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Ready of Not, Here Comes the Content

by Tim Young

What's that old counterculture catchphrase? "The Revolution will not be televised?" Well, perhaps not. It seems, however, that there is a revolution already in motion on *how* things are televised.

Well, maybe not *televised* per se, (though with HD approaching, and a now-vacant 700mhz bandwidth being auctioned off to the highest bidder, that's definitely a topic worth chatting about. See our story on the auction in last month's issue), but the ways in which content is delivered is certainly changing. The types of content we're receiving are also growing and shifting.

Tuning In

What types of new content are we expecting? An ever-expanding collection of streaming video applications, for one. High definition video, at that. Crisp. Clean. Add to that a wide variety of new games and software applications. The slow death of discs and tapes other physical delivery devices.

There's the impact of web-only programming that dozens of traditional television networks have adopted. There's also, of course, the impact of user-generated content on both sides of the pipe. Strictly online broadcasting of current regular television programs, as well, adds to the issue. I, for one, have been in places before without access to my TiVo (if you ever need to buy me a gift, it seems a Slingbox would be in order...) and have been very happy that another maddeningly confusing episode of *Lost* is just a click away. In fact, while online viewership is still considerably less pervasive than traditional television, the potential for future use is great.

Just ask the Writers Guild of America. It was residuals for "new media" (on-demand, IPTV, direct-to-net content, etc) that led the writer's union to strike, much to the chagrin of media companies and viewers alike.

So what is the state of online content? This "new media." A study by comscore released in February shows a definite surge in online viewership, possibly spurred, interestingly enough, by the very writers strike that was spurred, in part, by web content. In December of 2007, the report states, U.S. Internet users viewed over

10 billion videos. Google sites (including YouTube) were responsible for nearly 3.4 billion of those videos.

Anecdotally, I have a comedian friend who makes videos for his own site, but also places the content on YouTube. One recent video, which couldn't have cost more than a couple hundred dollars to produce, has been viewed nearly 4.5 million times (as of our publication date). Therein lies the attraction of the "new media." Low barriers to entry. Direct avenues for creativity.
Still, the comscore study goes on to state that though nearly 141 million Americans watched online videos in December of 2007, online viewers consumed an average of 3.4 hours of online content *per month.* Compared to traditional television, that's certainly not much. Many viewers watch that much TV in a single day.

Still, the implications are striking. New media is a fount of potential. That figure of 3.4 hours of content per month was up 34 percent from the beginning of 2007. Such increases are certainly worth noting.

Managing the shift

So what are the pain points for providers and consumers alike? How are OSS vendors adjusting to meet these needs?

First of all, new and different content raises the question of managing products in a telecom environment. The difficult starting place in such a puzzle is defining what, exactly, a product is. This issue was tackled at length by some top minds at a Tribold-sponsored round table in Dallas, which led to a Pipeline article in our January issue. I point to it now because the definitions of products and services is no less muddled now than it was a few months ago. Add to that a spate of *new* products and services that must be delivered to the consumer in order to remain competitive, and you have a truly boggling task at hand.

Then there's the issue of making sure that new technologies can be delivered in a way that transcends novelty and rises to the level of true quality. For advanced content, quality of service is always a concern. Packet loss for a data connection is one thing. Excessive lag can be annoying, but most delay is barely felt. For voice connections, packet loss is certainly more of an issue. Jitter and delay are still major issues, and one reason that digital voice is distrusted by many. However, occasional stutter is anticipated and largely forgiven by the masses. However, video, for starters, simply must live up to a certain quality in order to be viable in the market. Current consumers have access to high definition content via airwaves and cable connections and online streaming channels. The picture and sound should be of the utmost quality in order to please customers and stave off competitors.

Then, of course, there's the question of access. Bandwidth is always at a premium and build-outs take time. In our February issue, we explored some new and changing access technologies. Those included WiMAX, FTTx, and advanced cable. Of these, the clear favorite for advanced content is FTTx. It's a big pipe with a lot of potential. Then again, rolling it out is time-consuming and massively expensive. WiMAX, likewise, is capable of carrying content to mobile devices in a way that's fast, efficient, and compelling.

One of the chief questions overlaying the entire issue of advanced content is the question of who should be spending their time and resources developing applications and services for the end user. Should it be the companies that own the network, or third parties? That's a touchy topic for some network owners who are adamant about not becoming just a pipe for someone else's bits. Then again, the firms that develop the cutting edge content people want clearly have no delivery mechanism other than the networks owned by the very companies that view them as competition.

So who is best equipped to bring the content to the masses? The folks at LTC, International make a pretty compelling argument in this month's issue for a "community garden" approach, in which the Edge (device and over-the-top service companies) and the Core (network owners and operators) cooperate fully, with each faction fulfilling certain responsibilities for the good of the industry and the consumer. In my estimation, few other solutions seem as reasonable. Should the content providers attempt to acquire greater and greater chunks of the network? Should network providers continue to steer away from their core competencies to tackle projects that third parties are already doing, often with greater speed, skill, and cost-effectiveness? Should they acquire these third parties? Risky business, that. Content is only worth having if there is a demand. Demand is driven by the market. The market is driven by people. In case you haven't been paying attention to the goings-on of the world, people are maddeningly fickle. Especially when it comes to entertainment and technology.

Get Fit. Get Ready

The long and the short if it all is that the world of content isn't getting any simpler. Service providers need to gear up if they are to match demand that continues to grow and change. The content is out there, and a dedicated consumers can eat up huge amounts of bandwidth taking it all in. Limitations can certainly be put on bandwidth, but it's obviously a more attractive option to be able to meet the needs and wants of the consumer. That being the case, it's time to gear up, bite down, and get ready for a revolution.

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