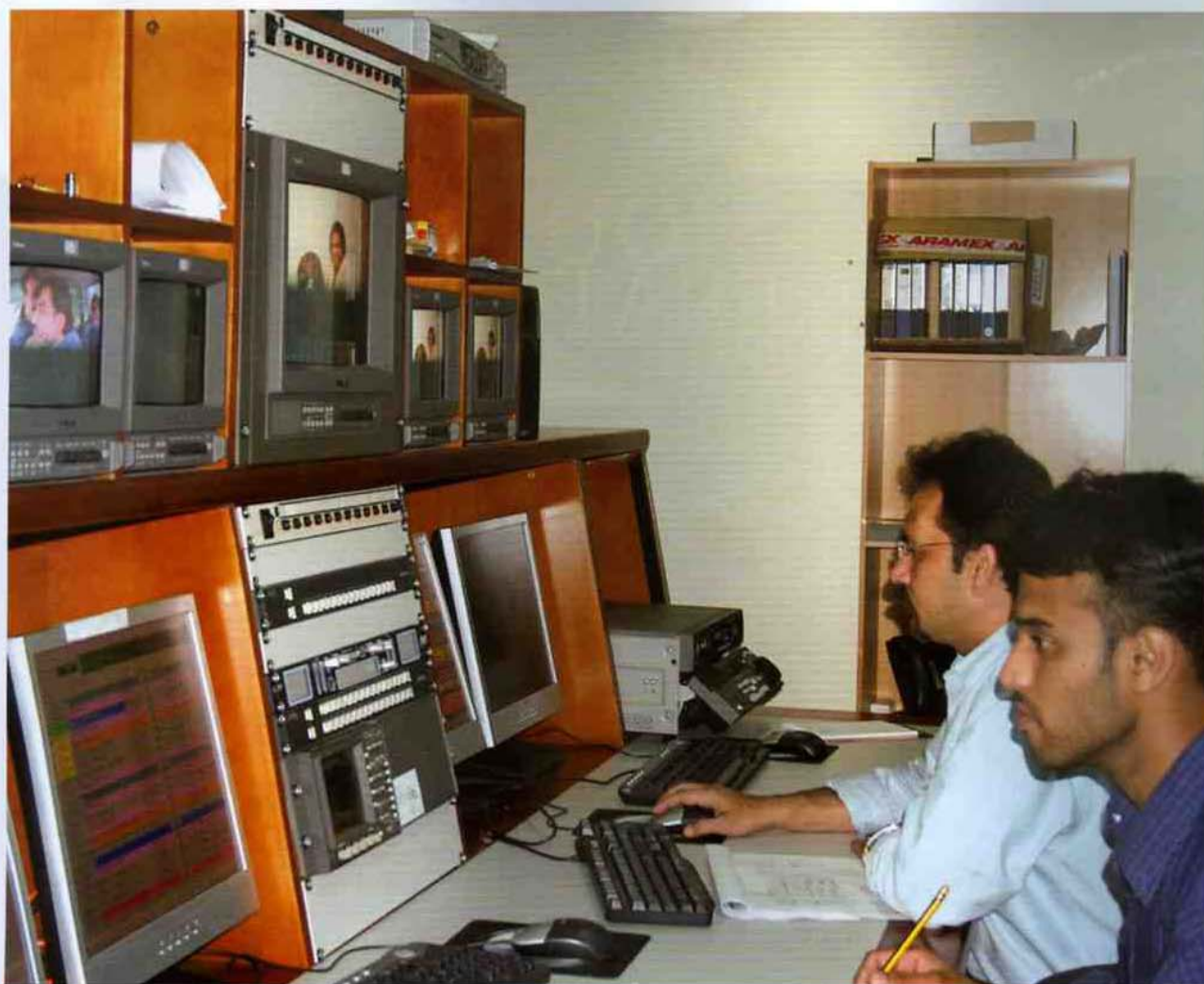# Infinity TV begins transmission

As of last month, another 24-hour channel has entered the region's family entertainment space. *Digital Studio* takes a tour of Infinity TV and reports on the new kit it has deployed at its facility in Dubai Media City.

Ramadan is the perfect testing ground for new television channels that aim to entertain the Arab family. This year, this audience segment will have a wide variety of entertainment to choose from thanks to the long line-up of free-to-air family entertainment channels that have burgeoned in the region.

Earlier this year, Dubai Media Inc had announced the launch of its revamped Arabic channel, replete with exclusive serials, talk shows and a whole host of programmes for the family.

Now, fresh on the broadcast scene is another 24-hour family entertainment channel — Infinity TV — that has been working over the last few months to get all of its systems in place by Ramadan. Operating out of one of the boutique villas in Dubai Media City, Infinity TV promises 'total, free-to-air entertainment' and telecasts a mix of Arabic serials, English and Arabic feature films, music videos, quiz programmes and locally produced programmes.

"We are targeting Arab audiences across the Middle East, US and Europe," says Shakeel Alam, chief strategy officer, Infinity TV. "60-70% of the content is Arabic and the rest is in English although

we plan to eventually broadcast French programmes as well. We have been buying rights for some programmes and films but we are also producing our own shows. 25% of our airtime will be taken up by programmes that we have produced locally," he adds.

This channel is part of the AbuDhabi-based Pal Group, which comprises 81 companies. Infinity TV is the group's first venture into the broadcast industry and seems to have been designed along the same lines as MBC1 in terms of programme content.

Ironically, the Group decided to operate out of Dubai Media City because it was time consuming to bring their idea to fruition in Abu Dhabi. "When you deal with the government, it is time consuming. After three months of meeting and negotiating with Emirates Media Inc, we got nowhere," says Nasir Ali, chief technology officer, Infinity TV. "In May, we had the first meeting with DMC and in six months, we are already done."

From left: Infinity TV's chief strategy officer, Shakeel Alam and Nasir Ali, chief technology officer.

Infinity TV transmits 24/7. The channel broadcasts 12 hours of programmes and then repeats the content. Right now, the channel has a single playout channel on Arabsat. However, it is now working with its systems integrator Salam Technical Services to have in place a playout channel that can split programmes for Arabsat, Nilesat and Hotbird 2. "There is a huge Arab viewership in Europe and we wish to target them as well. That's why we have decided to transmit on Hotbird 2 as well," says Alam.

In some cases, Infinity may not have the rights to show a programme or movie in a particular region. In this case, a split playout channel will enable it to easily replace programmes on the relevant channel.

The whole Infinity solution operates on an Etere automation system, which includes a main and a backup system. "Etere will manage Infinity's on-air system," says Fabio Gattari, president of Etere. "The automation will improve the quality and reliability of Infinity's transmission. It will also enable the team to schedule their workflow better. A lot of work, such as ingest, particularly can be done in different time slots than the transmission and this improves the quality of work for the operators," he adds.

The Etere solution does not stop at automation. It offers a database to organise tapes and video assets and comes with a Unicode interface to support the Arabic language. "In the Middle East market, most TV stations are interested in an overall system that covers the entire workflow — a system that naturally extends itself to the possibility of being used for media asset management and archiving," explains Gattari.

"This is why the Etere solution works for this market. It integrates automation,

In the Middle East market, most TV stations are interested in a system that extends itself to the possibility of being used for media asset management and archiving, says Fabio Gattari, president of Etere.

Ihab El Baba, technical director of Salam Technical Services, says Infinity TV's systems are scalable and built to accommodate future expansion.

traffic, browsing, media management, media asset management, transcoding and news management inside the same system. Additionally, these products are software only. They run on standard hardware and for a TV station, this translates to less expensive support, and the ability to improve the hardware without additional costs," he adds.

The project has barely been concluded and Gattari is already talking about a future upgrade at Infinity TV to integrate low-res browsing. "There are plans to also improve the scheduling preparation using the functions embedded in the Etere system," he adds.

Right now, the programming team puts their list of programmes on the schedule. The respective video tapes are then ingested into the server and the data is stored on the Etere database. Once the material is on the server, it is ready for playout.

"If the material is not available, the system will state in red that the material is not available. It will then give the operator the relevant tape number and ask him to insert the tape into the server for playout," says Ihab El Baba, technical director of Salam Technical Services and the main person behind the design and implementation of the project.

While it is possible to insert the video tape into the server and play it out in real time, Salam has also configured the system to ensure a 15-second delay after ingest and before playout. "This is primarily to ensure that if there is a problem with the tape, they have that much time to resolve the issue or insert a commercial break," explains El Baba.

With regards to a video server, Infinity has deployed a scalable Seachange video server — the BMC 60003 — with a three-node media cluster that is expandable to seven. Each node can

carry a maximum of eight channels, which means Infinity currently has the capacity to run upto 24 channels.

"For redundancy, we have one channel playing from two separate nodes so that if one goes down for some reason or is undergoing maintenance, the other can take over automatically. The third node is for previewing materials and additional storage," adds El Baba.

Each of Seachange's nodes cost about US $45,000. The entire system, which is currently housed in two racks, can run codecs upto 50m/bits. "This is a fully redundant and automated system," says El Baba. "It is safe for Infinity TV to have a system like this so that if there is a problem with one server, the system is configured to automatically switch to the backup server without any manual intervention," he explains.

"Moreover, each of these solutions are attached to a telephone line and con-

nected to the internet. "This makes it possible for the systems to be remotely accessed by the respective vendors in case there is a problem. If there is a problem with the automation solution, for instance, the system can be remotely accessed from Italy or in the case of Seachange, one of the vendor's offices in the US or France can resolve it," he explains.

Other main core solutions in the main control room include Leitch video and audio switchers, Pinnacle's Dekocast character generator, an audio limiter that ensures that the sound level remains consistent at all times, a Sony control unit and a vision mixer, and a Drake intercom system that enables the camera man in the studio to stay in contact with the transmission room.

Already, as the TV has begun transmission, new requirements have poured in and Salam has allotted sufficient room for expansion, confirms El Baba. "We knew that Infinity TV had plans to grow and expand further so we have incorporated space for future expansion into it."

Apart from the main control room, Infinity has a two-camera studio that is 7x5 ms in size, an editing room that comprises three non-linear edit suites and one linear edit suite, and a library.

The studio can double up as both a normal as well as a virtual studio, according to strategy officer, Alam. The studio is currently equipped with two Sony DVcams but Infinity hopes to acquire a digibeta cam soon.

The studio is equipped with cold lights owing to its small size. "This is a small studio with a very low ceiling. We need cold lights here to ensure that the place does not heat up," explains El Baba.

Although a startup, Infinity TV is already in the thick of the action, slowly and steadily gathering more resources to compete effectively against other regional players in the family entertainment space. Ramdan timings have made little difference to its employees.

Already, on the production side, the channel has gathered together a 19-member team, headed by Mahmoud Al-Khatib, director of programmes, who has worked for the last 25 years with Dubai TV. "We have many quizzes, programmes centering on local social issues, heart to heart conversations, programmes on health and fasting, chats with doctors as well as Arabic serials," he says.

The family entertainment space in the region is gradually getting crowded. Infinity TV has invested in the technology required to manage its broadcast requirements efficiently. Now we'll have to wait and see if the content it transmits will take audiences away from the likes of MBC1 and Dubai TV. ▯