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MIDDLE EAST

A woman in a blue top sits at a futuristic, glowing news desk in a studio. The desk has a glowing logo on it. The studio is filled with ARRI cameras on cranes, creating a high-tech broadcast environment. The background is a large screen displaying a blue and white graphic.

## A FRESH TAKE ON NEWS

Al Mashhad goes live with edgy content, immersive experiences and out-of-the-box digital initiatives



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Welcome

I hope all of you have had a great start to the New Year. Last year, behind a hoarding in Dubai Studio City, just across the street from our office, there was a lot of conjecture about the TV station that was in the making. From the name of the channel to who owned it to the reason behind its launch, many stood on the other side of the road and speculated.

In recent months, there has been more clarity on the channel, and last month I had the pleasure of touring Al Mashhad's new facility. Some old faces and some new, the channel's management is keen to woo younger audiences with more immersive storytelling and powerful talk shows. Impressively, they boast a hybrid technical infrastructure that accommodates all the buzz words we have heard in recent times – 4K, IP, cloud, AR, VR, mixed realities, Unreal Engine and what have you. But their tech head Srinivas Kuppa cautions not to get carried away by those terms or those technologies. He says he has been incredibly cautious about these technologies, only including them where they are deemed useful.

Al Mashhad is not done

yet. As Kuppa said: "This is the beginning of Al Mashhad's dream. More is yet to come."

And that's also true for the rest of the region. There are several new facilities coming up, and we are delighted to bring you those projects as they reach completion.

In the meantime, I have been attempting to bring more women to the fore and to that end, BroadcastPro ME has decided to host a Women in Media conference in September 2023. While there are a considerable number of women within the content and production sector, there are barely a handful on the tech side and I have enlisted the support of the industry to identify some of them and bring them to the conference. For those of you reading this, I welcome names from you as well. We also have two virtual conferences coming up on sports and tech in March and June respectively. This is your chance to register.

Vijaya Cherian, Editorial Director



On this month's cover...

The Al Mashhad facility in Dubai Studio City.

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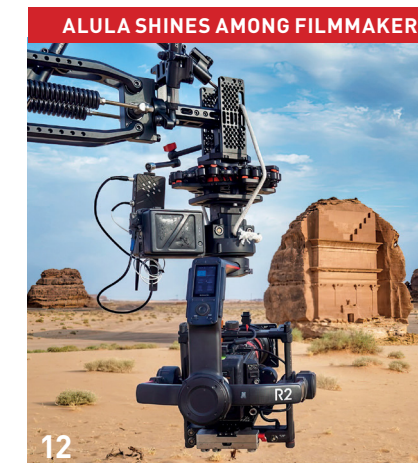
Daniel Robinson on the role of standards in the hybrid era

February 2023



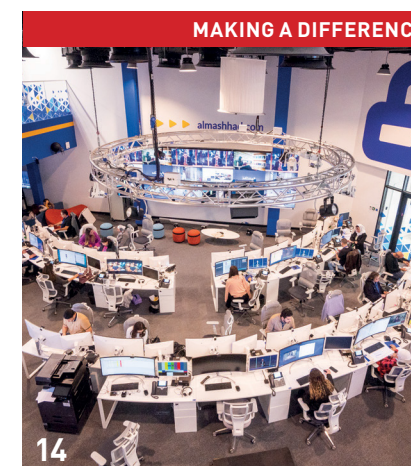
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# FUTURE OF SPORTS BROADCASTING SUMMIT

Date From 08 March Venue Online Website 2023.fsbsummit.com

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8 – 9 March 2023, Online

## About the Future of Sports Broadcasting Summit

The FIFA World Cup has taken the Arab world by storm and is currently the talk of the town, but the MENA region is also home to many other sports from cricket, horse racing, sailing and martial arts to camel racing, golf and rugby. The region plays host to several international events, and media stakeholders are investing heavily in creating dramatic and immersive viewer experiences for sports fans on TV and streaming platforms. From suppliers and vendors to solution producers, broadcasters and streamers, everyone within the sports chain is looking at commercial and technical strategies to elevate their game.

The Future of Sports Broadcasting Summit will serve as a springboard for all stakeholders in sports media – clubs, global and regional sports producers, broadcasters, rights holders, tech visionaries and talent and other media platforms – to discuss new trends, address and tackle upcoming challenges and share innovative strategies.

## Networking Opportunity

This event presents you with an opportunity to interact and connect with regional industry decision makers and influencers. There are several innovative ways to sponsor, from interactive live polls to session background branding, and from lead generation campaigns to presentations.

## 2023 Webinar

The Future of Sports Broadcasting Summit will be streamed live as a webinar, spread over the course of two days, from 8 – 9 March, 2023. The virtual event will bring together high-level TV sports executives to share disruptive use cases and explore new opportunities and trends in the market.



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# Desert Rose Films starts production of Emirati feature film *Mountain Boy*

Desert Rose Films, Abu Dhabi's female-focused production company, has started filming *Mountain Boy*, its latest Emirati feature film. Based on *The Boy Who Knew the Mountains*, the internationally acclaimed Emirati children's book, it aims to highlight the skills and talents of Emirati actors, writers and producers and put them in front of a new international audience.

Written by Emirati-Australian author Michele Ziolkowski, the book tells the story of Suhail, a young boy shunned by his tribespeople because they are puzzled by his exceptional abilities.

Brought to life by an inclusive and multicultural crew, *Mountain Boy* is



On the set of *Mountain Boy*.

directed by Emirati filmmaker Zainab Shaheen, the mind behind Arabic films *Journey of Hope* and *Dates to Mars*. Set and filmed in the Hajar Mountains of Fujairah, it shines a light on the UAE landscape, culture and people and touches on crucial

subjects as varied as autism awareness, inclusivity, climate change and the importance of preserving Arabian heritage. Filming started on January 15 and will continue for the next few months.

Nancy Paton, founder of Desert Rose Films,

said: "My team [and I] are honoured to start work on this incredible tale. I first came across *The Boy Who Knew the Mountains* around four years ago, and now, after months ... of patience and perseverance, I am delighted to start filming up in the glorious mountains of Fujairah. Large-scale projects like this demonstrate just how much the Emirati film sector has grown in such a short space of time. We are ready to pour endless hard work, creativity and imagination into this project, and we hope it will act as a timeless tribute to all the diverse and fascinating talents, enchanting stories and mesmerising landscapes of the UAE."

## Art Format Lab announces partnership with BIGG

Dubai production house Art Format Lab (AFL) has partnered with BIGG, a French media group specialising in video gaming and esports entertainment. According to the deal, AFL will help secure distribution and content localisation rights for the French channel across the MENA, Turkey, Italy, South Korea, Singapore, the Philippines and Sri Lanka. This includes AFL serving as the channel distributor, helping to produce local esports events across the

MENA region and also enabling the localisation of international content for BIGG in the Arab world. BIGG TV offers more than 1,500 hours of diversified content each year, including video gaming and esports content, live events covering popular games such as FIFA, CS: GO, DOTA 2, StarCraft, Hearthstone and Fortnite, as well as top past tournaments, universal franchises including Pokemon and Mario, and premium documentaries. The channel

aims to cover more than 150 major international championships such as the 2023 Africa eSports Championship, the FIFA 23 eChampionships and the 2023 Champions Chess Tour. Khulud Abu Homos, CEO of AFL, stated that this collaboration will see the two companies partner to produce season two of the popular *Live the Challenge* show, the production house's original video gaming championship. Season two will take place in Cairo in October 2023

with participation from the top 16 esports teams from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Kuwait. "We are very excited about this partnership with BIGG, as the future of the video game industry looks set to grow in leaps and bounds. Consumer demand is growing, technology is advancing quickly and new monetisation models are taking off with a global revenue that is expected to grow by more than 50% over the next five years," commented Abu Homos.



# Riedel fortifies Middle East presence with new hire



Abdul Hadi.

Riedel Communications has announced the appointment of Abdul Hadi as Regional Sales Manager with a focus on Qatar and Saudi Arabia, to further strengthen the company's presence and support capabilities in the Middle East. Hadi will manage key accounts in the install sector and help the company to continue building its footprint in the AV market and other verticals.

Prior to joining Riedel, Hadi was with NMK Electronics Trading for nearly a decade, first as Brand Manager for the

Dubai-based company's Business Communication unit and then as a Key Account Manager. Earlier roles included Sales Engineer for Telecom Services at EMS and Trainee Engineer at Mobilink GSM. He has a degree in Electrical Engineering (telecommunications engineering) from the Center of Advance Studies in Engineering.

Hadi will be based in Dubai and report directly to Ahmed Magd el din Abdalla, Riedel Communications Regional Sales Director for the Middle East.



## Medyapim appoints K7 Media

Turkish production company Medyapim has appointed K7 Media to provide global media intelligence consultancy services. K7 Media provides media intelligence to broadcasters, streaming platforms, distributors and production companies.

Founded in 1993, Istanbul-based Medyapim is a major production company in the Turkish TV industry. Consisting of production companies including Medyapim, MF, NTC, Mednova and no9, Medyapim Group has produced more than 10,000 hours of television content, including programmes for leading Turkish channels Foxt V, Show TV, Star, ATV, Kanal D, TRT and TV8.

The company has a series currently in production for Disney+ and has adapted many international formats for Turkish television, including *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?*, *Dancing on Ice* and *Pop Stars*. It has produced Turkish-language versions of scripted series such as *Doctor Foster*, *Grey's Anatomy* and *Desperate Housewives*, is a growing producer of shows for the Arabic markets and provides an in-house Turkish streaming service.

# UAE President appoints Sheikh Zayed bin Hamdan Chairman of National Media Office

Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, President of the UAE, has issued a Federal Decree appointing Sheikh Zayed bin Hamdan bin Zayed Al Nahyan Chairman of the newly announced National Media Office, with the rank of Minister, according to a WAM report.

The National Media Office will report to the Minister of the Presidential Court and will be financially and administratively

independent in fulfilling its duties and mandate.

The new entity aims to further grow the UAE media ecosystem to serve the nation's interests and strengthen the position of its media sector regionally and internationally. It will also enhance cooperation and consolidate efforts among media stakeholders, in addition to empowering a skilled generation to lead the country's media industry.

The new entity will undertake various roles and responsibilities, including developing and implementing national media policies, directives and strategies; proposing, developing and reviewing all national media laws and regulations; and coordinating with relevant media stakeholders to align the country's media vision and message, locally and internationally.

The National Media Office will also be responsible for preparing, evaluating and reviewing the UAE's media narrative at home and abroad; preserving and enhancing the UAE's reputation; representing the UAE in the regional and international media; and participating in media conferences and events in the UAE and abroad, in coordination with relevant stakeholders.

## Sky News Arabia promotes Abdou Gadallah to Head of News

Sky News Arabia has promoted Abdou Gadallah to Head of News for the regional news network. With more than 20 years of experience in the media industry, Gadallah has held various roles across the region, spanning a variety of roles within the journalism and media industry. He first joined Sky News Arabia in 2012, where he held multiple positions across the editorial team. Throughout his career, he was instrumental to the progression of its newsroom and played a leading role in the development of its digital and social media platforms. In 2019 he was appointed Deputy Head of News, playing a pivotal role in keeping the channels' day-to-day operations and editorial team driving forward despite the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In his new role, Gadallah is responsible for implementing the Sky News Arabia newsroom editorial strategy and content, with a particular focus on growing and expanding its reach digitally, in line with the network's digital strategy.



Abdou Gadallah.



## Pebble hires new product owner for Pebble Control

Pebble has appointed Nikolaos Katsampekis Product Owner for Pebble Control and is planning to introduce next-generation functionality ahead of this year's NAB Show in Las Vegas. Katsampekis joins from Grass Valley, where he led a team engaged in the design and development of control and monitoring solutions, specifically human-machine interfaces and orchestration solutions for SDI, hybrid and IP networks.

## Zero Density appoints Ofir Benovici CEO

Zero Density has appointed Ofir Benovici as its new CEO. Benovici will oversee commercial and product strategy, operations and ongoing geographical expansion. He will also manage the company portfolio as Zero Density targets new verticals and markets.

Deloitte recently named Zero Density one of Turkey's 50 fastest-growing companies in the past year. This growth has been supported by an increased international footprint, including the hire of technical and commercial team members in key regions

and multiple industry partnerships. Benovici was previously VP of Product Management at Avid Technologies. Prior to that, he was VP of Product Management & Marketing at Orad Hi Tec Systems for over a decade.

## Red Bee Media names James Arnold CEO

James Arnold steps into his new role from his previous position as Chief Commercial Officer, bringing his extensive experience as a member of Red Bee Media's founding leadership team. He will lead the next phase of growth, building on the company's expertise supporting international broadcasters, streaming services, sports leagues and media brands.

Åsa Tamsons, Red Bee Media Chairperson, said: "James ... is the right leader to take the business to the next level ... he has unrivalled experience leading customer-centric teams to deliver great results. I'm looking forward to working with him as he drives Red Bee Media through its next exciting phase."



James Arnold.



# Evision launches new channel to broadcast golf matches in MENA

Evision, the media and entertainment division of e&life (part of e&), has launched GolfLife, a dedicated 24/7 channel for all golf fans in the region capturing all the live and exclusive action of MENA tours and team competitions. It will also broadcast ancillary golf programming. In line with the vision to

bring the latest in sports, Evision has acquired exclusive MENA broadcasting rights for professional golf PGA Tour and DP World Tour events in 2023 and 2024, with special rights to broadcast the 2023 Ryder Cup in Rome and 2024 Presidents Cup in Montreal. Olivier Bramly, CEO of

Evision, said: "Golf as a sport is experiencing a boom in popularity across the MENA region and the new GolfLife channel will [be available] via eLife, Switch TV and StarzPlay packages and platforms. The channel will also be made available to other operators across the region to ensure we can reach

as many fans as possible. We are entering a big year for golf, with the Ryder Cup taking place in September and the PGA Tour returning to a calendar-year schedule that showcases the best players in the world, which makes this the perfect time to launch this brand-new dedicated golf channel in the region."

## Guntermann & Drunck establishes office in Dubai

German company Guntermann & Drunck GmbH (G&D), which manufactures KVM systems for control room applications, is strengthening its activities in the Middle East by establishing a new international location at Dubai World Trade Centre. This office will serve as the hub for Near Asia, the Middle East and Africa, and is now headed by Tamby Alasker.

Based in Dubai, Alasker has been working with mission-critical operations vendors in AV and KVM covering the Middle East for the past 15 years.

As an expert in control room applications, he will be the main local contact for G&D in terms of offering advice to customers as well as regional partners on individual projects.



Tamby Alasker



The Vice Media team filming in Saudi Arabia's Asir Province.

## Vice Media Group to open regional HQ in Riyadh

Vice Media Group will open its new regional headquarters in Riyadh's JAX cultural district soon. The new headquarters will help to expand Vice's footprint in the region while bolstering relationships with key partners in the Kingdom including the Ministry of Culture, Saudi Research and Marketing Group (SRMG), NEOM, MBC and the Royal Commission for Riyadh City. It will offer clients a full range of production capabilities, including a podcast

studio, editing suites and a soundstage to fit their needs. Tarek Khalil, Managing Director of Vice MEA, said: "As part of our commitment to the market, we will be hiring Saudi nationals to join our dynamic and thriving team. Our unique storytelling capabilities and presence in the Kingdom will allow us to grow our business and support new and existing partners who are looking to tap into younger audiences and be part of the Kingdom's cultural movement."

# GCC users access three VOD services on average: Oliver Wyman

People in the GCC have access to an average of three video-on-demand (VOD) streaming services, according to a new survey by global management consultancy Oliver Wyman that analysed household media consumption habits around the world. The survey canvassed people in three GCC countries: the UAE, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

The UAE consumer has access to the highest number of VOD services on average, 3.1, followed by Saudi Arabia (3.0) and then Kuwait (2.5). VOD services include Netflix,

Shahid, Amazon Prime and YouTube Premium. According to the report, 60% of UAE respondents have access to two or more VOD streaming services and only 12% of them do not access any VOD services, while 22% in Kuwait and 20% in Saudi Arabia do not access any VOD services.

GCC consumers access the second highest number of VOD services per person with an average of 2.9, second only to the US at 4.7. The GCC has higher penetration than Canada (2.8) and Europe

and Australia (both 2.6). Importantly, the GCC has the highest potential for growth in subscriptions: 75% of respondents in the GCC said they expect to increase the number of VOD streaming services they access. This suggests much more appetite for growth: in Europe, only 37% expected to increase subscriptions, with 34% in Australia and 29% in the US. In the GCC, respondents in Saudi Arabia showed the highest appetite for growth, with 80% stating that they are likely to increase the

number of video streaming services that they access. Rogerio Dienes, Partner and Lead of Oliver Wyman's Communications, Media and Technology vertical in India, the Middle East and Africa, said the high rate of VOD subscriptions in the GCC was no surprise, "considering the region has one of the highest penetrations of internet users in the world". He added that this was "in part connected to the fact that consumers here [face] less inflationary pressures on their wallets compared to those in other parts of the world".

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# Alaraby TV opts for Sennheiser systems

Alaraby TV recently invested in a set of Sennheiser solutions to address the interference in its studio from a lot of electronic devices. The team was on the lookout for a solution that was not plug-and-play and could shoot from anywhere in the facility, not just the studio.

Having understood its exact requirements, the implementation team suggested using Sennheiser D6000 wireless microphone systems, which consist of EM-6000 Dante receivers, SK-6000 bodypack transmitters and MKE-2 lapel microphones. The microphone solution also includes multiple ADP antennas with low-loss coaxial cables to ensure full and uninterrupted coverage in each studio. Sennheiser's 2000 Series in-ear monitors were also deployed for the presenters' IFB systems. These used a comprehensive antenna distribution system, including A-5000 CP circularly



polarised antennas.

"Due to the relationship Sennheiser Middle East has with both Alaraby and systems integrator Ideal Systems, we were involved with the design of this project from a very early stage. This is crucial to be able to ensure that things like radio frequency coordination, antenna positions and cable runs are agreed upon before the installation of the products takes place," explained Ryan Burr, Head of Technical Sales &

Application Engineering, Sennheiser Middle East. "The two main challenges we faced (and knew we would face) were the amount of LED screens and video walls each studio had and the fact that all three studios were in close proximity to each other. The LED walls generate a certain amount of RF noise that can have an impact on the performance of the wireless equipment. However, good antenna positioning and the fact the D6000 system has a

carrier-to-noise ratio of 11dBm meant that all studios performed well during the testing phase.

"In terms of proximity, we ensured that the frequency coordination of all the wireless systems allowed for transition between each studio so that even if a presenter walks between them with a transmitter turned on, this will not create any kind of interference. This entire set-up ensured that news anchors could present news freely standing anywhere in the room or roaming around the place. All three studios have a redundant system in place, which enhances the communication robustness."

Ali Hussein, Director of Operations & Creative Services, Alaraby TV, added: "Our studio is the classic example of how a modern-day news channel should look and sound like from every quarter of the space, and that's what has been made possible by the able team of Sennheiser."

# MBC Group extends partnership with Warner Bros. Discovery

MBC Group has extended its partnership with Warner Bros. Discovery to continue bringing Warner Bros. content as well as adding new Cartoon Network offerings for MENA audiences. Sam Barnett, CEO of MBC Group, said: "We have had a strong relationship with Warner Bros. Discovery for two decades and this deal cements it for years to come. The deal allows MBC Group to show some of the biggest theatrical



From left: Jamie Cooke of Warner Bros. Discovery and Sam Barnett of MBC Group.

titles by Warner Bros. to our audiences across MENA and expand our Cartoon Network offering across the region." Jamie Cooke, GM CEE, Middle East & Turkey of Warner Bros. Discovery, added: "MBC is a highly valued and longstanding partner for Warner Bros. Discovery in MENA. We are happy to have found new ways to deepen our longstanding relationship while reinforcing our commitment to Free TV."

## Alsumaria TV Network appoints DNA as exclusive media rep

Alsumaria TV Network in Iraq has appointed Digi Net Arabia (DNA), which operates within the Choueiri Group, as its exclusive media representative across the GCC and Levant. The tie-up, which took effect on January 1, is operative for an initial period of five years, with DNA taking on commercial advertising sales across a variety of media platforms from the Iraqi media house, including Alsumaria TV, SUMER FM, Alsumaria News and the Alsumaria app. Choueiri Group Chairman and CEO Pierre Choueiri said: "We are delighted at the long-term prospects of our agreement, which allows us the requisite timeframe to take Alsumaria to the next level of commercial success with regional advertisers and brands."

## RMG promotes Arabic productions for Ramadan '23

Roya Media Group has invited production companies to participate in this year's *Caravan Drama* programme by sharing their Ramadan 2023 productions for promotion and airing on Roya during the holy month. It has also begun preparing for the production of its own television programme

featuring Arabic dramas. *Caravan Drama* pulls in 30m daily views and has more than 8m followers on social media platforms, according to the company's data. The programme takes on the essence of Ramadan by featuring series in the running to win the holy month race.

It also shows behind-the-scenes footage and interviews with cast and crew members. The goal is to promote production companies and show off their best work to viewers. RMG has also launched *Roya Saudi*, a new social media platform directed at Saudi Arabia.

## Cinépolis Cinemas opens its first luxury cinema in Saudi Arabia

Cinépolis Cinemas celebrated the opening of its first luxury offering in Jeddah and fourth location in Saudi Arabia last month at Al Masarah Square. The Jeddah opening is part of Cinépolis Cinemas' expansion plan to reach

the largest possible number of viewers across Saudi Arabia. The cineplex has six luxurious screens, featuring recliner seats with adjustable tables and a dedicated phone charging station on each seat.

## Netflix co-founder steps down

Netflix co-founder Reed Hastings has stepped down from his role as CEO and appointed a successor. COO Greg Peters will become co-CEO alongside Ted Sarandos, who has held that title since July 2020.



Reed Hastings.

## ETL Systems announces new CEO

ETL Systems has strengthened its senior management team by appointing Kevin Dunne as its new CEO and Joanna Gower as HR Director. Dunne brings over 20 years' experience in RF Systems within satellite and defence communications markets. Before joining ETL, he was Vice President and Managing Director of the Microwave, Microelectronics and Secure Communications Divisions of API Technologies Corporation. Ian Hilditch and Dr Esen Bayar, who have been joint CEOs of ETL for 20 years, will remain fully engaged but with more focus on the Business Development and Technology Roadmaps and less on the day-to-day running of the business.



Kevin Dunne.



# Saudi Arabia's film scene

In AlUla and across Saudi Arabia, the emerging screen sector is lifted by the ambition and potential of young Saudi nationals

It was the end of a long day at the office. A young colleague said, "Let's have a change of scenery." We got in her car and drove into the hills of AlUla, the Saudi city where we work in film development. Up the steep hills we drove, round and round, traffic whizzing madly by. I looked at her and said, "Are you not frightened?"

"I'm not frightened of anything," she answered.

This is not the image that the rest of the world might have of a Saudi woman in her 20s. Yet it is the energy, ambition and indeed the fearlessness of the young people of Saudi Arabia that gives me such high hopes for the growth of the Kingdom's film industry.

Saudi Arabia is a young country – 40.2% of the population is aged 24 or younger, versus for example 31.4% in the US. And their love of movies has

driven a rapid growth in cinemas: from a standing start in 2018, the country this year reached 342 screens and over 35,000 seats, with more growth to come.

An image on film is in essence light captured and conveyed within a frame. It is my belief that the emerging Saudi film industry is a frame that can capture and convey the bright light of young Saudis – and, as we compile these frames, tell a new story to the world.

Film AlUla, the film agency of the Royal Commission for AlUla (RCU), serves the RCU vision to regenerate

northwest Saudi Arabia as a leading global destination for cultural and natural heritage. Productions that Film AlUla has hosted since our

launch in 2020 include the action movie *Kandahar* starring Gerard Butler, the Russo brothers drama *Cherry* starring Tom Holland, and Saudi filmmaker Tawfik Alzaidi's debut feature *Norah*, with an all-Saudi cast. So far, we have hosted 694 production-days at AlUla.

But it is the emerging generation that will sustain the coming transition from the birth of a sector to its maturity.



The filming of *Kandahar* in AlUla.

With that in mind, this year Film AlUla is launching an in-house training programme with a team from the Creative Media Skills Institute of London's legendary Pinewood Studios, famous for credits from *James Bond* to *Top Gun* and *Star Wars* instalments. Their experts will be coming to AlUla, and we'll put out an open call for residents who are interested in learning about a future in film. We'll answer questions such as: What does it mean to be on set? What does it mean to age a piece of clothing in a war film?

In this way, we hope to train 100 students for work in future productions at AlUla. We are also developing training programmes with the Saudi Film Commission that will be locally accessible and provide on-the-ground experience.

The energy and skill are there; we just need to nurture them. Recently, several residents of AlUla helped with the production of a Saudi film. They were there as extra pairs of hands, just helping out. But they made a positive impression, and now several will be working on the set of *Dune: Part Two* when it is shot in the region.

Internationally, there is a need for talent in this space. The demand is there for our supply.

**"It is the energy, ambition and indeed the fearlessness of the young people of Saudi Arabia that gives me such high hopes for the growth of the Kingdom's film industry"**

Charlene Deleon-Jones, Executive Director, Film AlUla

To promote local talent, Film AlUla signed on as a strategic sponsor of the Red Sea International Film Festival, which was held December 1-10 in Jeddah. We sponsored the Audience Award and the Best Saudi Film Award, each with a prize value of \$50,000.

Of course, at the same time as we are developing the human infrastructure, we are building up the physical and economic infrastructure for film to succeed at AlUla. Key elements include designing and building studio spaces, building more than 300 self-contained bungalows for crew, developing local businesses to support the sector's knock-on needs (e.g., catering), ensuring equipment

can be imported and stored without problems, using our local knowledge to do advance scouting for locations, and pressing home the advantages of the Saudi Film Commission's rebate of up to 40% on costs.

The strategy is off to a strong start. Interest from regional and international producers across the screen sector is growing sharply. And when these producers come to AlUla in growing numbers, they will be impressed not only by the beauty of the land but by the ability of the young people who represent the future of Saudi cinema. **PRO**



Charlene Deleon-Jones is Executive Director of Film AlUla.



# A FRESH TAKE ON NEWS

Al Mashhad, which went live last month, is looking to target Arab youth with a mix of edgy content and new digital initiatives. **Vijaya Cherian** takes a tour of the facility with the network's senior management, and gets a closer look at their tech deployments and a better understanding of their business strategy



At Dubai Studio City, buildings 15 and 16 were shrouded in mystery throughout 2022 before the hoardings were taken down for the big reveal on January 11: the launch of Arabic-language channel Al Mashhad TV and its brand-new facility. The privately owned linear and multimedia platform hopes to make friends with Gen-Z viewers and take a modern and youth-focused approach to topics within sports, business, climate and sustainability, through documentaries, controversial talk shows and satire, among other approaches.



**“Our focus is on never-seen-before content. We aim to present content that brings change and development in the media, to engage younger generations and to benefit from the digital transformation in the region”**

Tony Khalife, General Manager, Al Mashhad

“Through Al Mashhad, we are revolutionising the television and digital broadcast platforms,” says Al Mashhad GM Tony Khalife, a journalist and news presenter who has become a household name in the Arab world. His new role launches him into a new phase of his career where he will combine the skills garnered from his varied roles within the media business. “We promise the Arab audience an independent media outlet that adheres to the highest journalistic and professional standards. This stems from our belief that our



Al Mashhad's headquarters in Dubai Studio City presently includes 300 employees.

viewers have the right to access accurate content that represents diverse and bold opinions both in presentation and in format, while upholding our credibility in reporting and analysis,” he says.

“In a unique digital and technologically advanced style, with media experiences presented for the first time in the Arab world, Al Mashhad will showcase a variety of interactive and bold programmes that include the most important and latest political, business and sports news through news bulletins and a group of satirical and critical talk shows.”

Although Khalife helms operations at Al Mashhad, he will also host a couple of talk shows for the channel. *Studio Al Arab* will feature important personalities with whom he will explore issues of Arab and international importance. In another programme, *Tawator Aali*, he will debate with two guests “on any bold, political and socially controversial topic, while they will be presenting their viewpoints”.

One area that poses a significant challenge is the technical aspect, with construction still in progress in some areas of the facility.

“The project started around end 2021,” explains Srinivas Kuppa, Head of Technology at Al Mashhad. “The challenge was to turn around the project in terms of planning, designing, building, constructing, deploying technology, testing and commissioning. This included addressing screen architecture and studio designs within just 10 months.”

Early last year, following some meticulous planning, the Al Mashhad team awarded facility construction MEP to Hennessey LLC and broadcast integration to systems integrator One Diversified, also a Dubai Studio City tenant. Despite the global supply chain disruptions, deployment of the technology commenced in June and was completed by November 2022.

Testing, training and rehearsals were conducted in December and the channel successfully went on air last month.

“Our technical objective was to align our content creation with our digital distribution and our satellite TV presence, while also ensuring flexibility to adopt modern technologies, tools and broadcast infrastructure,” explains Kuppa.

Two large 250sqm broadcast studios have been built, with Studio 1 dedicated to programmes and Studio 2 to news. A semi-studio has also been developed and integrated as part of the newsroom. Studios 1 and 2 are fitted with best-of-breed

Unreal Engine-based 4K graphics capabilities to enable augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR) and extended reality (XR) productions.

In addition, Studio 1 is fitted with a 5x7m chromakey for AR and VR sets and a video wall, while Studio 2 boasts a motorised 10m video wall, 5m video walls, a touch screen and three motorised vertical screens. It also has large video wall screens for newsroom shots and a Blackcam dolly for on-air camera moves that require silent, smooth and flawless operation.

Both studios are fitted with Vinten robotic camera systems and a Stanton Jimmy Jib crane, using

**+ Snapshot**

**Kit for Field Production:**

- Sony ENG Z280 cameras
- Sony Promo / digital FX6 cameras
- 25 Mojo kits for correspondents worldwide
- iPhone 13 Pro Max and accessories

**Disaster Recovery Capabilities:**

- Spectra LTO-9 library for DR backup media
- AVID small scale and Vizrt graphics
- Pebble Dolphin, ROSS router
- Software-defined virtual production
- ATEME encoders and decoders



The newsroom at Al Mashhad.

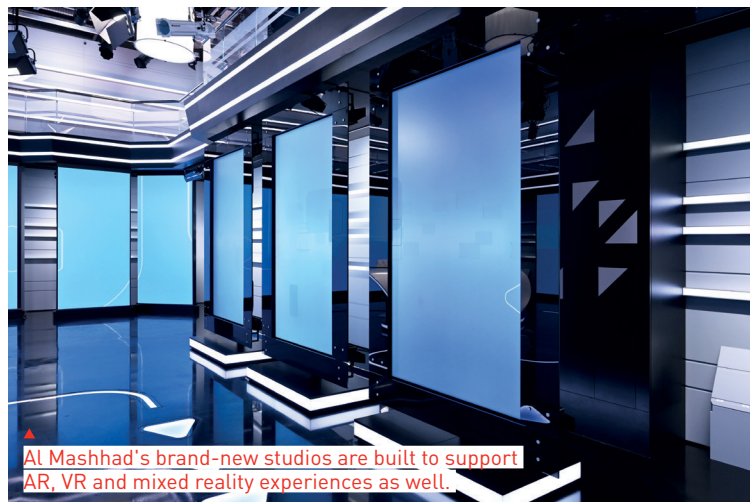
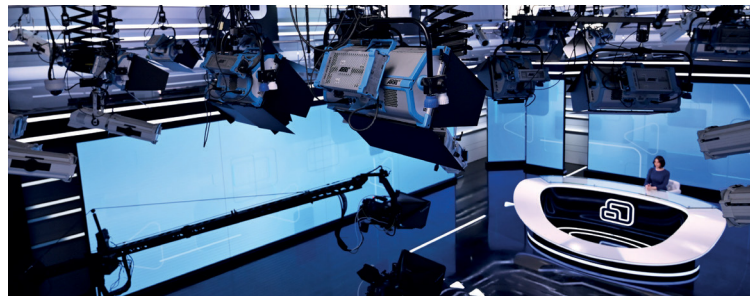




Grass Valley LDX-98 cameras with 4K capabilities. Each studio includes Avid, Vizrt graphics, Zero Density AR and VR solutions, a Grass Valley AR router and vision mixer, a Lawo audio mixer, Lawo VSM controls for network audio and video, and ARRI LED lighting with LUPO. They use RTS intercom solutions with Dante, managed by the Lawo VSM control stack including IP audio RAVENA network and Shure microphones. Both galleries are controlled by Ross studio automation. For digital programmes, a Wirecast system has been put in place.

Studio 1 shines with ARRI LED lighting and ETC controls. The lighting in the studios was delivered by local systems integrator Oasis Enterprises. The newsroom also boasts a robotic camera, a Panasonic PTZ with Blackcam tracking and sliding camera. The team has deployed hybrid infrastructure with HD-SDI, IP-NDI, IP-SRT, IP-Audio AES67, 4K 12G SDI, 4K cameras and 4K LED screens as video walls driven by Vizrt 4K. In addition, hybrid IP NOC-MCR capabilities can adapt any source signal contribution – mobile phones, TVU, Live-u, SRT streams, Ateame decoders,

NDI sources, Teams, Zoom, Ross Interstellar and modern IP streaming capabilities, explains Kuppa. A key aspect of the workflow is the contribution; Al Mashhad uses IBM Aspera Connect for file shares and Live from TVU Anywhere. Among other key systems are a host of solutions from the Avid stable, including NRCS, Cloud UX, Avid PAM, MAM and the Spectra Library with LTO-9 capabilities. Video editing solutions from Avid and Adobe are available, with Resource Scheduling and Booking Systems from the Microsoft stack.



Al Mashhad's brand-new studios are built to support AR, VR and mixed reality experiences as well.

Transmission payout is from Pebble Marina with Pebble Dolphin software-defined architecture. "We built a tier-3 data centre with all modern broadcast technologies and digital capabilities to ensure the speed and flexibility of TV and digital distribution," Kuppa elaborates. "This means it has highly redundant capabilities and smart controls in place. Our technical infrastructure is uniquely positioned to take any source with quick turnaround to the delivery platforms. The flexibility, quality and ease of operation with mobile journalism from our contributing reporters is especially unique and designed for IP and cloud delivery. With the hybrid approach, we have been able to keep automation and cloud-enabled workflows in focus."

Wanting to ensure a global impact from day 1, Al Mashhad's linear channels are available in multiple regions through Nilesat (Eutelsat 7w), Arabsat and Hotbird.

"We will have a global presence through IP distribution with most of the popular networks, to ensure we can reach Arabic-speaking audiences across the world. Technically, our hybrid broadcast infrastructure blended with our micro services architecture will help us reach that viewership," says Kuppa.

Another tech highlight is the digital area. The facility has three digital zones with the capability to produce shows using NDI and Wirecast for a digital Wirecast system.

"Our digital workflow is enabled with the Ateame Titan encoder. This has a software-defined architecture with global distribution that uses the Brightcove CDN. We also have AWS redundant cloud with Amazon Cloudfront CDN; a mobile app developed using React Native for iOS and Android that supports mobile devices; Apple Watch to handle notifications; a responsive website that works with all major browsers; and a TV app that supports



**"Our technical objective was to align our content creation with our digital distribution and our satellite TV presence, while also ensuring flexibility to adopt modern technologies, tools and broadcast infrastructure"**

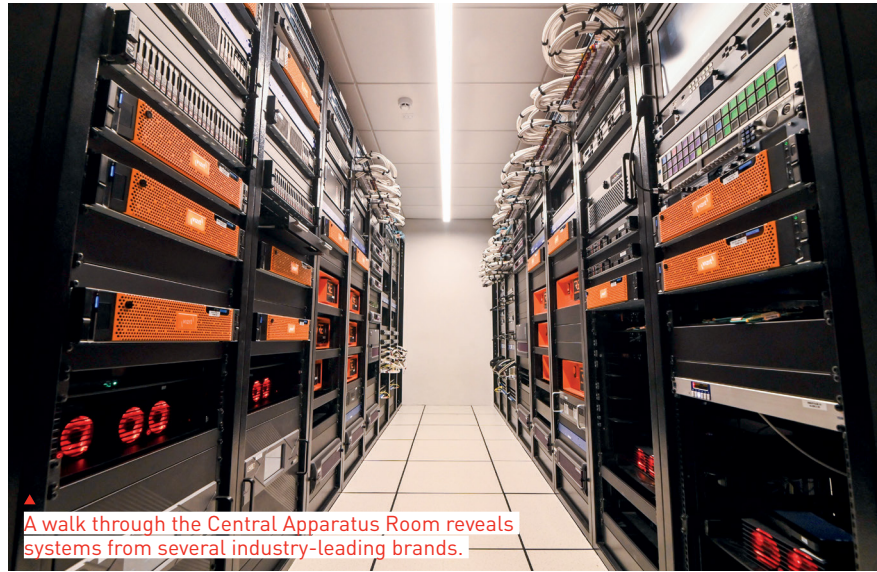
Srinivas Kuppa, Head of Technology, Al Mashhad

Apple TV, Android TV, LG and Samsung TV," explains Kuppa. As with any project today, the Al Mashhad facility has also been designed for the future: "Our broadcast infrastructure is scalable to 4K formats and expandable to include additional capacity – both vertically and horizontally." With such a big operation in place at such a fast pace, training was key. "Owing to the speed of the project, we started training resources early in the project with all the support from key suppliers and the help of One Diversified," explains Kuppa. Although the team remains cautious about sharing exact figures, they confirm that it is a multi-million-dollar operation. "While we are not an open budget entity, we were accountable to meet the entire project within scope, time and predicted costs. We are proud that this project did not exceed even 1% of the assigned budget," says Kuppa. As with any project, there were challenges and struggles with global supply chain issues during Covid. However, Kuppa says the team pre-empted these and "adopted risk-mitigation plans ... There were also challenges in the studio to build



In the Master Control Room.





the look and feel of the studio floor uniquely with LED lights on the floor. However, these were addressed.”

He stresses that Al Mashhad took a “solution-centric approach rather than a vendor-centric approach ... We believe in the ecosystem. Therefore, after several demos and POCs, we believe that the ecosystem we have created ensures the best balance of technology and usability compared to alternative solutions.”

For now, Al Mashhad is based in Dubai with a large operation that includes on-prem studios, a data centre and an entire UPS facility should there be a power cut.

“We have five smart UPS

systems installed in the facility. Two are connected for redundancy to the data centre and the rest support the technical rooms and the studio facility. The entire facility is backed up by a generator that runs automatically over ATS with the ability to detect incoming power failures. It has a continuous running capacity of 24 hours or more.”

But there are ambitious plans to “expand worldwide, as we see the world as a studio”, says Kuppa. “Our partners across the region provide fast turnaround content to serve us packaged content using frame.io collaborative tools. This allows us flexibility to receive content from anywhere in the world.”

The tech part is only the “beginning

of Al Mashhad’s dream”, though. “More is yet to come,” Kuppa offers mysteriously.

Although the technology is now there, GM Khalife knows that the success of the channel will rest on the power of its content and on targeting a younger audience.

“The need of the hour is for Arab audiences to have an experience that is focused on meeting their aspirations and needs of the new generations and contributing to shaping their visions for the future. Our focus is on never-seen-before content. We aim to present content that brings change and development in the media, to engage younger generations and to benefit from the digital transformation in the region. Al Mashhad is led by an exceptional team of specialists in the field to create outstanding content that tackles the most important issues and topics for the Arab viewer in an innovative manner. Good content is our priority; advertising will follow our success on the content side,” he says confidently.

Al Mashhad presently houses around 300 employees, with plans to expand the team further in the region and beyond, the GM concludes. **PRO**

**+ Talking Digital**

At Al Mashhad we are implementing a digital-first, end-to-end strategy which allows us to deploy adaptive, customised content based on analytics through a personalised AI-powered user experience. Once we identified our target audience, we have endeavoured to offer a seamless integration between linear TV and our digital platforms to reach them via their preferred information and communication channels. Therefore, we work on

adapting content pieces to be shared in an optimised way by drawing on each platform’s features to offer the most interactive experience. In addition, we look for select content opportunities that are bolstered through livestreaming, hence offering more live audience engagement with our formats.

Our channel and platforms work seamlessly within an ecosystem that offers continuous viewing experience for our audiences between platforms,

instead of a duplication. This helps us in driving a more tailored and efficient content strategy targeted directly for each different platform’s audience’s preferences and format consumption, to give them an intuitive experience.

**Maroun Bedran**  
– Head of Digital at Al Mashhad



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# DARE TO BE DIFFERENT

In a market dominated by big players producing drama series, Reim El Houni, who helms Dubai production house Ti22 Films, has dared to be different and still emerged successful. In a chat with **Vijaya Cherian**, El Houni talks about her journey, how she has constantly adapted to market needs and the latest lifestyle show she is producing for Dubai Media Inc

#### Tell us a bit about yourself

I am originally from Libya, but I grew up in the UK. Throughout my childhood I was obsessed with the world of film and television, and I had my first work experience at 16 at MBC when they were based in London. That experience opened my eyes to the possibility that I could have a career in this industry. From then on, I was persistent and very driven to work my way up. All of my initial training was at the BBC, and I then transitioned into corporate production and live events.

In 2007 I came to Dubai on holiday and came across Media City. I was excited by the prospect of working in a city that took media so seriously that they had a whole 'city' dedicated to it. I applied for positions, received an opportunity and in that one week took a leap of faith ... that was 16 years ago.

#### When did you start your production house, and how has that and your digital initiative panned out?

When I started Ti22 Films 12 years ago, my objective was to focus on high-end production and TV as those were the areas I enjoy the most and had the most success. Our industry is constantly evolving, which means you need to keep up with trends, technology and new ways to do things. Within a few years it was clear that budgets were diversifying, social media was important and clients wanted more for their money, so I developed other brands focusing more on digital content and animation.

When I launched my brand dubai ON demand in 2014, the plan was to create shows on YouTube. At the time I faced many challenges as brands were not ready to invest in digital, especially YouTube. We have since evolved dubai ON demand to become a membership for thought leaders who need support to grow their visibility through monthly video content. Had I launched

dubai ON demand in its original form today, I believe it would have been a roaring success. Learning from other markets means that sometimes you're a little too early for the market you're in.

#### How did your journey in production begin and how has your work evolved over time?

I am a very persistent person, and I knew if I was going to grow in this industry I needed to get as much experience as possible from reputable organisations. I credit the BBC for my initial training and for giving me my first TV credit at 18. By the time I was 22, I had been freelancing and contracted with a number of TV stations including the Disney Channel and the London Studios, and that gave me an amazing grounding. My transition to corporate and events, managing client expectations and understanding messaging as well as the world of webcasting, added to my skills.

When I moved to Dubai in 2007 I was fortunate to start a role with Dubai One to produce and direct their first English-language TV show, *Out & About*. It was an amazing opportunity. I quickly became an executive producer at the channel, managing a range of productions as well as live event coverages from the Dubai International Film Festival to the opening of Burj Khalifa. Leaving the station was not an easy decision but I was ready for my next chapter. It's great to work with Dubai One again, producing a new show for them under my company Ti22 Films. I would love to focus this next chapter on producing more TV content, documentaries and consulting work.

#### How does work here differ from other markets?

I personally think the region lacks the appetite for risk. Having worked in Europe and with clients from across the world and also being on the jury of the New York Festival seven times,





I feel production from our region is 'safe'. Clients sometimes ask me to show them a visual reference when I pitch something to them. We live in a visual market where often clients need to see before they can imagine. I think other parts of the world rely more on imagination and aren't afraid to take the risk, knowing that the vision may not translate as intended but if it does, it means they would have created something unique.

**Could you elaborate on your work with Expo 2020?**

Working with Expo 2020 Dubai has been by far one of the most unique and challenging yet rewarding experiences of my career. I was executive producing a daily live TV show called *Studio Expo* for DMI, the host broadcaster. The show aired for up to two hours every day for 183 consecutive days. We had a team of around 30 production crew and presenters and an additional 20 in our studio crew. The start was

particularly challenging for a number of reasons. I don't think any of us truly comprehended what Expo really was till we were in it. Needing to generate content, stories and guest reports on a daily basis meant we were learning a lot on the go. We needed to adapt to changes in schedule, work with protocol, manage the expectations of over 190 countries

**“We live in a visual market where ... clients need to see before they can imagine. I think other parts of the world rely more on imagination and aren't afraid to take the risk, knowing that the vision may not translate ... but if it does ... they would have created something unique”**

Reim El Houni, founder, Ti22 Films

while trying to produce the best show possible. Our studio facility was also brand-new, which means there were teething issues. It was at times tense and at other times exhilarating, but overall it was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for which I am grateful.

**How big is your team, and do you own your kit or rent it?**

Currently there are 12 of us on the core full-time team; we expand as needed. For Expo our team grew to 30, and now for our new daily lifestyle show we're close to 20. In-house we work with DSLR cameras for digital content and hire high-end equipment as needed.

**Tell us more about the new lifestyle show you are doing for Dubai One.**

*DXB Today* launched on 16 January on Dubai One. It is a daily magazine show focused on events and lifestyle content with a host of our favourite well-known faces as well as introducing some new members

to the presenting team. I remember when we launched *Out & About* on Dubai One in 2007, everyone was watching the show to learn something new about the city, and I would love *DXB Today* to continue that legacy and give audiences an insight into what the city has to offer. *Studio Expo* marked a return for local production on Dubai One. The show was very well received but with Expo coming to an end, so did the show. *DXB Today* is a result of efforts made during that time and DMI deciding to build on that by venturing back into regular local content and approaching me to executive produce the new venture through Ti22 Films.

**Are you also pitching projects to other broadcast networks?**

I am in discussions with a few entities that may be ready to move into the broadcast space, and planning a few documentaries that I would love to see on different platforms.

**How has business been these last few years?**

When Covid hit the majority of our larger clients and projects were on hold, but our smaller dubai ON demand clients kept us busy. I also shifted our focus to training, creating programmes and supporting CEOs in the personal branding space, as everyone had their eyes on their online presence. Last year we saw larger clients and productions come back. We do a great deal of work with broadcasters from other countries as well, such as Times of India.

**Your production house seems to be associated with several big brands. How did you bag those projects?**

Referrals have resulted in around 80% of the business that we have. Thankfully, our retention rate is high; we still work with our first clients from 2011 and they still refer us. Over the years as the portfolio grew, it became easier to connect with similar clients of a certain calibre.



Reim El Houni with Nitu Chandra Srivastava (r).

**Broadcasters are usually on the lookout for drama series, so your offering seems a bit different.**

I think people want to see what is happening in the city. I grew up in the UK with a huge amount of content available daily to satisfy every niche. Watching lifestyle content or magazine shows provides a very different and more personal real insight into the world we live in. The ability to be timely and showcase relevant stories that people can relate to is important.

People are curious about Dubai, even residents want to know the city better, and I would love to create more entertaining lifestyle programming that becomes part of their must-watch content, whether they ultimately consume it on TV or on other platforms.

**Where do you see yourself five years from now?**

Definitely still executive producing TV content, as that is a true passion for me. Hopefully doing more consulting and introducing even larger and newer productions to the region. My lifelong goal has been to win an Oscar, and I like to always say anything is possible as long as you have faith. PRO



At the Expo 2020 studio gallery.



Reim El Houni [extreme right] with industry professionals [starting from left] Maitha Alawadi from New Media Academy, Ahmed Alfasasi and Dua Altoobi.





# WHAT TO EXPECT IN 2023?

**Steve Reynolds**, President of Imagine Communications, looks into the proverbial crystal ball and shares his predictions for the year

**The media scene as we enter 2023 is looking very exciting. There is a significant change dynamic underway, which features two critical factors in alignment: consumer demand and technology enablers.**

The pandemic changed a lot for all of us, of that there is no doubt. And one of the things that happened was that we could not go out for entertainment, so we stayed in and watched television. That meant we dug more deeply into the resources available, and we saw a rapid expansion of choices for how to get our content.

Traditional channels still had their place, and I think they are going to be around for quite a while. Streaming services also prospered, although I believe there may be changes there, as more media companies offer direct-to-consumer channels and established players shift their business models – Netflix running advertising, for example.

But we also saw a number of new entrants providing online linear channels. We called this FAST: free, ad-

supported streaming television. It hit a sweet spot with consumers, not least because it offered the prospect of niche channels that people love to dip into with an ad-supported model, so no subscriptions or fees.

The demand was there, but so too were the enablers, in the form of technology. And the key here is the cloud. Using the cloud to organise and distribute media gives us the flexibility and agility to quickly respond to market demand. More importantly, it allows us to move toward unified origination.

Early forays into cloud left major content companies operating multiple silos, each focused on a particular platform or offering, with very little commonality or communication between them. What the industry learned from this was that to efficiently respond to commercial opportunities as they arise, you need to be able to switch resources or interconnect workflows. Unified origination means that content companies can control costs while maintaining the quality of their output.

Another significant shift here is in monetising all this. If

you are simply responsive – other people are streaming or starting FAST channels, so I guess we should too – then you have no plan to ensure you get a fair return across all your content, and it is hard to pin down which channels are making you money and which are not.

A transformation that will gather pace in 2023 builds on the unified origination concept and brings all the advertising together in one place. One sell to the advertiser, one campaign, one definition of audience views, but realisation across all platforms.

That model is transformative because it gives advertisers the

certainty of measuring audiences directly in terms of views, like a digital platform, but with all the premium values of television advertising, such as frequency, pacing and being associated with appropriate content. Intelligent ad servers can make millions of placement decisions in seconds to ensure that every bit of the advertising inventory, across every output, achieves its maximum revenue.

This too points toward the cloud as the place to deliver. It has the processing power for all this decision-making and the connectivity to deliver content and commercials in a seamless flow to any platform anywhere.

The cloud is becoming more important for another reason: supply chain issues. We have long accepted that virtually all broadcast technology is now based on clever software running on IT industry-standard hardware: processors, storage and switches. But we are still in the midst of a supply chain crisis for exactly those products.

The global chip shortage has had a huge impact across many industries. For us in media, it means the old idea of a box per function has been forced out, because it is still hard to get those boxes. And to put it bluntly, AWS and Microsoft Azure simply have a great deal more purchasing power than a broadcaster or even a large vendor like Imagine.

It makes good business sense to put as much processing in the cloud as possible, because you can agree the right SLA for broadcast services, get access to the capabilities to run those services, and connect directly to both advertisers and consumers through the cloud. Operations in the cloud, for the cloud, to the cloud.

I have one more prediction for 2023 (and beyond), which is that we are going to be talking a lot more about interoperability. The media industry has already seen a lot of work on this front, with initiatives such as the AIMS roadmap and SMPTE ST 2110. But as we become a specialised branch of the IT industry, so will we have to embrace other applications.

Our industry continues to move toward software architectures and virtualisation.

That brings huge opportunities for efficiencies, not least as we integrate content workflows with the business systems that surround them. In advertising, for example, broadcasters already have a sales front end with billing and CRMs. Those applications work for them, and they do not want the disruption of change.

To maximise efficiency, we need to make it as simple as possible to integrate media-specific workflows with business systems such as ad decisioning and playlist automation. This is why Imagine has made a significant investment in developing all the APIs that customers and partners will need to integrate into these other systems.

More than that, we have published these APIs so that systems integrators, whoever they are, can see the potential for massive efficiencies through tightly bound systems. Imagine has adopted Swagger as our online repository for APIs, but other choices exist. Whatever you choose, the key to a thriving future is to enable open, easy-to-use models for integration, so we can all move forward faster.

The idea that it is 'only software' and can be made to do anything still prevails. But for that to succeed, we must all be open about how to do it. Cooperation is going to be the watchword for 2023. **PRO**



Steve Reynolds is President of Imagine Communications.



# REAL-TIME RECAP: WHAT TO PREPARE FOR WHEN GOING VIRTUAL

In the last part of this series, **Matthew Collu** takes us through the final steps to truly ensuring a great virtual production

**So this is it. Our final stop in a series spanning everything you need to know when discussing the prospect of making your next production a virtual production. Over the course of these articles we've covered the summary, terminology, flexibility and even the mystery of this shifting filmmaking frontier, and as we wrap it all up, it seems only fitting to discuss the reality of stepping on set for the first time. What you'll see, what you'll set up and who you'll speak to are crucial components that are always good to know beforehand, ensuring your first bout has nothing unanticipated and is as smooth as can be, prior to calling out 'sound, camera, action'.**

First, congratulations are in order. You took your production to new, innovative heights and are finally deep diving into the next phase of content creation and sustainable production. That's no small feat. Having said that, even when equipped with all the information on paper, or perhaps even in your head due to diligent research and study, doing something for the first time is still an anxious undertaking. The goal here, as we cap everything off, is to make sure you are equipped with every wayfinder's best friend when voyaging out for the first time: a map. Much easier to know where

you're going and what's going to happen when it's right there in front of you, right?

As we chart your course here, we will mark the largest areas of intrigue, to be sure you're well on your way without major confusion – starting off with your first and largest stop, the volume. Despite covering it a few times in this series, including how it can vary depending on your stage of choice, the general exposure will be about the same for any first-time arrival. Whether it's a boxed-in area or a smooth, cove-like curve, the volume will be your window into the virtual extension of your world and the space in which your camera lives during your shoot. (For more details on its definition, function and breakdown, check out the other parts of this series.) This is less about the big, bold wall and more about how to prepare for using it.

This leads us to the more important, directly applicable topic of anticipation and preparation: tracking. There are a variety of tracking solutions and we've covered a few of them, but regardless of which one is housed in your stage choice, it requires proper rigging to ensure your tracking stays consistent and clean. The best approach is typically to schedule a prep day so that both the camera department and real-time technicians can ensure one isn't in the way



There are a variety of tracking solutions but regardless of which one is housed in your stage choice, it requires proper rigging to ensure your tracking stays consistent and clean.





Virtual production is many things to many people, but at its core, it's an opportunity for creative grandeur for those who previously only dreamed of it.

of the other. However, sometimes that isn't a luxury you have.

The next best thing is rigging and readying a camera, and finding an appropriate location for tracking afterwards, to keep the rigging and function as familiar for the camera department as possible while also remaining efficient. In either scenario, understand that in the menagerie of accessories and gear, tracking is a crucial aspect that must be properly set up in order to leverage the full power of the LED wall.

Alongside collaboration and communication between real-time technicians, the larger extension of that department is the VAD, the virtual art department. This is responsible for all virtual and technical tasks that occur on set during production. Depending on your role in the production, it could be the team you are in most contact with, adjusting parameters, lighting and assets.

Anticipating your direct collaboration with the VAD is crucial, as it plays an incredibly critical role in the proper functioning of the 'virtual' in virtual production. This also depends on your vendor, of course, as VADs differ in their level of involvement, but the premise and principle remain the same – this is a team of experienced and vigilant artists who ensure that everything within and around the monolithic virtual set extension

goes according to plan, in collaborative cohesion with existing production departments. Adjacent to these core roles and values, it is also the team that can best help you understand how it's all coming together. This can be invaluable in your virtual production journey, and certainly eases the nerves when staring at a 20ft phalanx of lights and wires. Although it can be a daunting first-time experience, having a group of experienced creatives supporting you can make all the difference when faced with something so powerful and enigmatic.

Lastly, the final X on this map is arguably the most important, yet the hardest to get to sometimes. I call this destination 'the moment'. We can talk forever about the technicalities and inner workings of the innovations that create this workflow, how it all works, what it all means, but the reality is that you must not only anticipate the feeling of creative freedom; you must open yourself up to it.

As my final send-off, my largest piece of advice, industry experience and thoughtful insight is this: be ready for the moment. The moment when your conventional idea of limitations begins to fade. The moment your mind spirals into a creative fireworks display, and you have nothing but ideas when you discover what's possible. The moment when silly questions become simple questions, and outlandish hypotheticals become nothing more than a request. That moment.

I've largely talked about how to overcome the intimidation factor usually associated with this incredible production pipeline, but now I think we've arrived at the place beyond that threshold. A place where there is no more apprehension or fear, due to experience; filled with nothing but the rush, the realisation of what's possible – and sometimes forgetting what isn't.

Virtual production is many things to many people, but at its core it's an opportunity for creative grandeur for those who previously only dreamed of it; solutions for those who dare to ask.

So what do you say? Dare to try for yourself? **PRO**



Matthew Collu is a visual effects artist and cinematographer with experience working in virtual production pipelines and helping production teams leverage the power of Unreal Engine and real-time software applications.



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“Agility and adaptation are extremely beneficial to the ongoing survival of every media business”

## The role of standards in the hybrid era

**As far as meta trends go, the migration towards IP workflows has been one of the most fundamental changes the industry has seen for many decades. It has resulted in a variety of different challenges that affect all parts and all levels of media businesses, with compatibility and interconnection a significant part of this. No workflow is an island, and the importance of interoperability has only skyrocketed as organisations look to move beyond black boxes and proprietary systems to the format-agnostic, even COTS-based workflows that IP enables.**

Workflows based on interoperable paradigms leverage the best features of all technologies in the chain. In an ideal world, this results in a seamless, flexible, highly adaptable workflow. It also highlights the key metric of scalability that all media organisations seek, to ensure that further growth can proceed unconstrained.

However, interoperability is unevenly distributed throughout the broadcast chain. Broadcasters want to build solutions made up of best-in-class components, but all too frequently the use of a proprietary protocol results in vendor lock-in as they are forced into a one-size-fits-all solution. And when different protocols are deployed, even a small amount of drift from one component in the chain can lead to distinct problems in the workflow, with disruptive workarounds sometimes being required to accommodate them.

It's clear that standards are crucial when building any system based on interoperable functions between different manufacturers' equipment, and two industry standards have been developed to advance the adoption of

IP deployment: SMPTE 2110 – the set of SMPTE standards for the transport of digital media over an IP network – and the NMOS (Networked Media Open Specifications) suite of specifications, which also ensures easy device connection management on a network, something fraught with multiple perils that were never envisaged by the builders of SDI networks in the past.

Happily, both standards have gained traction through the industry fairly rapidly, and multiple vendors are working to implement them in their product ranges to help simplify the establishment of IP workflows. We are all collectively ensuring that solutions are developed with the requirements of these protocols' architecture in mind, and integrating their future roadmaps into the ones that plot our own developmental routes. It's in all manufacturers' best interests to recognise the momentum and importance of these standards, as they are helping to build out IP workflows much more quickly than would happen in a completely unstandardised industry. Solutions based on these protocols benefit from enhanced reliability and ease of use, while also enabling future expansion to accommodate increased scale and complexity.

They are very rarely deployed, however, in completely IP-centric instances. We are in a transition stage, where interoperability requires seamless interconnection with legacy systems. As these deployments can include some of the aforementioned interoperable 'kludges' that sit on top of proprietary systems, it is more important than ever for protocol compliance to be maintained.

One crucial area where the implementation of standards in the broadcast industry is proving beneficial is the increasing number of cloud deployments. The pivot to the cloud was already underway before the pandemic took hold and has only accelerated since, with companies unwilling to specify costly on-prem IP infrastructure that might end up isolated from its necessary workforce. The desire for remote operation where possible has also increased massively, while the benefits of cloud workflows (scalability, opex cost basis, faster, iterations, etc) make their own cases.

The pandemic has also introduced a fault line in the way new installations are built. Wholly IP-based facilities were typically commissioned pre-pandemic, when costs were less of a consideration. The economic downturn since, and caution around any future economic headwinds, have led to a more pragmatic approach which sees a mixture of IP and SDI equipment coexist as part of an overall staged IP implementation. This is liable to be the prevailing strategy, at least until the current economic and resource crisis is over.

It is still important, however, to plan for an IP-native future. While current installations may be hybrid, they will not be that way forever, and it is key to ensure that the transition from the current implementation to the future IP is as seamless as possible. Again, this is where standards come into play, providing backwards and forwards compatibility regardless of scale, scope and future roadmaps.

And if recent years have taught the industry anything, it is that agility and adaptation are critical to the survival of every media business. **PRO**

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