their native language.

Following the successful integration of the IPTV Televes platform with the Babeleye metadata management solution, the EPG was launched with enriched data for top channels in MENA in both Arabic and English, and international channels in their original language.

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IN THE BIG LEAGUE

Football has attracted some of the world's most lucrative TV rights deals, with some contributing to more than 50% of a club's profits. This is also true for the UAE, where football has become a popular and lucrative sport thanks to the Pro League, which has played a strategic role in improving the local fan experience and successfully negotiating TV rights deals globally. In an exclusive interview with **Vijaya Cherian**, the team shares how they have raised the bar for football in the country and helped it travel globally

The UAE Pro League is relatively young, established only in 2008. But under the leadership of a team that is passionate about football, it has thrived, its stakeholders have seen rising profits, the clubs have a good fan following and rights to the matches have been sold around the world. In fact, while the rest of the world was in lockdown, the league continued to hold matches behind closed doors sans fans, using technology to enable efficient and seamless broadcast. It is now gearing up to open the doors to fans in the upcoming season.

"Our role is to manage and regulate the professional clubs' competitions," says Waleed Ibrahim Al Hosani, CEO of the UAE Pro League. "We have four main competitions – the League, the Cup, the Super Cup and the U21 League, which is sometimes called the Reserve League. So basically, we have four main competitions. Our other mandate is to commercialise these competitions and create solid revenue streams so that professional clubs can generate more funds for the stakeholders. And like most other such leagues, our biggest revenue stream is from our broadcast deals."

Knowing how critical broadcast is to the sport, the UAE Pro League has continuously ramped up the production of its games, while also implementing new technologies to ensure its productions are on a par with international standards and therefore marketable.

"We took over the production management in season 2015/16. Since then it hasn't been an easy journey for us,

but the rewards have been great. Now we are considered to have the highest standards in the region. Any international tournament that takes place in the UAE comes to us to cooperate and coordinate, and our team helps run and manage such projects in the UAE. From the FIFA Club World Cup 2017 and 2018 to the Asian Cup that took place in 2019 in the UAE, we have helped a number of international teams and competitions," explains Al Hosani.

"In addition to that, we have increased the rights and the value of media rights of the Pro League to more than double of what it was in previous years. This was all achieved within a short time span and is quite remarkable for a market like the UAE, where the population is fairly small. We are also one of the few local entities that have sold our rights to international media houses because of the quality of the content we have produced."

The UAE Pro League's achievements are the result of several technical and commercial initiatives. Malek Doughan, Marketing and Commercial Affairs Director at the UAE Pro League, attributes this to "a progressive approach".

"This is especially true in how we have developed the game locally and internationally," he explains. "We represent 14 clubs with a variety of fans that live in the UAE, so we needed to see how we could attract all of them. For this, we took a centralised approach to our communication so we could properly represent our product



CEO Waleed Ibrahim Al Hosani (l), flanked by Ammar Hina (U), TV Broadcast Director, and Malek Doughan (r), Marketing & Commercial Affairs Director, at the UAE Pro League.



Action from the Ajman vs Al Jazira Arabian Gulf League 2020-21 season.

with football, but we are doing that for every match now. We have been organising virtual football competitions and online gaming in parallel with our physical matches. During the peak of the Covid-19 lockdown, our online gaming took over and we got a new fan following onboard that we have to now consider for any future plans we undertake. We also have the Arabian Gulf League Fantasy game, which keeps our fans engaged and enhances their experience by bringing more fun and competitive aspects to the sport.”

On the TV production and broadcast technology side, the team is continuously innovating and on the lookout for disruptive new solutions to enhance production. When fans could not go to the stadium owing to the lockdown, the team recreated the atmosphere for viewers by adding virtual audio crowd cheering and new VR and AR elements.

“All of this was aimed at giving our fans more value, more involvement, and also giving our sponsors and partners additional engagement and exposure to justify their

to the nation as well as to the clubs. We identified that within the UAE, there are a total of 4.1m residents, who we qualified as our personas and whom we wanted to bring to the stadium.

“So we undertook a centralised marketing campaign, the first of its kind in the region, and the directive of this campaign was to recruit fans, retain them and at the same time reward their activity, whether it is engaging with us on social media or watching us on TV, or coming physically to our stadium. We did a touring campaign and we went to young people. We went to schools, in line with the Ministry of Education and the Abu Dhabi and Dubai Education Councils, to introduce activities around football, to promote the leagues and also introduce a more healthy lifestyle that includes all members of the community in the UAE. The pandemic did bring some plans to a halt, but we used that time to generate more content for fans and started e-competitions to attract gamers.”

As technology and future-trend followers, gamers are a very important target audience, explains Ammar Hina.

“According to our strategy, technology and futuristic features are important because many of those technologies are now coming

“In the next rights cycle, we will identify additional packages and have separate offerings for linear TV, OTT, digital platforms and any other additional media”

Malek Doughan, Marketing and Commercial Affairs Director, UAE Pro League

to fruition. What we discussed a couple of years back as impossible has now become part of the game, like the Video Assistant Referee. No one thought we could mix augmented and virtual reality



The matches were played behind closed doors during the Covid-19 lockdown.



The Arabian Gulf League 2020-2021 season.

sponsorship with us,” says Hina.

Al Hosani elaborates: “When Covid hit us last season, we took some time to analyse and evaluate the situation. We restructured our business plan but also made two priorities to execute these plans. The first was to ensure the safety of our players and staff. The second was to ensure the consistency of the competition to make it sustainable, so we could keep our part of the deal with sponsors. Powered by the continuous support of the top management and the UAEPL’s clear vision and strategy, my team worked on creating a protocol to go back and resume the competition safely, but we are also aligned with our government’s requirement to ensure the games were played in a safe environment.

“I am proud to say that we have successfully completed the last season and so far we have not postponed or cancelled any matches. This is a great success; the credit goes to the team and our colleagues and partners with the clubs and their staff, who showed great discipline in applying

“We took over the production management in season 2015/16. Since then it hasn’t been an easy journey for us, but the rewards have been great. Now we are considered to have the highest standards in the region”

Waleed Ibrahim Al Hosani, CEO, UAE Pro League

these protocols. This has helped us a lot. We did limit our manpower, our resources and equipment to maintain safety, but we made sure the quality was not impacted. In fact, we added technical solutions to enhance the viewer’s experience. We made sure that the matches ran on schedule and were not interrupted.”

Perhaps the biggest success is shown in the international takers for the productions.

“As a league, one of our key objectives is to always ensure maximum reach, whether in the local market or abroad,” says Doughan. “With that in mind, our team have been quite active in securing all these

distribution deals that would allow us to get that reach. I am proud to say that the UAE Pro League is one of the few leagues in the region that has currently broadcast in different parts of the world, and in at least four languages. In addition to linear television rights in the MENA region, we are proud to have partners in Europe, Australia, Asia and North America. We are continuously working on newer packages, deals and bundles that allow us to get more potential in truly making our competition a global product.

“We don’t consider ourselves a local competition anymore. We are a global product, and we are proud to keep on trying to push it across. We are an attractive league. We have interest from global players, with international coaches coming in to be part of the league. We are trying to attract these players and at the same time attract their audience, whether it’s Brazilian players for South American fans or European players that could bring us European exposure.”

Al Hosani elaborates: “Football,

When stadia were closed to fans, the Pro League turned to AR and VR to offer an enhanced viewing experience to TV viewers.

being a universal sport, has a huge audience on screen. That's why we decided to enhance the broadcast standard, because we want to create an attractive product. We didn't let the UAE's small population reduce our expectations. So we didn't just set our limits to serve local talent; we included international commentators in different languages like Portuguese and other Asian languages. That made it more attractive to international broadcasters. We are also producing and distributing weekly magazines in English and Arabic languages to enhance the league coverage and bring outstanding content to our fans. That's why we are so proud of what we have achieved. We may not have an international league but we have this appetite to do something big and we created a unique product that can attract international stakeholders."

When rights deals come up for renewal, a new avenue will be the opportunity to explore



separate streaming opportunities.

"We are always on the lookout to increase our rights deals, and this is the highest revenue for us as an industry. This would allow us to invest more back into the product. It would allow us to create more opportunities for our players, give back to our fans and attract commercial deals. So a lot rides

on these deals. However, in the best interest of the domestic rights, we also ensure our product is always visible to our fans locally, with no constraints," explains Doughan.

"In the next rights cycle, we will identify additional packages and have separate offerings for linear TV, OTT, digital platforms and any other additional media. For this, we are continuously looking to work with new partners on the solutions and strategy side to help us in creating new avenues for revenue."

Unlike other players, however, the Pro League has no plans to go direct-to-consumer just yet.

"D2C has been on our radar for two years, but it's not the right time. Without alignment with partners on this project, I don't think we can create sustainable partnerships or projects on this front just yet. It is not in alignment with our stakeholders," Al Hosani says.

The UAE Pro League is also in charge of UAE stadia, and over the last few years has been



The AGL awards ceremony.



Passionate about football, the Pro League team have made it their mission to take the UAE games to the world.

gradually upgrading facilities to meet international criteria. When Covid-19 is fully gone, the league is preparing to welcome more fans into the stadiums.

"Our product on TV is getting better and better," says Doughan, "and we are continuously enriching it and adding new elements to the broadcast side. We are also one of the few entities to have broadcast our finals in 4K last month. We have all these beautiful elements, like augmented reality and interactive cheering that give our players the ability to experience the ambience and the atmosphere that you would have in a stadium. At the same time, we are looking to bring our fans to the stadium and we are working towards adding a few elements that make this experience also exceptional."

Some of the details are still under wraps. "We are going to allow fans the opportunity to

"What we discussed a couple of years back as impossible has now become part of the game. No one thought we could mix augmented and virtual reality with football, but we are doing that for every match now"

Ammar Hina, Broadcast & TV Production Director, UAE Pro League

appear in the match through the giant screens, but we are not going to divulge more," Doughan winks.

"Experiences are getting more and more personalised and engaging. So with everything that we do, we have three main pillars that we concentrate on – there is TV, social engagement across all our platforms, and the in-stadium experience. With the in-stadium experience, we consider ourselves content creators. I need to give my audience a valuable enough experience

in the stadium to get them to come and bring other friends too.

"Based on our CEO's advice, we conducted an exercise where we picked the best stadia in the UAE that are also considered among the best in Asia, and benchmarked the experience of an individual fan from the time they buy a ticket and tweet about us on social media platforms, to that journey of arriving at the stadium, ordering their food and beverage, to the actual entertainment that takes place there. Based on this, we have made some tweaks so our fans can enjoy a seamless experience. And this is how we plan to grow our fans to the big numbers and make them bring their loved ones and their friends, to make it an actual experience that they are proud of being a part of."

Other activations that fit well within the UAE Pro League's strategic plan are also in the offing, with an e-competition that will allow UAE residents to participate in the West Asia World Cup qualifiers for the first time.

"This has not been done before," explains Al Hosani. "When we restructured our business plans, we saw that e-games offered a great opportunity to engage with the fans and link them to football. We have a strong competition in e-gaming with FIFA – that is the start of our initiatives in esports. Government entities are interested in this project as well. Hopefully we can create a very strong platform that can increase our fanbase in the region.

"And this is just one of the projects. There are many others. Of course, things are not perfect. We don't want to make it sound as if everything is smooth all the time. But we do have a mandate and some set objectives, and we are clear we want to remain pioneers in the region. What we want to do continuously is over-achieve." PRO



ARABSAT EXTENDS ITS REACH

Arabsat has been serving the growing needs of the Arab world and beyond since its launch in 1976, with a full spectrum of broadcast, telecommunications and broadband services. Its recent satellite penetration study and its impact on the MENA broadcast landscape is an eye opener. **BroadcastPro ME** brings you the details

The MENA region has long been a unique broadcasting environment, with more than 1,100 free-to-air channels available, offering almost unlimited choice. They are primarily broadcast via satellite, by far the leading distribution platform here. This is reinforced in a study undertaken by Arabsat, one of the leading satellite operators in the Arab world, with a strong presence across the Middle East, Africa and Europe.

The MENA Satellite Penetration study, conducted in 2020 with research specialist IPSOS, shows that satellite continues to enjoy a 97% market share, despite the uptake of IPTV and streaming services. The majority of MENA TV viewers, who are young, are loyal to satellite TV and use streaming services to complement their on-demand viewing experience. The study also shows that satellite TV viewers are largely citizens (96%); the remaining 4% are split equally between Arabs and other nationalities.

Arabsat, founded in 1976, has periodically undertaken such surveys to get a clear understanding of the markets it operates in and to see how to better

serve its customers and viewers.

“The main purpose of this study is to make sure we have the right offering of channels and services, maximising the benefits for our broadcast customers and partners, while at the same time continuously improving viewer experience and use value for the Arabsat TV audience,” says Badih Kanaan, Director Marketing, Arabsat.

“The study also provides business-relevant updates on the latest changes in market behaviour, viewer socio-demographics, viewing preference and TV household readiness for next-generation TV services. These data and facts are a valuable source for the strategic planning of our customers as well as for our own strategic initiatives, and we are glad to be able to share all those learnings and trends with our customers and partners in webinars and customer workshops.

“It was an interesting journey. A very challenging journey, especially with Covid-19. This research enables us to continuously offer enhanced products and services to our customers and partners. This time, however,

the study had a broader scope and scale. Under the research expertise of IPSOS, the study included not just the 22 countries in the Arab region but also reached out to other Arab communities in Europe and Africa.

“Together with IPSOS, we explored all satellite TV aspects, including the potential of complementary or substitute technologies and other players in the market. We are very proud of this study, because it was perhaps the most comprehensive one we have conducted for Arabsat, and we are looking forward to sharing our findings with our customer base.”

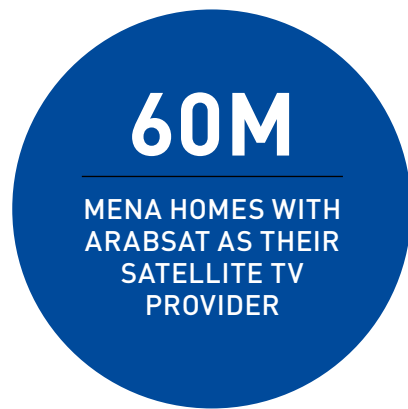
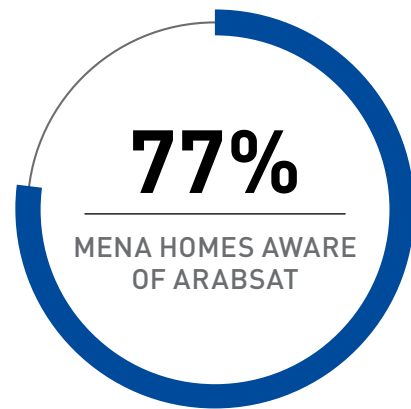
According to the study, the vast majority of MENA viewers – almost 80% – are under 44 years old, and at least 45% are under 30, which illustrates the strong sustainable relevance of satellite TV in MENA.

The paucity of broadband in the region, except in the wealthier GCC countries, and satellite’s ability to reach remote parts of the Arab world where fibre and other infrastructure are minimal, means satellite remains the main mode of content distribution, entertainment and even internet access. As a result, operators have a powerful position, with Arabsat enjoying a large share of the pie in several Arab markets.

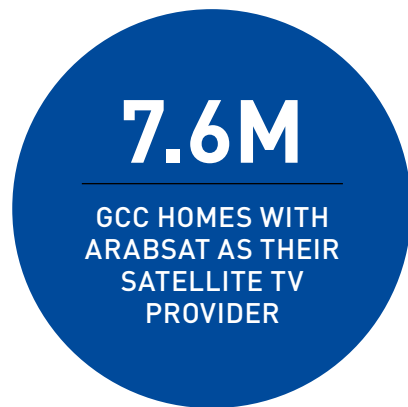
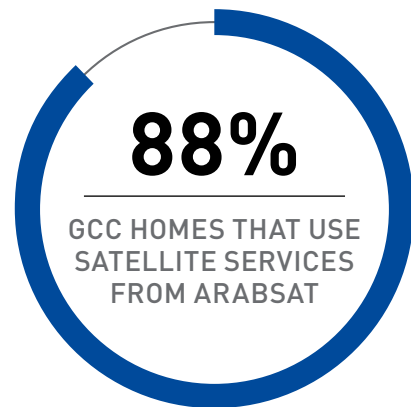
Arabsat owns and operates seven satellites at three orbital positions, 20°, 26° and 30.5° East: Arabsat-5C (20°E), BADR-4, BADR-5, BADR-6, BADR-7 (26°E), Arabsat-5A and Arabsat-6A (30.5°E). Coverage spans more than 100 countries, including the MENA, Europe and Central Asia, with more than 650 TV channels and 270 radio stations. Arabsat’s video ‘hotspot’ at 26°E alone caters to more than 288m MENA viewers, transmitting more than 50% of its TV channels in HD or 4K.

There is extra good news in

How well-known is Arabsat in the MENA region?



Arabsat’s position in the GCC region



“The main purpose of this study is to make sure we have the right offering of channels and services, maximising the benefits for our broadcast customers and partners”

Badih Kanaan, Director Marketing, Arabsat

the research for Arabsat – 77% of MENA homes are aware of the brand, and 58% have chosen it as their satellite provider. With 103m satellite TV homes in MENA, this means at least 60m of them use Arabsat’s TV services, whether exclusively or along with other TV services.

Three main factors are responsible

for Arabsat’s success, according to the research: technical robustness, programme selection and family members’ choice.

In the GCC, 88% of homes use satellite services provided by Arabsat, with at least 7.6m homes getting their TV this way. There has also been great success in Saudi Arabia, where it is the first choice for more than 5.25m households.

Laith Alani, Head of Product Sales – Broadcasting Services, Arabsat, elaborates: “Saudi Arabia is one of our key markets, and we are clearly leading there with access to 90% of the satellite TV households. Out of these, at least 9% or 523,000 homes watch Arabsat exclusively. We are also

further improving in other Gulf countries despite the increased offerings and initiatives from IPTV and OTT players, particularly in those fast flourishing countries, where the infrastructure developed in the new suburbs creates a fertile ground for such applications to thrive. Not only in Saudi Arabia, but overall, we have maintained our success in the GCC, where we enjoy 88% viewership. And thanks to the great support and loyalty of our customers, we have logged over 813,000 homes watching programmes exclusively via Arabsat satellites.”

One reason for Arabsat’s exceptional success is its strict adherence to the cultural sensitivities of the Arab world, making it the ‘family members’ choice’.

“The content we carry on our satellites is in perfect harmony with the values and traditions of the Arab world,” explains Sami Mobarah, Arabsat Product Marketing Manager. “Arabsat was one of the members who defined

“Saudi Arabia is one of our key markets, and we are clearly leading there with access to 90% of the satellite TV households. Out of these, at least 9% or 523,000 homes watch Arabsat exclusively”

Laith Alani, Head of Product Sales – Broadcasting Services, Arabsat

the Arab States Charter for Satellite TV. This charter is reflected in all Arabsat contracts, so our video hotspot is the safest for all families. We are also part of the Arab League, which makes us the first choice for governmental and national TVs in the region.”

In the Levant region plus Iraq and Iran, 77% of homes have access to Arabsat, with 26.8m satellite TV homes choosing it as their preferred satellite TV service provider, the study shows. It has had a majority market share in Lebanon since January 2020, where it caters to 860,000 satellite TV homes and 78% viewership – 22% exclusively on Arabsat, which

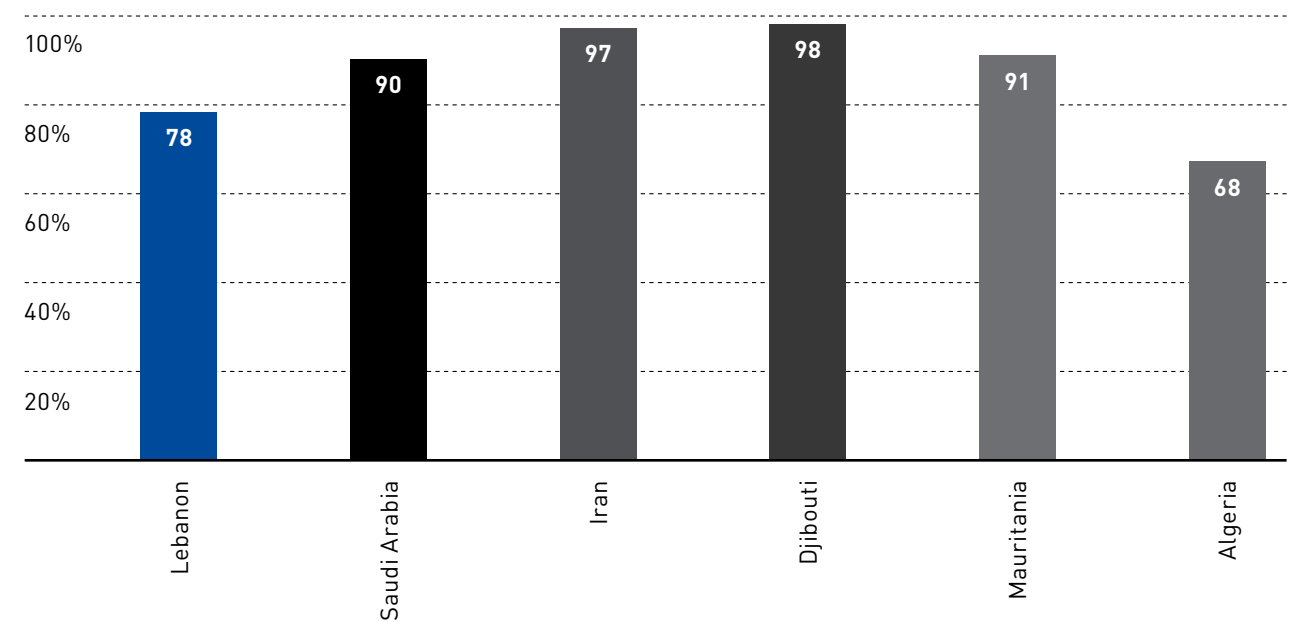
comes to 238,000 homes.

“No other operator in the region enjoys this exclusive market share, making Arabsat the leading regional satellite operator in Lebanon. This has also led to a positive impact on adjacent markets like Jordan, where viewership has increased by 11% just after the Lebanese channels shifted exclusively to Arabsat,” explains Alani.

Alani attributes the success in Lebanon to a strategy that concluded in December 2019, whereby it secured and migrated all of the top Lebanese channels to its satellite exclusively, causing a mass shift in viewership in the country.

“Particularly in the Levant, we did a survey before the shift of channels and another one after, and found that we’ve enjoyed at least 20% increase in Lebanon since the migration. More importantly, this shift has impacted adjacent markets like Jordan, where we enjoyed a 10% increase. We still believe that there will be larger differences if we conduct further measurement again. And this is quite a significant

Percentage of households with access to Arabsat



achievement, as we trust that the Lebanese content and channels are one of the top most-watched across MENA,” Alani explains.

Arabsat also leads in Iran’s broadcast space. The satellite operator has access to 97% of the Iranian TV market, which totals around 22.34m satellite-connected homes.

North African countries also have an impressive uptake of Arabsat channels, with 53% of satellite TV households signed up, meaning 10.1m TV homes, and Alani says Arabsat has prime position in some African markets – Algeria, Mauritania and Djibouti.

In the latter two especially, Arabsat caters to the majority of satellite-connected homes, with 98% of Djibouti and 91%

“The content we carry on our satellites is in perfect harmony with the values and traditions of the Arab world”

Sami Mobarah, Product Marketing Manager, Arabsat

of Mauritania having access. The operator serves 34% of 95,000 satellite homes exclusively in Djibouti, and 30% of 740,000 in Mauritania. In Algeria too, Arabsat has penetrated the market with 68% of satellite homes, which amounts to 4.8m households.

“In this study, we found that Arabsat’s overall position increased by at least 30% since the last time we did a large-scale measurement like this one, which was around five years

ago,” explains Alani. “We have seen tremendous increase in some markets over others. Thankfully, we have no declines and although we are satisfied with this growth, we are looking forward to new ways to grow in the future.”

The study also reveals that the most-watched languages for TV viewing, besides Arabic and local languages, are English, French and Turkish.

“Such information is very valuable for our customers targeting specific audience groups,” explains Alani. “We also have Urdu and Hindi, which is expected because of the content being broadcast over satellites as well as the larger community from India, Pakistan and Southeast Asia countries residing here in this part of MENA.”

One other important factor is the significant uptake of HD in the market. Arabsat currently carries more than 230 HD channels. At least 50% of TV channels on its 26°E orbital location are in HD or 4K. Badih Kanaan says the strategy during the last five years has been to attract the most-watched channels – where possible, exclusively in HD.

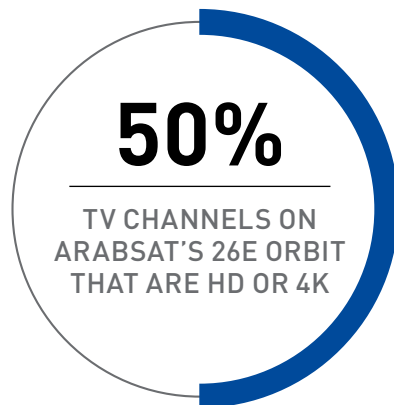
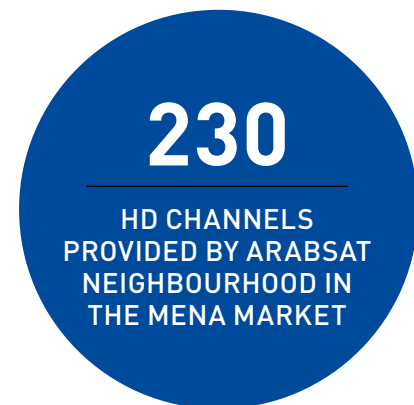
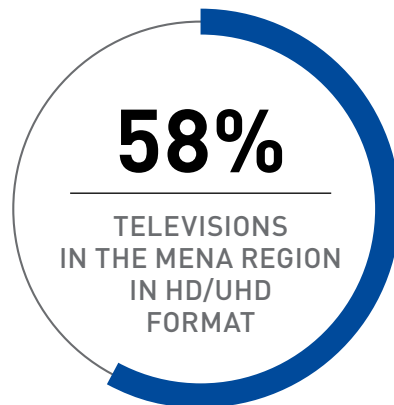
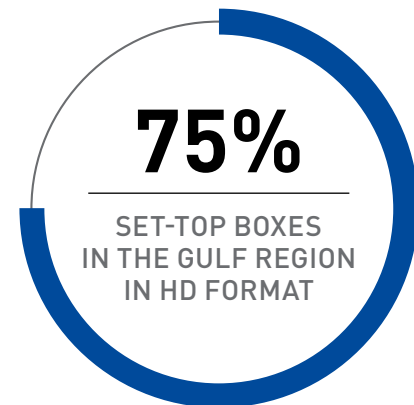
“77% of TV sets in the MENA region are flatscreen. 56% of TV sets in the MENA region are in HD format. Additionally, 6% of TV sets in the region are in 4K format while at least 40% of homes have smart TVs.”

While the Gulf region has a very high uptake of HD set-top boxes (75%), at least 56% of MENA viewers have HD receivers and at least 21% have replaced their receivers in the last year. This impressive growth has led HD to become a mass market service, with satellite leading and seamlessly enabling the best picture quality across the whole region.

Sami Mobarah says penetration will further accelerate as HD receivers and television sets



HD penetration in MENA households



become more affordable.

“The main factors that influence the uptake of new technology within a market would be the availability of exclusive content, the availability of HD TVs and availability of HD receivers. Not all of our clients can afford HD transmission yet, but we have introduced initiatives to encourage broadcasters to upgrade their content by providing them attractive pricing models or supporting them with equipment to encourage HD broadcasting. Also, Arabsat signed a partnership with leading broadcasters such as MBC and Rotana to broadcast their channels exclusively on HD format, and this helped increase the consumer demand for HD receivers.

“After HD, UHD will be the next technology to bring an even further enhanced viewing experience to MENA. In support of this, we

“We recently signed a contract for the new BADR-8 satellite, which will bring new high-performance growth capacity to the market, especially in the broadcasting segment. We also have plans ... to enhance the products and services we are bringing to the market”

Badih Kanaan, Director Marketing, Arabsat

are closely working together with our customers and partners to align technology, provide expertise, build most efficient distribution workflows and processes, and calibrate business models, making them most suitable for the uptake of UHD in the future.”

Kanaan adds that Arabsat has

already “put in place a clear strategy for our upcoming satellites and the replacement of existing satellites”.

“We recently signed a contract for the new BADR-8 satellite, which will bring new high-performance growth capacity to the market, especially in the broadcasting segment. We have other plans as well to enhance the products and services we are bringing to the market.”

Kanaan adds: “In many regions and countries, our satellite fleet is also already used to enable seamless deployment and growth of internet connectivity and IP-centric file, data and content delivery. We are studying the market, exploring new technologies and new trends, and we are confident we will have a new portfolio of very attractive and future-ready services for our clients and partners available at the right time.” **PRO**

BAHRAIN RADIO'S DIGITAL MAKEOVER

While most of the GCC countries have put their broadcast projects on hold, Bahrain's Ministry of Information Affairs (MIA) released a number of tenders over the last year for massive infrastructural overhauls. Eng Abdulla Ahmed Albaloooshi and systems integrator GloCom take **Vijaya Cherian** through the \$6.5m refurbishment at Bahrain Radio

Built in 1980, Bahrain Radio, with seven radio stations, was long due for a revamp. The recent \$6.5m turnkey project, which is the first phase, has launched this facility into the digital realm. The entire facility has been refurbished, from nine radio studios and control rooms to the MCR (Master Control Room) and CAR (Central Apparatus Room), with a parallel overhaul of furniture, equipment, automation systems, radio library and acoustics.

By deploying digital solutions in all areas of the facility, the radio section of Bahrain's MIA has essentially migrated out of an analogue environment. Dubai systems integrator (SI) GloCom was tasked with the challenge of undertaking

this overhaul right in the midst of the 2020 lockdown, and it delivered, ensuring that the existing service was not disrupted at any point in time, and also digitising the department's radio library archive. While the main centre of the project was in Isa Town, related civil work also took place at various other MIA sites.

Bahrain Radio is one of many projects the MIA has completed in recent months, with more due for completion this year and next. Much of this renovation has been possible thanks to the support of Prince Salman bin Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, Crown Prince and Prime Minister of Bahrain, says Eng Abdulla Ahmed Albaloooshi, Assistant Undersecretary for Technical Affairs at the MIA.

"Our radio station and studios were



The new Studio 9. Each studio at the refurbished facility boasts a different colour scheme.

built in 1980. They were really old, and we used to have the occasional breakdown with no support available for them. All our FM and AM stations are processed in these studios and go through the MCR; our radio channels are also available on satellite and OTT. With this project, we have transferred our entire radio technology to a digital platform and have added a few elements that will make life easier for the production people in our radio department,” he explains.

At the core of the set-up is a Lawo-based MADI architecture that covers all seven on-air studios and allows the control room to serve as a self-operating studio. These on-air studios can also be connected to two of the production studios for music or drama. A third production studio has been redesigned for mix-mastering. All seven on-air studios are designed to enable any FM station to log in and go live from any studio.

The MCR, the heart of the station, includes a 15 FM station automation system with full redundancy, enabling the department to scale up in the future and add another six FM stations. It also includes



“It created an opportunity for us to recruit young Bahraini engineers and graduates fresh out of university. They are more familiar with this workflow and have gravitated naturally towards it”

Eng Abdulla Ahmed Albalooshi, Assistant Undersecretary for Technical Affairs at the MIA

Eng Abdulla Ahmed Albalooshi, Assistant Undersecretary for Technical Affairs at the MIA, says the Ministry is actively refurbishing several areas at Bahrain Radio and TV.

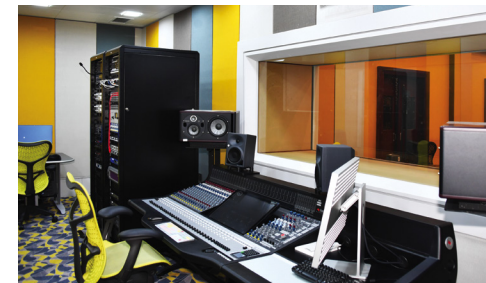
four 80" LED walls, a brand-new Lawo Vistool for audio monitoring and a Lawo VSM monitoring solution. A big part of the project was the replacement of a legacy Dalet system with the latest radio automation system from RCS. The studios are connected with the MCR through fibre (MADI), with physical AES/ANA cables for redundancy. The CAR was also designed with a centralised audio router (MADI) from Lawo.

Other important elements of the project are DDP storage and an audio archiving solution from Xendata, with its tape library integrated with RCS Archive2go. Also included are AVT’s on-air telephone management solution, RF distribution of on- and off-air signals, and compliance recording and monitoring. The whole area is integrated with the transmission and uplink facility.

Albalooshi elaborates. “The video wall in the MCR helps operators see the graphic bars, the output of these studios and the radio satellite channels, along with all the clocks and the GPS. The environment at the MCR now entirely comprises routers and displays, as opposed to patch panels and the wiring from the past. We also have a logging system so they log all the data and programmes into the database – so if anything goes wrong, they can immediately check the audio file. The monitoring system at the MCR allows them to see the quality of each of the titles and take necessary action.

“Every studio was also given a different theme and colour scheme to make it more friendly and attractive for the staff who work there for long hours. We also created a three-camera studio with a video wall that includes furniture from Lund and Halsey. These include standing position desks to give viewers different angles.”

GloCom undertook a carefully



Various areas of Studio 5 with the presenter room to the top left, the control room to the top right and the MCR room with the VSM monitoring wall below.

planned design, step-by-step decommissioning, on-air migration, execution and training despite Covid-19 challenges, notes Zahid Mirza, President & Chairman at GloCom Ltd. “We undertook a complete refurbishment of each of the radio studios, followed by detailed acoustics measurements and installation of new technical furniture, new equipment and thereafter its configuration and commissioning.”

Glocom had a 22-strong implementation team in Bahrain – a project manager, two project engineers, four site engineers

and 15 technicians – with an average of 10 people on-site at any given time. But new and unexpected challenges arose with the arrival of Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdown and flight restrictions.

“This project was contracted to us in October 2019, but Covid-19 resulted in severe challenges in terms of shipments, permits to work on-site and so on – but we worked closely with the customer and our logistics team to circumvent this. Our team worked around the clock due to the restriction on the number of engineers allowed on-site at any given time. By holding video conferencing calls with

the team in different countries, we were able to minimise and mitigate these challenges and deliver the project on time,” Mirza explains.

Albalooshi agrees, saying the lockdown called for further “coordination between the engineering department, GloCom and the radio stations”.

“There were also technical and operational complexities for GloCom to address. The channels were on air. Shifting one studio system to the other and ensuring people were happy with the set-up and removing the bulk of spaghetti wire was quite challenging. We



also didn't have the drawings and routings for some of the old wiring, and that was a big concern. We couldn't afford to make any mistakes while putting in new cables."

Despite these obstacles, the project, signed off in October 2020, was delivered on time. Along with the total renovation of the MCR and CAR, GloCom migrated a whopping 80,000 hours of radio programming to a Xendata-grade archiving

storage. In addition, Cisco 9200 supplied the AoIP and management network infrastructure (16 x 48 port Cisco switches), and audio solutions were sourced from Genelec, Neumann, Senheisser, RAMI Audio, RME, Sonifex, Yellowtec, Focusrite and Big Knob.

For GloCom, one of the biggest challenges was managing the workflow of the Quran station. "With our highly qualified engineers, and with support of the MIA team, we achieved that without

an operator. With the successful integration of the RCS automation and Lawo, all the stations played the Azan on time for one calendar year, without any delay."

Abdullah added that his team was roped in this time to make choices on solutions. This resulted in the decision to deploy RCS automation, ingest and traffic systems to provide centralised content ingest and playout in the redesigned system.

The new music and drama studio is well equipped and will be rented out to third parties as part of the MIA's efforts to monetise its facility.

"We got the production team involved in selecting the automation system, and they chose RCS. Making them a part of this selection just made the whole adaptation a lot easier. RCS controls everything in this set-up, even the mixer. It was a great collaborative effort between the technical and radio people, which made it all the more successful."

Various RCS tools and software have been incorporated, which also presented staff training opportunities at Bahrain Radio. The team was trained extensively on the Lawo, RCS, AVT Trilogy, Xendata and DDP Storage systems, among others, by the GloCom team.

"We have around 15 staff from the technical and radio departments trained on the RCS automation system. RCS had a lot of tools that our other teams can use as well. Even our marketing people have been trained in using the platform, so now they know exactly how many ads have gone on air. The programming people are happy because they know how many times a song has been played for copyright uses. RCS also uses the timings of the Azan correctly," explains Albaloooshi.

He adds that unlike most broadcasters, who have had to struggle with training their staff, the MIA is fortunate that most of its engineering staff are young. "Most of the old generation has retired, and it created an opportunity for us to recruit young Bahraini engineers and graduates fresh out of university. They are more familiar with this workflow and have gravitated naturally towards it."

GloCom staff have been stationed at Bahrain Radio for a two-year period to "support the system and train our engineers to ensure knowledge transfer", explains Albaloooshi, who lauds GloCom for working from midnight into the early morning most days



"We got the production team involved in selecting the automation system, and they chose RCS. Making them a part of this selection just made the whole adaptation a lot easier. RCS controls everything in this set-up, even the mixer"

Eng Abdulla Ahmed Albaloooshi, Assistant Undersecretary for Technical Affairs at the MIA

to ensure work did not clash with on-air radio schedules.

The MIA has a more ambitious plan to monetise the facility. To that effect, a studio has been designed for the production of music videos and drama series, equipped with state-of-the-art Avid equipment and the latest technology required to produce songs and dramas on a professional level, says Albaloooshi. The team has plans to rent this studio out.

In addition, the MIA is gearing up to attract six private radio channels. Popular Indian FM station Radio Mirchi launched on 104.2FM in Bahrain a month ago as part of this plan, and is using one of MIA's nine studios and its new facility.

"We have already completed work on the new building that will house the new private radio stations," explains Albaloooshi, adding that the MIA will release one frequency in an auction for another private radio station within a month.

And that's not all. The MIA is currently building a brand-new news centre, which is 40% done with an expected completion date of November 2021. Several tenders have been released for this project, with more on the way for lighting, equipment and décor. In short, Covid-19 hasn't stopped Bahrain forging ahead with its broadcast projects. **PRO**



Various areas of the facility, including the control room and CAR. Seen in this control room are the Lawo audio mixer, RCS playout, the telephone system and effects processors.

Key kit

MCR

- Lawo VSM
- Cisco Network Infrastructure
- DDP – Online Production Storage
- Xendata – Archiving Storage
- Orban – Audio Processors

On-Air Studios

- Lawo Consoles
- AVT Telephone Hybrid
- RCS Automation & On-Air Player

Drama & Music Studio

- Pro Tools
- SSL Audio Mixer
- Neve Audio Mixer



CNN IN THE TIME OF COVID

When Covid-19 hit the world, news organisations were the first to take action, innovating extensively to retain the audiences that had come to their platforms for information. Robyn Peterson, CNN CTO, and Leo Tucker-Brown, Engineering Manager at the CNN Abu Dhabi facility, share insights on how CNN fared

News was big during Covid. Can you share figures on how CNN fared, and which platforms did better? How are you changing your strategy to suit the new normal?
 CNN has more unique visitors and multi-platform video viewers than any news organisation in the world. With such an intense news cycle in 2020 and news pouring in from all over the globe, users turned to CNN in historic numbers. In 2020, CNN reached its largest digital audience in history, averaging more than 200m global unique users a month on CNN platforms.

How are new technologies changing journalism, and what role does smart engineering play in the new media landscape?
 Technology has been at the core of journalism since its inception. From the printing press to radio to TV, and now the internet, modern media consumption is changing faster than many media organisations can handle.

The media industry faces pressure from audiences to deliver best-in-class product experiences, competition in the advertising market against the major social platforms, and attacks on integrity around the truthfulness of their editorial content. As a result, many media organisations have rushed to debut shiny gimmicks, but it's the engineers and technologists who are behind the advancements and who are pushing boundaries on what is possible. They have the vital role of bringing journalists' great stories to audiences in a way that's fast, smart, easy to access and sustainable. The best consumer experiences are built by hiring amazing user experience teams – from product managers to designers to engineers – who love to move the needle forward.

Do you think the future of news formats is mobile? Where does CNN stand in this regard?
 Mobile isn't just our future; it is our present. The majority of users come to



◀ Robyn Peterson says the priority today is to build innovative experiences for the end user.

be critical in the advancement of digital news products and experiences – especially since audiences now have some baseline expectation for customisation. It's not only about creating content to meet a one-size-fits-all experience anymore; rather, it's about how that content can be delivered and the intelligence behind that distribution. And a great experience extends to making the best environment for advertisers and brands, who are eager to deliver positive, great experiences to their customers.

As a CTO, what are some of the challenges in newsrooms today? How are you addressing them?

In today's world, it's all about the user and building innovative experiences inherently for them. Users are going to continue to demand and expect instantaneous, personally relevant and seamless experiences whenever they want it and wherever they are. So most of the challenges we face require us to think about what these product innovations are going to be, and how are we going to develop them.

We prioritise innovation and growth above everything else to meet these demands, and have an acute awareness that we must continue investing heavily in a product and technology team that supports not just the newsroom, but the entire organisation. To ensure our success, we have built – and continue to build – a cross-functional and holistic group that works to power user experiences, allowing people all over the world the ability to engage with our journalism, storytelling and services. The task of breaking down the walls between our content, audiences and advertisers is one of our biggest challenges, but it is what we constantly work at to ensure the best needs and interests are delivered to our users. **PRO**

“The democratisation of artificial intelligence, including personalisation and machine learning, is going to be critical in the advancement of digital news products and experiences – especially since audiences now have some baseline expectation for customisation”

Robyn Peterson, CTO, CNN

it's something we want to be smart about, taking into consideration the space and how we use it. It's not just about making sure the content fits in the aspect ratio; it's more about what content is on the screen and what the user interface is like.

How is AI being used within your organisation?

The democratisation of artificial intelligence, including personalisation and machine learning, is going to

CNN on mobile devices, and have for some time. News is always breaking, and the smartphone is critical to worldwide user news consumption and experiences. Almost everything else is supplementary to the phone. That said, consumer experiences can be multi-device, and each device has its role that may vary from user to user. Someone may prefer headlines and alerts on their phone, then dive into features on a laptop, but catch up on long-form video on their smart TV. Knowing your consumers, and how they want to consume your content, is a vital prerequisite to building the best consumer experiences to satisfy their needs.

What are your thoughts on the vertical format? Is this something you already have or are considering?

From a mobile point of view, vertical layouts are certainly something we explore as we look to bring our content and products to users in a variety of formats. But

+ Leo Tucker-Brown shares the latest developments at CNN in Abu Dhabi

CNN has had a TV studio in the UAE for over a decade now, and our technology has evolved over that time. Older digital and HD systems have now given way to more sophisticated IP-based systems, giving us a smart and flexible road to the future. Those technologies have also enabled us to seamlessly communicate with our other bureaus and field teams.

We will soon be moving to a brand-new facility in the new Yas Creative Hub, so we're currently planning our new presence there, which is tremendously exciting. This will be a major investment for us in the region. It will be great to be at the centre of the media community at the Hub, and the blank canvas there gives us some exciting opportunities to work with. Watch this space.

One key thing that distinguishes us from other news organisations is definitely our field anchoring, which is something our Abu Dhabi-based team specialises in. We often take the studio to the story, which enables us to give our viewers that front-row seat on history that CNN is renowned for.

In practice, that means employing a mix of new IP technology with tried-and-trusted cellular and satellite comms techniques. Every news story is a learning experience in that regard, and we are always evolving our approach. In recent years, our UAE-based team has covered stories such as the Pope's visit to the UAE, elections in Israel and Iran, the Special Olympics and more, all anchoring in the field.

CNN's engineering expertise has been forged in some often quite extreme situations, whether that is in a conflict zone or a natural disaster, or in the restrictive security environment of a political summit or other global event. That constantly pays dividends for us

when we're looking for solutions to the kind of unexpected problems that field anchoring throws up.

As a global network, CNN has had to respond to Covid all over the world in different ways. Here in the UAE, while we faced some logistical hurdles during the early lockdown, we were back into the bureau relatively quickly. We've been broadcasting CTW from our Abu Dhabi programming hub since July, which is almost unique within our international network, albeit with staff working a blended schedule to ensure Covid protocols are met.

Many of our colleagues in other

countries are still working from home, and we have anchored high-profile shows from people's living rooms, often for many months. Those same field engineering techniques have come into their own in that situation. For a show like *Connect the World*, we're working with colleagues out on assignment, but also working from home in Atlanta, London and New York, and then in our bureaus and studios too. It's an extraordinary logistical challenge, but the working practices we've evolved function incredibly smoothly. We have barely missed a beat.



▲ Leo Tucker-Brown.



“A mismatch in timing between the original and dubbed tracks causes synchronisation problems that can quickly lead to viewer dissatisfaction”

Automated QC solutions offer better audio dubbing

With the globalisation of content, providers are looking for new ways to streamline video delivery and ensure a good viewing experience for consumers. While creating content for different geographies is an opportunity to reach new audiences, preparing content in various languages can be challenging. Roughly 6,500 different languages are spoken around the world today, each with its own distinct differences.

For years, content providers relied on the use of captions and subtitles to deliver content in regional languages. However, these come with certain limitations. Subtitles make it challenging to deliver long dialogue scenes within limited screen times. They can be distracting and often fail to convey the emotions in a dialogue.

Audio dubbing is an alternative that enables content providers to add language-specific content to the original audio. Audio dubbing translates a foreign language programme into the audience's native language. When content creators produce dubbed audio tracks, however, they must take care to ensure high quality, as synchronisation issues are among the biggest challenges with dubbing.

Any noticeable lead or delay between audio and video can negatively affect the viewing experience. The time taken to communicate the same message in different languages can vary drastically, thereby creating synchronisation problems. Sync issues also occur if a frame on the dubbed track is lost.

Ideally, a QC solution can efficiently check synchronisation between the dubbed track and the master track,

and determine if the audio track was changed in any way after the dubbing stage. A mismatch in timing between the original and dubbed tracks causes synchronisation problems that can quickly lead to viewer dissatisfaction.

By automating QC workflows and performing comprehensive checks, content providers can streamline audio dubbing. Advancements in automated and AI-ML-based technologies are driving new efficiencies for QC workflows, allowing content providers to rapidly and accurately detect audio dubbing issues with reduced manual supervision. There are five particular ways in which technology is transforming audio dubbing for content providers:

- Automated QC solutions make the verification of complex dubbing packages, including multiple MXF and .wav files, more efficient.
- By leveraging an automated QC solution, content providers can certify that metadata package structures are precise, while also checking that the number of audio tracks, channel configuration of dubbed tracks, and duration of the original audio track compared with dubbed audio tracks are correct.

Content providers can rapidly confirm synchronisation between video and dubbed tracks, as well as between original and dubbed tracks. An automated QC solution can detect whether synchronisation issues exist between the video and dubbed tracks, by verifying the presence of black frames in video tracks when there is silence, as well as by detecting colour and test tones in dubbed audio tracks. Checking for sync loss between the original and

dubbed audio tracks is a little tricky, since the audio data are vastly different. The master track and dubbed track have common background music or effects, which can be separated from the audio track using techniques such as bandpass filter. An automated QC solution that can check for localised correlation between background beds of dubbed audio tracks and the original audio track, and compare loudness curves, ultimately helps content providers identify any out-of-sync audio.

- Language identification is an important part of the audio dubbing process. Over the last few years, AI/ML algorithms have become so intelligent that automated QC systems can detect language in any audio track with more than 90% accuracy. It only takes a few hours to train AI/ML models before they're capable of predicting the language spoken in the audio track. Using metadata, content creators can verify that it is correct.
- Many countries have regulations requiring that regular television programming and commercials have the same level of loudness. These measures are put in place to ensure that commercials are not substantially louder. With an automated QC system, content creators can compare loudness values between audio tracks, based on standard CALM or ITU algorithms.

In short, with automated QC solutions and the use of AI/ML technologies, content providers can create dubbed packages with greater speed and accuracy, ensuring a high quality of experience for global viewers. **PRO**

Manik Gupta is Associate Director of Engineering at Interra Systems.



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LOCATION



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(Mazda Showroom) Sheikh Zayed Road Dubai, UAE



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