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Broadcasting Industry Gearing Up for True Mobile Television

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With frequent announcements about network sitcoms and sporting events being available over cell phone networks, the average consumer may feel that mobile television is already a mainstream reality. Not really.

The trailblazing efforts of companies such as Sling Media (Slingback), MobiTV, MediaFlo and Orb Networks are to be applauded. They are providing consumers with snatches of broadcast television on mobile devices and home computers, and their technological achievements are impressive. Like all pioneering efforts, they are priming the market and creating consumer demand for content that once seemed unobtainable away from a stationary TV set.

At the same time, current mobile TV offerings have significant limitations that are raising questions about the long-term viability of existing cellular-based models. For example, will consumers be content for long with watching brief snippets of their favorite programs on a cell phone as they bus or BART or Metro to work? In addition, we need to keep in mind that the programming available today is coming, for the most part, over the same cellular networks that a few years ago were considered to be excelling if they managed to limit dropped calls to a reasonable percentage. Those networks have been beefed up recently, and terms such as EDGE, EV-DO and the Holy Grail – 3G – are highly touted for their ability to carry voice, data and video at the same time. The reality is that these networks cannot sustain live broadcast programming to large numbers of people.

Beyond network limitations, think also about the programming itself. “Desperate Housewives” clips are fine, but what about the vast array of other offerings we’ve become used to receiving over broadcast channels: live sports, news and, most important, local content? No mobile TV experience will be complete if it contains only snippets of programming that networks decide to parcel out to various wireless carriers. Consumers need and want relevant and local content. No one is going to feel truly connected if their mobile device is showing a network show while a hurricane is ravaging their downtown district or the mayor is caught in a scandal. We want and expect the immediacy of local broadcast television.

The Broadcasters’ Advantage

Now think about the desirability of receiving your normal TV fare on a mobile device, delivered in full-motion video and complete with local news, weather and sports, plus opportunities to capitalize on local bargains, specials and events. This is content that cannot be provided by current mobile video providers, but is just around the corner for the broadcast industry. We’ve all seen the announcements about the cross-over from analog transmission of broadcast signals to digital, set by law to occur by February 2009. Broadcasters should view that date as an opportunity, indeed, as the launch pad for true mobile digital TV. There is a tremendous consumer benefit to be derived from digitizing the broadcast signal. And the broadcasting industry has been working for the last few years to ensure that existing and new broadcast

content will be available to a wide variety of mobile and handheld devices – not only mobile phones and PDAs, but portable computers, in-car TV screens and devices we haven't thought of yet.

As with any new technology, mobile broadcast TV requires technical standards so that equipment manufacturers can provide handsets and other consumer devices. Fortunately, the nation's broadcasters have been smart about making this new future a reality. They have banded together to provide the fullest support for the standards-setting process. The organization I represent, the Open Mobile Video Coalition, is a voluntary association of more than 850 private and public broadcast stations that have united to accelerate the development of mobile digital TV, and we have made considerable progress. Working together with the international standards-setting organization, the Advanced Television Systems Committee (ATSC), we are on track for adoption of a Candidate mobile/handheld standard by this fall, and the final standard by July of 2009.

A key milestone in this effort was completion of field trials of proponent mobile TV systems this past February, March and April in the San Francisco Bay Area and Las Vegas. Sponsored by the OMVC and managed by the Association for Maximum Service Television (MSTV), the field trials accumulated more than 140 hours of mobile data over 1,000 miles of testing. Those trials conclusively proved the viability of high-speed mobile digital TV at distances of up to 40 miles from broadcast transmitters, and found that the service does not interfere with regular FCC-compliant broadcasting.

Just as OMVC was presenting the trial results to ATSC for incorporation into a Candidate Standard, two of the electronics manufacturers involved in the field trials – LG Electronics and Samsung Electronics – announced that they were joining forces to present a unified technology to ATSC. This was a significant step forward, and demonstrated the faith of two of the world's leading electronics companies in the promise of broadcast-initiated mobile DTV. In a press release announcing their collaboration, the companies cited a study conducted for the National Association of Broadcasters that predicted there would be 130 million mobile DTV phones and another 25 million portable mobile DTV receivers in the U.S. market by the end of 2012.

Next Steps

As important as the standards-setting process is, it is far from the whole story of getting broadcasters ready to become mobile content providers. OMVC is planning to conduct consumer trials later this year in cooperation with LG and Samsung, and will push for full standardization and product development following anticipated adoption of a Candidate Standard. Although the expense of converting broadcast transmitters to mobile TV stations is relatively slight compared to the cost of constructing a broadband wireless network from scratch, it is still an expense that local broadcast stations must bear. It is our goal at OMVC to work with the industry to prove the benefits of becoming mobile DTV providers, and to encourage the rollout of services that will convince consumers that the only true mobile television experience is that provided by local broadcasters.

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