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# The Future Has Arrived. Is MediaTech Ready?

Matt Stagg in conversation with Andrew Cross, DefyReality.ai

IAMT Studio Visual Podcast Series
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Hi, welcome back to the IAMT Podcast Studio with me, Matt Stagg. Now, our next guest — well, there won't be anyone who doesn't know the career of this industry titan, Andrew Cross. I'll pass over. We haven't got so much time to say what you do, because that'll be a cut after that. You know, you've been everywhere. Please introduce yourself to us.

So I started in this industry — actually, it was my first job out of college. I flew to Texas, which is where I still live, and I started work at NewTek. And, you know, at NewTek — the most amazing company — we built the first live production systems that ran on software. And it's funny because today we so much take that for granted, you know? We just assume computers can do real-time video, but back then, gosh, that was — like, we would walk into NAB, where we are now, and people would look at us like there was something wrong with us. Like, "These guys are saying you can do it on the thing you play Doom on." And, you know, our belief, what we did — like, we saw the path that was happening in computing, which was every year they were getting faster.

Moore's law.

Yeah, Moore's law, that's exactly right. And you just plot out where it's going to go, and you know it's going to happen, and we made that bet, and we were right. So we built the very first systems. I probably saw the first live production stream on one computer with two cameras streaming to the web with Windows Media 1.0.

And, you know, we just take that stuff for granted today. Then, you know, obviously we went off and we built NDI, and then I worked with Vizrt, the company that produced, you know, like, every image. Like, the elections are funny, because literally 40 channels are running products we built at Vizrt. And then I was CEO at Grass Valley. And I'm still here at NAB.

Oh, wow. I mean, what a pedigree. And this is why I want to talk to you. It's quite close to my heart. You walk round here, you still see fast software, locally wired network, desktop software. And that's not where we live. Why? Why are we so behind as an industry?

So this is a great question, and I think it is very fascinating because, you know, it is funny. Like, let's imagine we go back 10 years, and you go, okay, imagine a world where everybody in their pocket has a 4K camera and a screen that's got super-high resolution, that's connected to Wi-Fi. We have AI that understands images. Like, it'd sound like we're describing a science fiction movie.

We're here today and we have every piece of that, and yet somehow it doesn't work together. It doesn't feel like we're living in the future yet. And so, like, it just sticks out to me that we have all the pieces that 10 years ago would have sounded impossible, and we've got them all today, and it's not changed. Like, if we tried to imagine what is that world like, we would have thought there

were flying cars, and here we are still with the same problems, and I think it's a really great question. And I think that, you know, the problem is that the TV industry, the broadcast industry, has been driven by very complex workflows that end up very sticky. It's like if you have every file you've ever made on Excel, it's really hard to move off Excel. But this is a big risk, because, you know, if you're stuck on Excel because every file you ever did is on Excel, the guy who works out what's next and just uses, I don't know, ChatGPT for their finances is a serious threat to you, and that is a problem I think we have in this industry.

Yeah. No, I totally agree, and you can almost see each of those. You could make everything work in there if you ran a fibre between each of the booths, you know? And that's it. And you came on to AI, and also, do you think it's because as an industry we like plugging stuff in? You know? We like a box, and if that box doesn't work — do you think it's just we're very slow, we're used to building stuff, and the whole software mindset? And actually, even commercially, the OpEx model, do you think we just don't get it?

I think we have built complex solutions, and they end up very sticky.

Yeah.

But it's a very big risk, and we need to challenge ourselves, because if we don't, there'll be disruptors that disrupt many of the big companies that end up in a workflow that made sense 10 years ago and could be done very differently today, and this is very, very, very hard. Like, if you are the CFO at one of the big companies that is attached to, you know, some workflow solution that's been working for you for 10 years, how do you change that? You know, and the answer is you don't. You take the lowest approach, but that works five years, and maybe it works for 10, and then 15, somebody comes along and does it better. But that is where we are, and I think we should be very worried that, you know, generally the world out there is changing, and we're not changing fast enough.

Yeah. Now this brings me on — it sort of triggered a thought — you know, we're facing a massive skills gap. You know, we're losing people, and we're not as attractive as an industry as we used to be. People, you'll ask them where they want to go: "I work at Meta," "I work at Google." Do you think if we start to almost reach out and explain that we're hoping to move into that world, and we're trying to move into that world, we can entice the people we need to make that change? Or is that just too much to do at once?

You know, so my first reaction when you said that was, it's not a question of whether we're moving into their world — their world's coming into ours.

Yes, yep. No, no, yeah.

You know, every company you named there, in some way, is already a big player in delivery of content of some kind to users, and they're growing fast. You know, those companies are all so big that that is the world, and I just think we've got to work out how we adjust in it. I mean, there's no question on whether this is happening. We have to work it out, and I think it's a little scary.

Well, we were supposed to be democratising, and the big players, they're still there. I mean, it's a struggle, isn't it?

You know, the democratising is an interesting thing, because I think that, you know, at NewTek — people who follow NewTek, you know, if you listen to things I'd said, I'd always say what we believed as a company is we wanted to make video accessible to everybody. And the funny thing is that we built the tools, and we made it so that everybody could do that, and it didn't really happen, by the way. And I find that super interesting, that it was never that simple, because — and this maybe'll change now — the big players are still the big players.

That's been true.

But there's still a lot more content created, and it's still easier to produce content. And as much as, you know, in broadcast we go, "Well, people are spending, what, six hours of their day, give or take, in front of a TV" — I don't have more time to spend in front of a TV if I wanted to. I can't spend 12. But outside of that, you know what, I've got good friends at Epiphan, lecture capture. Business growing at 20% a year, and so they do lecture capture. People are using it for capturing lectures and sharing them with their students. And the use of video as a whole is growing super fast.

Yeah.

It's just not yet us.

No, no. And this brings me back. One of the massive things that I look at in technology, and when I'm working with clubs, is if you look and you say, "Okay, what if we democratise it?" You can democratise broadcast now. You can get what would be seen as a niche sport. You can pop up an automated 5G camera. You can use a bit of cloud-based production, and the volunteer coach can come out. And interestingly, when you look at that in grassroots football, the passion there — they'll pay. You know? They'll pay, you know, $5 to watch their grandson play.

Well, look. Okay. Do you have kids?

I've got three, yes. Teenage.

So, choice. Your kids have their high school finals, whatever, but it's on the same day as whatever team you support — which do you do?

Exactly. Yeah. You watch the kids.

It's funny because —

Well, yeah, only because Bristol City are not a big class.

But I think my point — anyway. You know, look, kids, family, the things around us, they actually matter really a lot to us. And, you know, the democratisation of video should mean that we can see our kids play, and we can see your local school and your local church. Like, that is actually super relevant content to people that they often care more about than anything else. And I think that, you know, that content has a lot of value. And I would like to see more of it, make it more accessible. Like, I think that would be good for us all, frankly.

Well, this showed up in the MediaTech report that IAMT put in, State of MediaTech: all the different verticals that used to be — someone niche might do places of worship. Someone might do a little bit of enterprise. And now, you know, that's high value to people. You know, you say to a CEO who's doing an all-hands broadcast to 10,000 of his employees, for him, that's Premier

League sport. You know? And so it's very interesting that this is coming into our world, and I think people need to embrace it more.

Yes, totally. And I think, you know, like, you named the CEO, and I think that's pretty easy. That's a production. But, you know, salespeople don't fly to visit customers one-to-one any more. They do a presentation online. The quality of that presentation matters.

Yeah. Well, that's it. Yeah.

You know, talk to your investors. The quality of that presentation matters.

You know, and I think it's also because there's so much content that's well produced that is of what we would call maybe little value in your company. You know, you can go through TikTok and go, "Geez, that's done well." It was, like, in someone's room. So if you don't do it when it's something important, it shows up.

Yeah. Look, you know, I think this goes back to kind of where we started, which is the need and use of video is going to grow. And it's going to grow in all sorts of places, and they're not going to just be broadcast — and they're probably not going to be broadcast. And I think that is what is actually very exciting. And, you know, what keeps me coming here, staying involved in this market, is because I believe there's something big there. And I think AI is disruptive in a way that we are underestimating.

Yeah. Exactly to that point, someone said — I was doing a presentation, I think it might have been at IBC when AI was just coming out — it's the worst it's ever going to be at the moment. You know, you see and you go, "This is amazing." And, you know, your vision would be really interesting to know: if we came in here, what we're going to see next year and what we're going to see from AI.

Well, what I'm worried is we'll come and see it exactly the same as it is this year. But let's imagine an alternate universe. By the way, I challenge us like that. It shouldn't be that way. We can do better than that. But I think that, you know, I find it hard a little bit to talk about AI, even though it's just very much what I am involved in and what I do. Because the problem is, I think, people jump to conclusions so easily and connect, you know, kind of all-seeing, all-dancing Borg-type AI.

They go straight to Terminator.

Yeah. You know? That's right. And, you know, it's getting smarter, and then they confuse LLMs. We're in the video industry. You know, look, we're in a studio here. And you've got great lighting. You've got pretty good cameras. You know, the thing that jumps out at me is, you know, I've spent a huge part of my career trying to democratise video production. And I think we have made it so that the production tools themselves are, in effect, free. I mean, they're probably not. You have to pay. But it's just so cheap that — but it's still hard to make great-looking video. Like, you guys know what you're doing. You've got the lights. But my kids at school — well, they aren't at school, unfortunately, but kids at school, you know, they produce video, and it doesn't look that great. And it's because there's still lots of it that is very hard. You still need lights. You still need makeup. You need —

Audio.

Audio.

It's the master one.

Great audio. And so I think the thing that's very interesting is we made production easy. Can AI help us make the rest of it easy? And it seems like it's totally an AI-solvable problem to fix lighting without needing lights. And that will be disruptive. And that will make high-quality video be able to be produced by far more people than today, because we made one large part of the stack really easy. But there's all these other parts that are still hard. And we're frankly ignoring — nobody is going, "AI's replacing lights." But actually the disruptive thing would be for AI to replace lights, because you need to do this. And so, like, that's what I hope we're going to see. I suspect we won't, but that's what I hope we're going to see.

Yeah. On that point, I mean, we'll continue this. This podcast could go for hours and hours. And your insight is always amazing. And, you know, I think we're very lucky to have you here.

Those feelings are mutual.

Yeah. So we're going to wrap up here, but we'll be back. Thank you, Andrew. And yeah, see you.

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