

Zest4.tv Delivers Quality

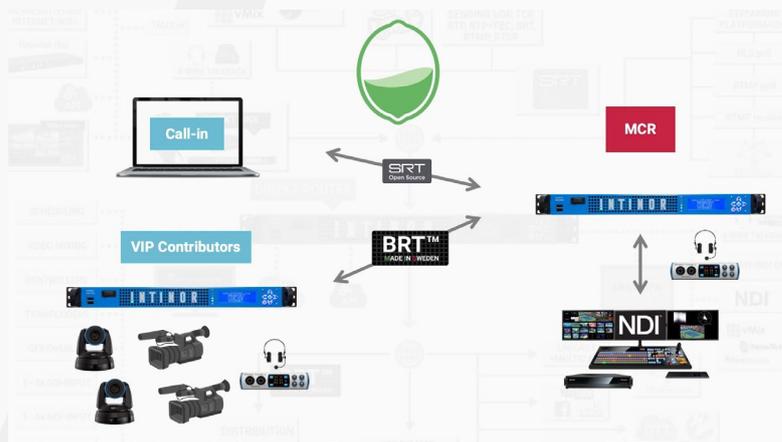


Zest4.tv is a live production company, supplying all the technology its client needs. Traditionally that started with the outside broadcast truck, along with live ingest, chase edit and complex audio. Those clients are in the live event, streaming and broadcast sectors, from the top broadcasters to live production agencies and corporates.

The company provides a one-stop shop, with the in-house planning and project management teams bolstered by engineers and operators as required.

Remote production was always a part of the vision for Zest4.tv, but the events of 2020 brought it front and centre. The company built three bespoke master control rooms at its west London headquarters, with a flexible design to allow them to tackle anything. With demand for remote production growing rapidly, it was vital to remain flexible. The MCRs are built around both traditional hardware and software systems connected over IP. The company has long relied on Dante for audio routing and management, and the new MCRs also feature NDI video over IP for internal signals and SRT for remote connectivity.

This flexibility means they can support simple call-in contributions where the talent uses their own home computer and internet connection, or they can deliver and operate care packages including cameras, microphones and encoders. The latter solution is appropriate for VIP contributors, as well as for clients who have their own established technology platforms.



“Absolutely central to making remote production work is reliable, high quality and cost-effective contribution circuits,” said Gareth Hopkins, operations director for Zest4.TV. “If we are not getting a stable video and audio stream coming into the MCR, then nothing else matters.”

“We looked around, and the Intinor Direkt platform stood out for us,” Hopkins continued. “First, they offered the flexibility that we knew we needed, with the ability to route a large variety of IP and baseband signals in and out of the Direkt encoders and decoders. Whatever we have at the remote end we can multiplex and stream to the MCR, where the Direkt decoder outputs native NDI to go straight into our operations.”

As an example of what the set-up can do, Hopkins described a recent project where Zest4.tv worked for the streaming company Groovy Gecko, who were providing the streaming solution, on a live fashion programme for the online retailer Pretty Little Thing. Pretty Little Thing has its own facilities in Manchester, but for this Pink Friday production the show was run from London.

“We sent just one engineer to Manchester,” Hopkins explained. “We used the client’s two cameras, plus two wireless microphones, which we fed into the Direkt router rack for delivery over the public internet to our London MCR. Also part of the connection were two four-wire comms circuits, connecting our Dante in-house network with a Clear-com Freespeak unit on site for production talkback and a separate circuit for the presenters’ in-ear talkback.

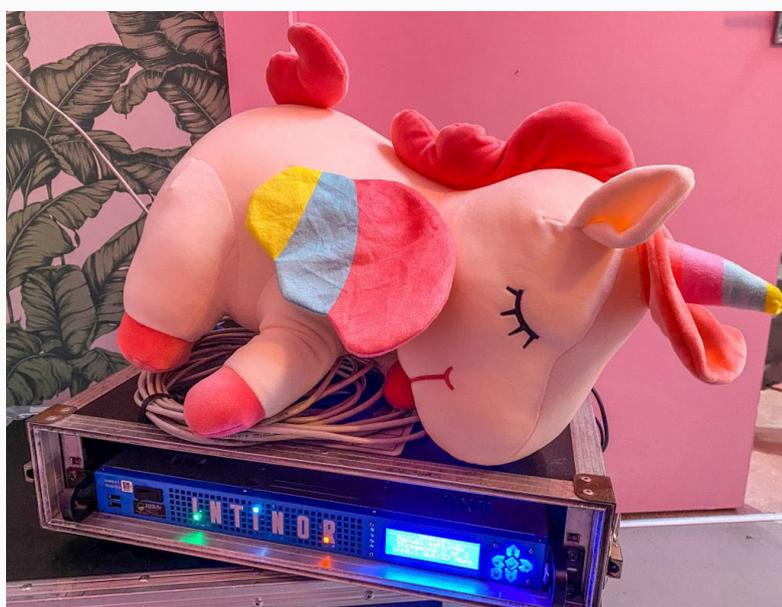
“At the London end the Intinor Direkt router decoded the video and embedded audio and presented it as NDI, which we passed through our in-house 10 gigabit ethernet, ready to be mixed on VMix,” he continued. “Over the same connection we sent a mix-minus transmission feed back to the Manchester studio, so the presenter could see the full programme feed with graphics and inserts.”

One of the reasons that Intinor can deliver high quality at manageable data rates and low latency is that it uses its own transport protocol, Bifrost. This incorporates forward error correction which greatly increases the resilience of the signal at a marginal increase in latency. For Pink Friday, the end-to-end latency was around 0.9 seconds while maintaining excellent HD quality.

The flexibility of the Intinor connectivity platform is seen by Zest4.tv as a commercial benefit as well as an operational one. “The way that options are separate licences means that we can build what we need,” Hopkins said.

“When we started with Intinor we did not actually know what options we would require over time, so we initially purchased the hardware of the Direkt routers along with the standard features,” he said. “Then, as different projects needed slightly different functionality, we added licences for SRT, RTMP send and receive, NDI and four-wire talkback.

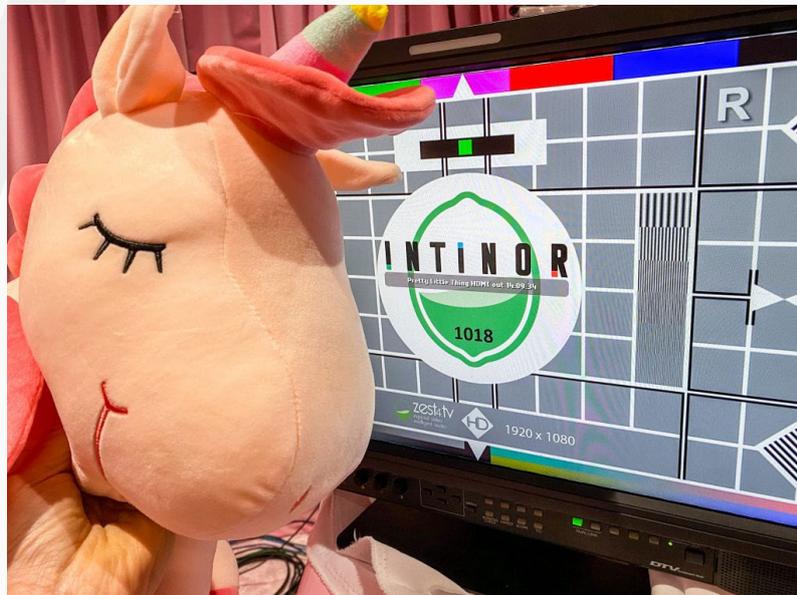
“The Direkt routers and software are incredibly easy to control remotely via a web page, so it is now normal to send a minimal crew to the location – who may never have seen a Direkt router before – knowing they can power it up and plug in the local equipment.



“We do all the configuration and routing from our MCR, or even from a home office. And that same web user interface gives us a realtime dashboard on the health of the feeds at each stage – a real benefit during configuration, testing and live broadcast,” Hopkins said. “Intinor is the choice for remote production if you want a super flexible unit, with the ability to upgrade the licences overnight. The Customer Support from Intinor is also superb, with the Intinor team willing to assist no matter how small the problem. It seems there is always a solution they can offer to our specific networking on interconnection issue on a particular project”

Zest4.tv sees Intinor as a key part of remote production, and remote production as a game-changer for the industry. “During the covid-19 pandemic, we need to keep our crews safe, and remote production allows us to use minimal on-location crews and keep everyone safe,” according to Zest4.tv’s Hopkins.

“Long-term, we have proved the practicality and effectiveness of remote production with work across the UK and into Europe,” he added. “By reducing the size of the crew on the road we have reduced carbon emissions and reduced the budget for travel, hotel and catering, as well as giving our people a better work/life balance.”



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