

The making of Newzroom Afrika



Arguably one of the best-looking newsrooms on the continent, reaching a new audience and bringing cutting edge content to the screen, Newzroom Afrika, a channel on Multi-Choice's DStv satellite pay-TV service, went live earlier this year in time for the South African elections. The set, based at their new premises in Linden, was designed by Michael Gill Designs, built by Sets Drapes Screens (SDS), part of the Gearhouse Group of Companies, and the Absen DW 2.9 LED Panels, Green Hippo Boreal+ and dot2 lighting console was supplied by DWR Distribution.



“The project was very exciting,” said Michael Gill of MGD. “I can honestly say that Thokozani Nkosi and Thabile Ngwato, the television producers and entrepreneurs, are the two most forward-thinking individuals I have ever worked with. Their way of thinking is so youthful, fresh and digital. The mindset behind Newzroom Afrika is that news breaks on your telephone these days and not always on TV. With an emphasis on social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp, the idea is to link what is on your phone to the studio, hence screens were an important part of the set brief.

“In their initial pitch, Thokozani and Thabile had a red desk that I took and made a new version of to become one of the main features of the set. The middle structure of the studio, which has become the framing device for all the shows, was inspired by the desk shape,” Michael describes. It has to be said that if ever a desk looked like a Ferrari, this would be it! There are also eight other presentation areas on the set that are used for various shows.

“I am so lucky to be able to see in 3D,” Michael explains. “If you tell me what you are thinking or show me references, once I leave the briefing I can see the design in my head by the time I get to the first traffic light! I always sketch small ideas of what I am thinking, and the only way I can explain it is that it comes into focus when adding technical to make it work for television. And then I can see the picture clearly.”



MGD is renowned for making television pictures look world-class. Their renders look exactly like the real thing. "But to get it to look identical, you need to have lighting, good screens, good LED, a good TV director, and a good visual controller. I rely on so many people to make what we do look topnotch. You have to work with the best people in the industry to achieve this and to create world-class pictures."

The Newzroom Afrika studio is 20m x 20m and the height is 4,5m, which is why Michael forced the 16:9 ratio and why the long, thin screens work so well.

There was initially a deliberation on which screens to use. Projection was considered but it lacked the high-resolution quality. There had to be no pixelation when filming 2,5m away from the screen. The client, not thinking that they could purchase the screens in time, did consider renting them and this option would have cost more than buying in the long run.



Duncan Riley of DWR continues, “Ryan Toerien, a consultant on the install, phoned me and asked if he could bring his camera to our office. He arrived, measured the 2,5m distance and did some tests to see if the Absen screen would work. He said it was the best results he’d had so far, but the big question was could we deliver?” The surrounds for the screen had been manufactured already, with space or openings allocated for the screen to fit in. The cutoff day was April 1 and DWR were able to deliver a week earlier.

Roxanne Dare, from Newzroom Afrika, concurs, “At that stage, we were trying to conclude and it was imperative that we had the correct screen in regards to the moiré effect. I was given the details of DWR, we contacted them and they were professional. While I had been advised to rent a screen for a month because we were going live, DWR not only delivered on time, but it was far less expensive than what we had been quoted on by other suppliers. Subsequently, we have not had a single failed LED screen, we haven’t had a mark or any problem whatsoever. When I contact DWR I get a response on the same day, which now days is incredible considering how busy we all are. Important too is that they offer after-sales service and training. DWR’s Bruce Riley also visited the studio afterwards give us advice on setting our cameras.”

DWR’s Bruce Riley, Andi Rodgers, Schalk Botha and Tyler Pugin worked alongside Jacob Mogale from the Install Crew for the installation and wiring. The Absen Screens have three MCTRL 4K Processors all fed from three Calibre LedView770SV scalers and at the heart of it the Green Hippo Boreal+. Dylan Jones took care of the Green Hippo Boreal+ install and training. The Hippotizer has four SDI inputs, so from the main studio,

content can be routed onto the screens in the studio as a PIP or background using multiple layers pre-programmed on the dot2.



“Green Hippo is a versatile system, especially with a screen like this. Due to the number of screens and the pixel count, we had to use all 4K outputs and multiple viewpoints stacked within the pixel space to get the total wrap around the screen in the set,” said Bruce Riley.

Lighting design was by Joshua Cutts of Visual Frontier and Paula Modise, who programmed on the new dot2 console.



Once everything was up and running, it was a matter of the directors getting used to the set with all the hourly set and prop changes. “In the first weeks, there were mainly close-up shots, as all the directors were concentrating on getting the content on-air,” explains Michael. “But now, some months later, they are exploring and starting to use the set to its full potential. One of the outstanding features of Newzroom Afrika is their vibrant team of graphic artists who produce visuals daily and which changes the look of the set consistently.”

Newzroom Afrika is on air 20 hours a day (they have a break between midnight and 4 am), seven days a week. “I think MGD has given them something that no news channel in the world has,” adds Michael. The Newzroom Afrika studio has high gloss black floors that reflects the set and the diagonally shaped desk gives it that high end look. The glass on the desk reflects the screen behind it. If you knew what infrastructure to changing the desks, chairs and sets hourly to accommodate all the shows, you would be amazed! The screen appears to be floating and together with the red and white structures and the high res screens we have been able to anchor a simple, interesting and ever-changing visual excitement for the viewers.”