

Hybrid internet TV makes progress

Project Canvas would be open to rival providers, says Eric Pfanner

Internet television has become so popular that some European broadcasters want to put it on TV — the one in the living room.

In Britain, the BBC and several partners are working on a more ambitious project to bring what is called catch-up TV and a variety of other programming and interactive services to television sets as soon as next year. Why would viewers, who already get dozens of channels over the air, via cable or satellite or through their telephone lines, need yet another way to watch television?

Catch-up services, like the iPlayer of the BBC in Britain and Hulu in the United States, have attracted millions of users on the Internet, allowing them to fit TV viewing into busy schedules. But they have been available only on computers. The new technology, called hybrid television because it uses over-the-air transmission as well as broadband connections, would do more.

Supporters of the technology say it will open up possibilities like those enabled by the iPhone from Apple, which allows independent developers to create customized applications. Imagine watching a cooking program that ended with a page of links to similar, archived ones, for example, or to the Web sites of online retailers selling the ingredients.

"This crosses the Rubicon," said Gavin Patterson, chief executive of the retail division of BT, the British telecommunications company, which has joined the BBC and two other broadcasters, ITV and Five, in the hybrid TV enterprise called Project Canvas. "It is truly the moment when the Internet and the television come together."

Many broadcasters have been wary of

embracing the Internet for fear of cannibalising their audiences and undermining more lucrative television advertising. But now, with TV ad revenue plunging anyway during the recession, some broadcasters are reconsidering. And even European public television providers, which are less reliant on advertising — or, in the case of the BBC, entirely free of it — worry about how they will maintain audiences when other media options are proliferating.

Richard Halton, who leads the BBC's work on so-called Internet protocol television, said Project Canvas, as the hybrid TV partnership is called, was a natural outgrowth of Freeview, a digital, over-the-air TV system that beams out dozens of channels, much like cable and satellite services, but for no charge. It is the main TV system in 10 million of the 25 million British homes with televisions.

Indeed, Canvas is called a hybrid technology because it would use the Freeview system to provide regularly scheduled programming, while a broadband connection would deliver Internet services as well as on-demand content. While some of these programs might require payment, nobody would have to subscribe.

Before Canvas supplants Freeview, though, it faces regulatory scrutiny. The BBC's involvement in the project could face opposition from British Sky Broadcasting, the leading pay-TV provider in Britain, which resents the BBC's expansion into new areas. The BBC Trust, which oversees the BBC, is set to rule this autumn on whether Project Canvas will proceed.

Each of which could offer its own package of movies, sports or other programming. All of this would be organized in a single electronic program guide, controlled by one remote device and accessible via a search engine. To use these services, viewers would need new set-top boxes, which the partners aim to have on the market next year.

The German-led hybrid TV project, which has lined up support from several French broadcasters and a range of tech-

nology companies, is less far-reaching, seeking simply to create a set of hybrid TV standards for broadcasters and makers of TVs and set-top boxes. Broadcasters could then create and market their own hybrid services.

Klaus Merkel, project manager for Hybrid Broadcast Broadband Television, or HbbTV, at the German Institute for Broadcast Technology, a partner in the project, said it would be easier to bring new services to market if no "gatekeeper" were involved.

Some televisions soon to be introduced in Germany will be able to connect directly to the hybrid services, he said. Mr. Halton at the BBC says he hopes that Canvas will be in use for the 2012 Olympic Games. "You open up this huge world of potential content and services," Mr. Halton said.

The New York Times



Currently BBC iPlayer TV programmes are available in the UK only

On IP, TV viewing is more exciting

For a long time, the industry has been talking about the idea of convergence — amalgamating the richness of information available on the internet over the wealth of visual and audio information wafting around in the radio waves. IPTV, the concept of broadcasting television programmes over the Internet Protocol (IP) platform, has been the answer many were looking for.

A maturing television market and the growing need amongst the operators to make their services appealing has made this the right time for IPTV to take-off in Bangalore.

Among many cable operators, Atria has taken the lead in terms of packing in their services with more features certain to increase the numbers of couch potatoes.

ACTV (the re-branded cable services of the Atria group) launched its IPTV service a few months ago with the promise of adding more attractive features and it seem

to have done precisely that now, as we enter the festive season.

Besides familiar things like Video-On-Demand, which lets users choose from a long list of movies and songs to play at their convenience, the operator has now brought internet over television. Through the compact set top box (STB) installed at the user's end, they can browse the net with the help of the remote that accompanies the STB. The operator's patented convergence technology allows users to watch virtually any channel across the world available on the IPTV platform.

YouTube tie-up

The operators have also tied up with YouTube to let users play thousands of videos on the YouTube site, from songs to college lectures. Unlike in the PC, ACTV claim that YouTube videos start playing in no time.

The "spot record" feature could be something many television viewers would welcome, since they can choose to record one of their favourite programmes while they watch another, or switch on the record button while they step out for work. The "My personal media" feature, users can transfer all their pictures and videos on to their television and watch them or even play the personal music collection.

ACT Television Pvt Ltd (ACT), the flagship of the Atria group, a triple play multi-service operator (MSO) based in Bangalore, has been providing cable TV, Digital TV, IPTV and other broadband services. For the past nine years, ACT has been serving over a lakh customers in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. ACT is spearheaded by Sunder Raju who has founded computer firms and hotels.

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