

Site seeing

Al Aqariya TV made a splash when it entered the UAE broadcast market a couple of years ago with the Middle East's first Arabic real estate channel. Since then, the channel has grown so rapidly that the company felt the need to invest a further US \$2 million to expand its TV offerings. *Digital Studio* reports.

Al Aqariya, the only channel that currently provides in-depth information about the real estate industry in the Middle East, has decided to expand from one channel to three within the next month. The expansion to an English channel and a classifieds channel has entailed the addition of a dedicated Transmission Control Room (TCR), Central Apparatus Room (CAR) and a studio with a virtual system at the station's headquarters in Dubai Media City. The infrastructure has also been put in place for production and digital editing facilities at the premise. The TV station currently has more than 100 people to man its three channels. The initial contract for the TV station, as well as the US \$2 million expansion project, have been undertaken by systems integrator Salam Media Cast.

"Previously, it was a small installation," says Ihab El Baba, technical director, Salam Media Cast. "Al Aqariya was using an On-Air video server, which was limited to one channel and a switcher. The On-Air system was used for automation, storage, playout as well as graphics but it was very limited in its capabilities. Al Aqariya couldn't do anything additional. So when they decided to expand, we changed the entire equipment and replaced them so that it would allow for future expansion and scalability."

As a result, the On-Air system was replaced with a Seachange server that

allows for easy and flexible expansion.

"We provided more facilities on this server so that they could use the same server for both production as well as playout," says El Baba. "The current server is a BML from Seachange with the Media Client, Etere automation and Vizrt graphics. They are expanding still further so we are looking to put in place a newsroom system as well for them," he adds.



Al Aqariya has put in place a Seachange server to enable further expansion and scalability in future.

The expansion project encompasses three main technical areas. These include a TCR, CAR and a two-camera studio.

Two of the main systems that are in place in the TCR are the Etere automation playout system and the Seachange transmission video server. The Seachange server comprises three BML nodes with 146 GbX 72 Raid 5 and raid square along

with 3 MCL. Other equipment includes a Tx520 master switcher from Probel with the 32X32 embedded router, Sony MPEG IMX (MSW-M2100P) playout/ingest and emergency playout, Miranda channel ident system and an on-air graphics system from Vizrt. All three channels use the Etere automation system and Seachange video/audio servers.

With regards to the CAR, all central processing equipment is located within a suite of eight racks. Processing equipment within this area includes SDI embedded infrastructure, the Probel digital video router, the Drake intercom system, Leitch timecode and Trilogy video reference system. The studio is equipped with two of Thomson's LDK 300 cameras, its Kayak DD2 vision mixer, a BDL prompter, a Yamaha audio mixer and microphones from Shure.

As with most projects in the Middle East, one of the biggest challenges has been time, and installing equipment on an unfinished site. "Against very challenging time constraints, the Professional Services division of Salam completed the design, installation, testing and commissioning for this project," says El Baba.

"Timing was of essence because Al Aqariya had already publicly announced a launch date. Consequently, Salam needed to closely manage, plan and monitor the project alongside several other construction related work such as building,



Al Aqariya uses Etere's automation system, Seachange video/audio servers, a master switcher from Probel, Miranda channel ident and Vizrt on-air graphics.

air-conditioning and electrical work. This was quite a task,' adds El Baba.

Training and on-air support was also phased into the programme to ensure that Al Aqariya's technical and operational staff would have the necessary skills to make full use of the new facilities. Salam utilised its local technical support group in Dubai to provide much of the training and technical support for the project.

"Although we are a smaller TV station than Dubai TV and MBC, we use similar high quality equipment and have highly skilled workers working for us," says Khaled Awamleh, general manager for Al Aqariya's English channel. "Our video servers are used in CNN and Dubai TV. Also, we are a 24-hour channel so people work shifts here. Most of the staff we have here come from bigger stations. We have a good mix of workers from Syria, Italy, India, Morocco, Palestine, Jordan and Iraq. You could say this is a mix of Dubai in one small place."

Once the English channel, which Awamleh is heading, is in place, Al Aqariya will be providing business news — an area that was once covered by Channel 33 and has been discontinued since its revamp.

"Businessmen like to hear news in their own language," says Awamleh. "When they are making crucial investment decisions that go into millions, they like to understand the complete nature of the real estate business. It's therefore important for us to provide this in Arabic for the local population and English for the expatriates. We are also gradually trying to produce news in other important languages such as Russian to cater to the Russian community," he adds.

Currently, Al Aqariya produces about 60% of its programming on its own. These channels are aired on Arabsat, Nilesat and Hotbird, which means they don't just reach the Arab populations in the Middle East but are also targeted at audiences in

America, Africa and Europe. "If I have invested in Emaar or Nakheel properties, for instance, I'd be just as keen to know what the new property law that was announced in Dubai means for me, what its implications in the market are and so on. Right now, there is no channel that provides that kind of market insight. We are here to make that possible," says Awamleh.

Although it started small, Al Aqariya now sees immense potential as it claims to be the only real estate channel in the Middle East and hopes to cash in on it while it lasts. It speaks about projects right from the time they are conceptualised. "Some companies approach us from the time they have a concept in mind about a tower and we follow up till the construction, marketing and so on.

Some of these projects take up to three years or more but that is the level of our commitment," says Mahmoud Al Majali, general manager, Al Aqariya. "When a

project is announced, it sets so many business people into motion. There are interior decorators, electrical companies, lighting solutions companies and so on who want to know more about the project so that they can get into it. That, in turn, creates a lot of jobs and it's a great feeling that we can use a mass medium to communicate this," says Al Majali.

In the last two months, the channel has also encouraged interactivity with its viewers through its classifieds channel. "Now we have a database in Channel 2. In just two months, we have received more than 100,000 SMSs and our prime viewership is from Saudi Arabia," explains Al Majali.

According to Al Majali, the company has only reached about 20% of its vision. The TV station has plans to further expand its broadcast reach in the real estate business. At the same time, Al Majali does not fear competition should a competing



Al Aqariya's president, Mohammad Saleh (left) awards the contract to Ihab El Baba (front right) of Salam Media Cast as Khaled Awamleh of the English channel and GM, Mahmoud Al Majali of Al Aqariya look on.

channel be launched. "There is a lot of room here for more such channels, and competition is always healthy. It will help us to sharpen our own skills and produce

better quality programmes. We also have the advantage of being the first in this business and we are making every attempt to produce high quality programmes." 