Satellite Executive BRIEFING
Vol. 2 No. 11 July-August 2009
SATELLITE Markets & Research
Industry Trends, News Analysis, Market Intelligence and Opportunities

The Middle East Market: Poised for Growth

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The video distribution business in the Middle East is booming. Last year, we provided an overview of commercial Middle Eastern Satellite Communications, based on primary and secondary research. What we provide here is an update from the perspective we gained during travel to the region in the month of June 2009, which included visits to major facilities. In this article, we report on the leading teleports in Dubai, UAE, and Amman, Jordan.

By meeting with the key management and touring several facilities, we confirmed that the "media cities" are world-class service providers with state-of-the-art facilities and qualified staff. Also, they meet the expectations of their customers who originate and/or deliver programming throughout the Middle East. The business flourishes because satellite TV is a key foundation of the region's information infrastructure and the media cities provide essentially a turn-key solution to organizations wishing to broadcast their content to the Arab world.

Focus on Dubai

Dubai Media City (DMC) showed itself to be the biggest and best equipped video services facility in the region, with the ability to offer its broadcast customers uplink to 25 different orbit positions through its service partner *du* that owns and operates the Samacom teleport. I met with the original architect and managing director of this business, Yatinder Mahajan, who continues as Executive VP – Technology for Emirates Integrated Telecommunications Company. The latter company, also known as *du*, is the second carrier in the UAE and the owner of the Samacom Teleport that I visited. Samacom started out small and grew to an 85% ME region market share, as they convinced media companies serving the region to move from the UK and Italy to Dubai. The entire DMC facility is an extensive office park serving well known broadcasters including CNN, NBC and Showtime.

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The teleport earth station is located some miles away in an area more suitable to the kind of antenna farm Samacom requires. The teleport is well laid out and provides for access to all equipment and antennas, allowing engineers to make changes and perform maintenance with minimum disruption to existing services. I was informed that a plan has been developed to move the teleport to a much larger site with a new building designed for further expansion. In addition to the full breath of video services, Samacom also provides collocation services for VSAT network providers.

At the site, I was hosted by Ahmed Al Muhaideb, an engineering graduate of the University of Pittsburgh, who is Senior Director – Samacom Operations Technology. Ahmed and his technical team conduct the engineering and operations for Samacom, providing existing services as new services are added. There is a high degree of expertise represented in the staff, which includes many graduate engineers. The video uplinks through 25 antennas are all of modern design and include normal amounts of redundancy in terms of spare HPAs, modems and multiplexers. Yatinder made special mention of the contribution of their systems integrator, Globecomm Systems, Inc. (GSI) of Hauppauge NY who built most of the uplinks. All of the equipment and downlinks are monitored through automated monitor and control systems provided by GSI, with Samacom staff vigilant 7/24. According to Ahmed, the overall service availability is in excess of 99.99%, not including scheduled downtime, and they have never had to pay outage credits under existing Service Level Agreements. Mean-time-to-repair is reduced to near zero because of backup equipment, spares and maintenance agreements with suppliers in the US and Europe.

Dubai Media City is one of the biggest and best equipped video services facility in the region serving major broadcasters such as CNN, Reuters, BBC and NBC, among others.

The site has commercial as well as emergency power, and all of it is tested and certified on a continuous basis. There is redundant fiber to connect the studios and related facilities at DMC with the Samacom teleport. From there, access is available via redundant fiber to the submarine cables that serve the UAE. In this way, services can be originated within DMC or brought to Samacom using high-quality and reliable transmission facilities. The video uplinks include necessary digital compression and multiplexing using MPEG 2 and DVB-S, and there are already a few chains capable of MPEG 4 and DVB-S2. Some programmers pre-assemble their multi-channel basebands and send them over fiber in the Asynchronous Serial Interface (ASI) format. Furthermore, DMC can ingest content via satellite (from backhaul sources including their own SNG vehicle), fiber and tape, and play-out video and audio using their state-of-the-art content-management system.

Overall, Dubai, which operates as a free port, is a bustling city with many newly-constructed high-rise buildings, shopping malls and expressways; and it is surprisingly easy to get around. A rapid transit system is nearing completion, which will further enhance the attractiveness of Dubai as a center for media operations like Samacom. Marketing of teleport services is the responsibility of Mohamed Saeed Al Shahi, Senior Director Broadcasting Technology, who is based at the DMC headquaraters.

The Jordan Option

The Jordan Media City (JMC) is very substantial by global standards, offering the full range of video services from studio through uplink. Their transmissions currently deliver over 200 DTH TV channels to ME viewers. While less

extensive in terms of the number of antennas, JMC offers the same degree of one-stop-shopping that DMC is so well known for. JMC was engineered, developed and continues to be run by Hani Al-Kararbeh, Teleport Manager. Hani explained that JMC began on the initiative from Engineer Radi Alkhas, who, as general manager, grasped the potential of this Jordanian teleport, driving the program from its start as a single and simple uplink earth station to the impressive facility I toured.

Throughout our conversations and the tour, Hani displayed a high degree of understanding and involvement with all systems and activities of JMC. Like his staff, he is Jordanian and well skilled as an engineering and operations professional. This is in line with my personal experience at Hughes Communications, where teleport managers knew how every nut and bolt came together in their respective facilities. Such a knowledgeable teleport manager will pick qualified people and ensure they have the training needed to continue to perform their work assignments. All of the staff I met communicate well, understood the teleport and its structure, and could answer all of my questions.

JMC resources allow creation, edit, storage, processing and transmission of content, which can also be ingested from digital tape, transferred from microwave or fiber optic cable, or originated at one of the studios located on site. The principal purpose of these studios is to provide commentary and voice over for the many sports channels that are provided to DTH viewers. The equipment is specified, installed and integrated by local engineers so that a consistent system and sparing arrangement is maintained. Their monitor and control scheme is world class, with 7/24 operation. Hani stated that he makes

himself personally available to customers, who can contact him at any time they wish.

Amman may seem a bit off the beaten track, but a visit to this flourishing city makes clear that it is one of the bright spots in the region. Telecommunications are well developed as witnessed by the ready availably of 3G wireless services, DTH TV (including a considerable range of US cable services such as ESPN, CNBC and Fox News Channel), and submarine cable (which terminates in Aqaba on the Red Sea). Roads are very good in Amman and down to the Red Sea at the southern end of the country. The world-class teleport at JMC is fully capable of serving literally any satellite TV need, with modern equipment, facilities and highly-qualified and attentive staff.

JMC expanded its horizon through an agreement with Globecast, putting Jordan on the Globecast global fiber ring. The joint effort makes TV services available through the AsiaSat 2 satellite in the Indian Ocean region. Hani also expressed pride in the overall availability record of 99.9% of his service, including propagation. The uplink is also being expanded to include MPEG 4 and DVB-S2 transmission for customers requiring this capability.

This brief report from the field clearly show that both DMC and JMC are world class service providers to the broadcasting industry in the Middle East. A choice will depend on the usual factors, which include the geographic location, availability of off-the-shelf transmission for the desired function, an overall sense of how the teleport is positioned to support the customer, and finally the price. We will be writing about other aspects of the trip in a subsequent issue.

The antenna farm of the Jordan Media Center in Amman.
(photo courtesy of Jordan Media Center)

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