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Transcript of Fireside Chat

Matt Stagg in conversation with Ben Wickham, Director of Creative Output, Sky Sports

Presented as part of the IAMT Rebrand Press Announcement at 2026 NAB Show

Matt Stagg:

Thank you, Saleha (Saleha Williams, CEO IAMT) and thank you everybody for coming and joining me. My name's Matt Stagg. I'm the Strategy Director and Partnerships for a company called Neutral Wireless, which provide private 5G networks for broadcasters on land, in the air, and on the sea.

We can talk about that another time, but why I'm here is I was asked by IAMT — or at that point it was IABM — to come on and bring a guest on and talk about something that their members would find interesting and insightful.

For me, certainly lately, when I've been looking at stuff in my previous work at BT Sport and subsequently Warner Bros. Discovery, is I'm from technology, we drive technology, but I think all of us get so excited about the technology that sometimes we lose sight of why it's there, and that is enabling the creative teams to tell stories.

We're all here. We're all storytellers, whether you're putting cables in the ground or you're putting encoders in.

Now, I'm very lucky that I know Ben. He agreed to come on here. He's the Director of Creative Output. If there's somebody that understands the link between technology and storytelling, it's Ben. So thank you, Ben. I don't know if you'd like to interrupt me and stop me from talking.

Ben Wickham:

Yeah, yeah. Thank you so much, Matt. It's an absolute pleasure to be here.

So yeah, my name's Ben Wickham, I'm from Sky Sports. I've worked across news and sport my entire career. My background is as a TV director in news and sport.

When I started doing that, I would sit in front of a load of monitors, I would be directing talent, directing people and incoming feeds and all sorts of things, and things would happen and technology would happen in the background and I wouldn't care about it. I would create a story, the customer would see a story, and there was technology in the middle, but I didn't really care about it until it started going wrong.

But over the course of my career, I've had to get more and more involved in that technology. And I think the more you look at it, we're at this point now where technology is so important and everything is changing so quickly, and the craft is changing quickly, and the creative is changing quickly, and how we tell stories is changing so fast.

On some levels, it's exactly the same as it's always been, but the point at which I try and tell a story as a TV director and the customer sees it, the journey is so different nowadays — where they see it, where you see it, all those kinds of things, the platform it's on.

So I think it's a really interesting moment for the industry.

Matt Stagg:

Thank you, Ben. And if we take Sky as a use case of pushing the boundaries of technology — and you're in news and sport, the most difficult things to deliver, it's live, you can't miss it — how do you balance that relationship of the teams between deep tech and creative output in Sky?

Ben Wickham:

Deep tech and creative output — it's interesting. So it's about provisioning the right systems. It sounds like an obvious thing to say, but we have a lot of technology. We have ways of doing everything we could ever want to do. We walk the show floor and someone can tell me something to do, everything I could ever possibly want to do.

I don't need 700 systems to do all the things I need to do. I need the right system to do what I need to do. So it's about understanding that need. It's about understanding — and I'm probably going to say this a lot — at Sky, particularly Sky Sports, what we've really learned is the best way we can work with our partners is to really explain to them what our roadmap looks like, what the story is we're trying to tell, what our customer base is, what our skill level is, where we want to do some of that work and where we need partners in that work.

So for me, balancing that creative process and deep tech is about, here is the need, here is what we bring to the table, and here is what we need you as a media tech company to plug in the gaps there.

Matt Stagg:

And that is the key, really, is to have that relationship with your vendors that understand what you want to do, so you don't get given an AI solution for a problem you didn't know you had. To be able to have that link. And I guess while we're talking about AI and automation, how do you see that technology enabling you to do more, allowing your team to do more and put better output out there? And are you seeing it working, or is it still that buzzword for you?

Ben Wickham:

Am I seeing AI working? An interesting one. That's going to be asked a lot this weekend, isn't it?

So automation — let's start there, let's start with the easy one — is massive in my world. And that's everything from... I struggle a little bit because certainly in my world, automation has almost become a kind of someone sitting in front of a keyboard with a spacebar sometimes.

But the way automation works in the background, we have just signed a huge amount of rights and we're delivering on many, many more platforms than we've ever done before. We have massive amounts of content that we have to get out there.

And let's be honest, the industry is not throwing money at us anymore. So what we need to do is look really, really carefully at what processes are being done in a manual way that we can automate.

So we're looking, we're going through with a real fine-tooth comb our entire portfolio of technology, our whole tech stack, and working out which bits of this can be automated. Also, which bits we don't think can be automated — but why not? If they can't, why not? How are we going to take three steps back and work out where that automation might be put in?

So automation is in absolutely everything, at every point, from the point at which a team sits in a control room all the way through to a user interacting with whatever screen they're interacting with.

So that's massive. And again, it's about working out where we put it and how we do it and how fast we can do it.

AI is a whole subject of its own. I was at Devoncroft yesterday. I've got a lot of close contacts who I know are working in the AI space. We're investigating that quite a lot. We're not far away from putting that into our production processes.

Someone said to me yesterday there's a divide between the people in your office who are saying "Claude, Claude, Claude" about everything, and the people who are like, "Yeah, I think this is something I need to worry about."

I'm excited by agentic AI. I think agentic AI is the point at which this goes from being something where we're playing around with it and it sort of works. Generative AI is interesting, but it's not that useful in terms of the quality content that we're trying to make.

At the moment we're in that space — and I'm sure there are loads of people involved in this room — around indexing metadata. I think there are loads of great things happening there, and we're quite deep into that conversation.

Pulling it back, it's about the story we're trying to tell. I think the exciting thing for me about AI is finding stories that we couldn't tell before.

We talk a lot about data lakes and making sure all of our content, our archive content, everything we have happening live, is being put somewhere so that the AI can find it, and then we can find the stories we can tell.

So I think that's really exciting.

But I think agentic AI is the point at which — and I say this as a customer of many companies in this room — once we can start to expose all the different systems that exist in our industry, in our world, to some sort of agentic AI, then we move beyond the API. Actually, the thing that we struggle with most is plugging systems together, and suddenly we've got this technology coming about which might actually not just plug systems together, but tell us what the systems are doing and be ahead of the game in terms of the automation that we're trying to put through.

So I don't think any of us at Sky Sports, or Sky, are fundamentally deploying AI in our production workflows at the moment. But I think we are starting to make inroads into that point. We will have AI in our production and our output very soon. But I think once we turn on those agents and they start really working for us, that's when this gets really exciting to me.

Matt Stagg:

Yeah. And I think I was talking about quite an interesting piece, because it used to be our business — you would do whatever to get into it. Normally, if your dad knew someone's dad, and we all know that's where it is.

But now we're increasingly facing a skills gap where we're not as attractive as an industry to people, and they'll say, "Well, I'll take my skills and I'll go to Apple or I'll go to TikTok."

Mainly because you start out and you don't really have a very good job. If you're creative, they say, "Okay, well, you go in and you tag all of this and you sit in that room and tag the metadata."

So do you think offloading some of those menial tasks — if someone's come from university and they have a creative degree and they're sat in that room going, "When can I be an actual producer?" — do you find that those types of jobs, are you able to outsource them to technology?

Ben Wickham:

Yes, increasingly so. We are starting to do that. We're baby steps at the moment, but we're definitely starting to do that.

I think it's a really interesting thing. You only have to look at the market cap of all the big global brands. I work in Sky Sports — it's a big media organization. We sit under Comcast. Comcast is a big media organization. But you compare it to the Amazons and the Netflices, and they're that much bigger than you. Then you go into TikToks and Metas, and we're not even close.

I think what's exciting is that — and maybe we get onto this — it's interesting, the change of the name that's happened today. We've always thought in a very linear way. We've always thought in a very broadcast technology way.

And I'm seeing — not even just increasingly, that ship has sailed — we don't think like that anymore. We need to pull a lot of people along with us, but digital workflows, social workflows, the way media gets delivered, the screen you're looking on, the platform you're looking on — increasingly, we don't care where that goes. The story is the story.

So we really need people who do that.

So yes, we have actually struggled a lot with finding the right people to deliver what we want to do. But as we move into a much broader space, I think it's going to get really exciting, because we really need those people who don't just want to be a producer on a Saturday morning TV show. They want to work on really modern workflows and digital workflows.

Matt Stagg:

Yeah, and that's great because we have got the guys who don't get to go out on the OBs. You must have had the pushback from remote production — “I like to go away on a weekend” — and so we do get pushback. But the thing you were saying about some of those more manual tasks, someone said to me, all you need to do is think of AI as a thousand interns that don't moan about doing rubbish jobs. And I was like, “Oh, that's great. I'll have some of that.”

Ben Wickham:

Yeah, it's a really powerful way of putting it.

It's funny you say about that. Just on that point, it's slightly strange. I was at SVG a few days ago, the Chairman's Forum, and there's definitely still a bit of a shift.

We at Sky Sports produce the majority of our tier-one sports remotely. And actually, what's happened there is we almost get less pushback, because there's this traditional idea that everyone wants to be flying around the world and doing these amazing things. But people don't want to be driving up the M6 every day, and they don't want to be out late at night.

So actually, centralizing that technology means that we can do really interesting things. The amount of tennis we produce, the amount of rugby we produce, the amount of football and Formula One and all of those things — those teams all sit in one place, and we can really drive our tech hard because we're not flying it around the world. We're not having to plug it in every time.

That's really exciting. We don't really have to worry too much about cloud in that sense. We don't have those “the wire's not working” issues.

So that's a really interesting time. And like you said, with AI, once people discover that agents can do something — you tell them something, they do it, it works the same way every time — that's brilliant. Fantastic. That job's done. Thank you very much.

And I think that's where it gets exciting. That's where the technology gets exciting, right? Because we can plug new tech in.

I was having this conversation with a friend of mine yesterday — our IP is how we do things, the way we work, the value we want to bring to the customer. We can explain that to an AI and then plug it into your technology. And that's really exciting, because that sits now in a kind of AI world.

Matt Stagg:

Yes. And I guess we've started to see Sky Sports premium sports, but we are starting to see, with things like automated cameras and machine learning, you can plug it into a 5G network and bring on these more niche sports a lot quicker.

Are you seeing more content becoming accessible? I guess as a scheduler, you've got your live things, you've got to fill them up, and it's like, okay, what have we got? I think we've got camel racing from Saudi we can put on now.

Do you see that some of those lower-tier sports using this democratization through technology are going to enable you guys to have more content because there are more ways to do it? Or do you think you'll always stay at premium?

Ben Wickham:

I mean, you'd have to ask our strategy team. For us, obviously, it's about getting the value out of the content we have.

The world in which we can just rely on the uptick of people buying more subscriptions every month is kind of gone. So we're driving the value harder and harder and harder.

We have to make sure that every moment has a value, and every right that we negotiate has a value. It won't have escaped anyone's attention that in something like tennis, we don't just show the tennis anymore. We show every court, we show every match, every round. We have to surface that on different platforms.

With the Super League, with the EFL, with the amount of games we have in the WSL, we have so much content. We almost don't have to drop tiers, because we have so much content from the tiers we do cover. Yes, the scheduling is really difficult for that, but also the provisioning of the platforms. Tennis is a really interesting one. It's a highly automated way of working, the way we do our tennis output. We show all of the courts, all of the games, all the matches, but we had to work so hard on the data coming in from the ATP and the WTA because it was a bit of a mess, to be honest with you.

And once we had that data right, we could feed it through an automation. The automation can schedule it and put graphics and slates and all that kind of good stuff up.

So there is definitely a democratization like that.

But also within the sport as well. And again, this goes back a little bit to AI. We can't have moments happening that aren't then surfaced somewhere else. We need to make sure that that 90-minute game or that two-hour race or whatever it is, the moments within that — people are watching highlights, people are catching up, people are seeing things on TikTok, people are seeing things on YouTube — we need to keep driving those moments through.

We need to make sure that we're not just thinking of it as one output. If a moment happens and no one sees it, what's the point of that?

So every individual moment has its space now, and we're trying to make sure that every right that we negotiate, we are driving the value for all of that.

Matt Stagg:

And I guess we as an industry in general are at that time where everyone talks about how Gen Z like to have it, and in fact, as a broadcasting industry — in sports broadcast — I think we were a little bit naive and said, "Don't worry, they'll learn to watch sports. We learned how to watch sports."

And that's gone.

And I used to get quite — not cross, but it used to annoy me — when people just went, "Oh, well that's all right, we'll just change it to vertical and we'll put it on TikTok," because young people don't have a low attention span. My kids — I said *The Walking Dead* was good, eight seasons were gone when I came back. But they do have a forensic filter on what's relevant.

Do you find it difficult to use all of the content you've got and serve it? And is that where some of the technology is helping you to almost segment that, and like you said, every clip has a value somewhere else?

Ben Wickham:

Yeah, it's really interesting, that.

I think we definitely had this idea that we all watched sport on 50-inch TV screens with Atmos, and eventually these people who are watching on the phone will move to that. And they're not. They're just not going to do that.

I've had many a person say to me, "Why are we doing it in vertical? Why can't you turn your phone the other way around?" It's like, because it doesn't work like that.

But it's about understanding the value. It's difficult, right, because there's not a huge amount — let's be honest — there's not a huge amount of value at the moment. We're trying to work out where the value is. What's the return on investment on those digital platforms? There's not masses there.

And we have big legacy workforces and tech debt, bluntly, which work in a kind of linear broadcast way. I think we're at an inflection point. I think it's a really interesting moment because product roadmaps and broadcast roadmaps are so different, and we're trying to bring them together, and the teams are different. We're trying to do a lot of work at Sky to bring those things together, but we're starting to realize that actually what we need to do is set up story-centric workflows. We need to really think about what the value is of each of those moments, each of those clips, each of those things that happen in a match, the whole match as it is, the tournament, however it works.

But we need to work out how we are driving that value. It can't just go out on broadcast and someone clips it, loads it up and sticks it on Instagram. That is not going to fly anymore. That is not going to fly with Gen Z, Gen Alpha. That is not how that works.

We need to think about highlights as another thing. Automated AI generation of highlights — bluntly, I think they're going to see through that. I think if you just start throwing out personalized highlights that an AI has generated, you're going to miss the emotion, and the emotion is what we do.

So we need to figure out how we get people involved in this, but how we also drive that at scale and create personalized content and properly drive that value.

So none of these questions are easy, right?

But I would say to everyone in this room, we are definitely at that inflection point where myself, the tech teams I work with, people in my industry, are going, "Do you know what? We might be throwing this out and starting again, because this isn't working."

We cannot just create for broadcasting and throw it onto digital. It doesn't work that way anymore. We need workflows that think about the consumer, because the consumer is not thinking this screen or this screen. The consumer is just thinking, "Man U v Liverpool," or "Verstappen winning a race." That's what they care about, and they don't give a damn where they get it from.

Matt Stagg:

That's brilliant. We've come to the end, Ben. That was really insightful, and we could carry this on a lot longer, as we did when we were having our briefing call.

But thanks, everyone, and hopefully that helps you to be able to help these guys tell better stories. Thank you very much.

About the International Association of MediaTech (IAMT)

IAMT (formerly IABM) connects, supports, and informs technology innovators, service providers, buyers, and end users across the broadcast, streaming, enterprise, and emerging media sectors. As the industry continues to evolve beyond traditional boundaries, IAMT equips its members with the market access, intelligence, and influence needed to thrive in a rapidly changing landscape. Through the delivery of actionable business insights, the facilitation of meaningful connections and opportunities, and by serving as a global platform for innovation and thought leadership, IAMT empowers organizations to make smarter decisions, expand into new markets, and drive measurable business impact across the global MediaTech ecosystem.

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