

## HbbTV Overture Couched in Terms of Comfort

By Don Fujiwara

Ah, the couch. The unsung hero of the living room, the couch is, at once, a repository for loose change and petrified, half-eaten Twizzlers; the surrogate scratching post of wayward housecats; and the nighttime destination for those unfortunate enough to have forgotten an anniversary.

And now, thanks to those behind Hybrid Broadcast Broadband Television (HbbTV), the simple couch is grabbing its own little piece of the living room limelight. The HbbTV coalition believes its hybrid digital TV standard opens up new avenues for communications service providers to push content directly to the consumer, all in the comfort of their very own living room. The coalition refers to it as a “couch-oriented TV environment.”

HbbTV is both a digital TV standard and the marketing platform driving it. At its root, it is an open standard developed to converge broadcast, IPTV, and broadband internet through one set-top box to your hybrid digital television. With a single remote, you can call up such features as VOD, electronic program guides (EPGs), teletext-based functions, catch-up TV, DVR, and internet applications in one, interactive package. Sounds awesome, right?

But HbbTV is not so much a new technology as it is



a narrowing down of profiles of available standards, like Open IPTV Forum (OIPF), CEA-2014 (CE-HTML), and the DVB Application Signalling Specification. In a 2010 whitepaper titled, “[Hybrid Broadband Broadcast TV V.1.1.1 Explained](#),” mediatvcom (one of HbbTV’s original supporters) wrote, “This approach is extremely valuable in terms of developments costs and, more importantly, time-to-market.”

The standard itself shows promise. Boiling equipment needs down to one set-top box, one TV and one remote removes the PC from the loop, and makes the couch life that much easier. The open standard promotes usability across free-to-air, cable, satellite, and internet, plus it affords versatility and choice. Not to mention, we’ve only really just scratched the surface of the potentials of HbbTV applications and interactivity. As an added bonus, over-the-top (OTT) and other internet content can also be channeled directly into your living room via HbbTV.

HbbTV began as the marriage of two separate projects in February 2009: the French H4TV and German HTML profile projects. HbbTV has since crossed the channel from France and Germany to the UK, and three public networks in Holland had slated pilot broadcasts of “red button” applications for September of this year.

Pipeline conducted a Q&A with Steve Morris, systems analyst at ANT Software in the UK. Morris says HbbTV’s European presence is “shaping up well” and adds, “We’re not only seeing more HbbTV services being launched in those markets where it’s already deployed, but also seeing more interest from markets where it’s not been formally adopted yet.”

While France and Germany have already embraced hybrid television, several other European countries are taking a look at how HbbTV suits their market needs, and Austria, Switzerland, and Spain are



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actively moving toward the standard.

The European Telecommunications Standards Institute (ETSI) published HbbTV's specification under reference [ETSI TE 102 796](#) back in June of 2010. According to Morris, HbbTV benefits from its pragmatic approach to standardization. The simplicity of the standard facilitates shipment of products and services, and this makes HbbTV attractive to manufacturers and CSPs. Says Morris, "With HbbTV 1.5 on the horizon... HbbTV is continuing this approach of evolving based on real market needs rather than technology push."

"What's most interesting about HbbTV's presence at exhibitions and conferences recently," he adds, "is that HbbTV is no longer being demonstrated as a new technology: now it's something that people expect to see and is more of a 'table stakes' feature for device manufacturers."

Clearly, HbbTV is gaining momentum in Europe, but the question remains, will HbbTV make it in the United States? Or will it meet with the same tepid reception that IPTV has?

#### What's in it for CSPs?

Will the direct window to the couch prove enough of an incentive for CSPs in the U.S. to adopt HbbTV? Viaccess—a DTV solutions provider and France Telecom subsidiary—says pay-TV incumbents are vulnerable to competition from new entrants, and it

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behooves them to make their wares more attractive to customers. Viaccess lists scaled-down software costs from open standard use as another key selling point. They see the additional benefit of increased competition among set-top box manufacturers driving down procurement costs for operators. "As a result, operators can continue to focus on their core business: aggregate the best contents and package them into the most appealing offers," said Viaccess in its marketing whitepaper, "[HbbTV Solution for Hybrid Broadcast/OTT Operators](#)."

In the aforementioned whitepaper from mediatvcom, that firm says, "In the future, every consumer will receive Digital TV, or at least DTT. This will be a huge drive for demand, allowing markets to reach a significant leverage in terms of potential users compared to interactive TV systems deployed on walled markets (DTH, IPTV...)."

Stefan Schneiders, head of mobile TV solutions at

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Nokia-Siemens, told me in a Q&A, “HbbTV provides opportunities regarding over-the-top TV offerings for communications service providers. Most CSPs would appreciate and require an eco-system which includes options for pay-TV requirements.”

Steve Morris sees HbbTV as the first choice for those CSPs looking to implement HTML-based TV. HbbTV’s widespread support from manufacturers positions it to fulfill a role as a critical platform upon which hybrid TV applications can be developed.

As Morris points out, “More and more service providers are launching quality HbbTV services that are more than just EPGs or teletext applications and that provide a revenue stream. These are not just VOD stores, but online shopping, interactive ads and other kinds of pay services that can build a lasting relationship with end users.”

#### What’s in it for B/OSS?

The [HbbTV coalition member roll](#) features prominent names in broadcasting (like Canal+, France Télévisions, and TF1), consumer electronics (LG, Philips, and Sony) and software (ANT and Opera). Absent is the presence of the bigger OSS/BSS players; the HbbTV coalition names Alcatel-Lucent and Cisco as supporters, however Nokia-Siemens Networks is about the biggest name representing our space in the consortium’s members list. Nokia-Siemens is a founding member of the OIPF standard on which HbbTV is, in part, based. According to Schneiders, Nokia joined the HbbTV organization in 2011 because it “recognized a demand for fast implementation for HbbTV kinds of services.”

Schneiders says Nokia’s involvement in HbbTV stems from its role as a leading supplier for IPTV, adding, “Interactive TV services like HbbTV and other connected TV applications are local evolutions of our TV solutions.” Interestingly, the OpenHbb project—which aims to deliver open tools for application authoring, code validation, broadcast scheduling, and HbbTV middleware programming—is headed up by recent Amdocs acquisition Streamezzo. Recall, Amdocs acquired the rich media developer in May of 2010, ostensibly, to expand its digital device services offering.

In March of this year, Giles Cottle, the principal analyst at Informa who follows broadband content

**More and more service providers are launching quality HbbTV services that provide a revenue stream.**

and devices, posted “[Five Things We Learned at IP&TV World Forum](#),” in which he observed, “for now, HbbTV is solely a broadcaster play.”

With that said, in a climate where so many CSPs are wrestling with OTT and multi-screen offerings, it may just prove worth their whiles to explore opportunities in offering a consolidated service experience directly to the TV.

For OSS, the opportunity lies in software solutions to power HbbTV compliant set top boxes and services but, as mentioned before, the field of HbbTV applications is a fertile one. Once service providers learn to navigate and leverage the couch-oriented environment, opportunities to enhance the customer experience will arise. The interactivity of HbbTV, in conjunction with open standards, opens up a new TV-based avenue for billing and customer care, whereby the consumer can interact with the CSP with the same remote he or she uses to change channels or record shows. Looking out even further, interactive advertising, or even polling opportunities could be integrated into the mix.

#### HbbTV Receives Mixed Reviews

But it’s not all comfy throw pillows for HbbTV.

Cottle doesn’t see HbbTV assuming the role of “pay-TV destroyer” that some make it out to be. He says that in the HbbTV coalition’s “attempts to ring-fence HbbTV for the benefit of the broadcasters, [they] are limiting its usefulness,” and though functional and useful, most HbbTV demonstrations add “little beyond what is already available via digital Teletext.”

Anthony Smith-Chaigneau, chairman of the Commercial Module Multimedia Home Platform (CM-MHP)—a subgroup of the DVB CM—leveled criticism in his “[HBB & HbbTV in the MHP Environment](#)” whitepaper. Smith-Chaigneau contends HbbTV is “re-inventing the wheel” to deliver the same thing that the Globally Executable MHP (GEM) standard already does.

According to Steve Morris, coexistence with middleware technologies, like MHP, will continue to be an issue, albeit an addressable one. Says Morris:

“Even in markets where there is an incumbent middleware solution such as MHP and no ‘official’ adoption of HbbTV, manufacturers will be shipping HbbTV products. Even if it isn’t used with broadcast services, HbbTV still provides a powerful platform for deploying portal-based services. By enabling service providers such as VOD stores to build a single application and deploy it on a range of receivers, HbbTV is proving popular even for portal-based applications.”

In a September 2010 report, Informa research predicted, “platforms that aggregate services rather than any individual device will play the most important role in the connected home in the next five years.”

They see connected TVs supplanting internet connected gaming consoles as the primary device in the connected home, but do not believe that one device or manufacturer will come to dominate the connected home the way platforms, like HbbTV, will. Informa posits that the expected high penetration, third-party services, and significant resources behind the connected TV platforms will likely earn them prime position in the connected home. Informa Analyst Andrew Ladbroke wrote, “The launch of Google TV, Canvas, and HbbTV means that consumer choice of online video in the living room will be vastly greater than ever before.” Ladbroke, however, also raised the caveat that getting viewers to incorporate a keyboard into their TV regimens could dilute hybrid television’s mass market appeal.

#### **The Big Question: How Will HbbTV Fare Outside Europe?**

While Morris sees “definite interest” in HbbTV abroad, he says actual adoption will take more time, as CSPs are waiting to see how it pans out globally. ANT has worked with a number of U.S. companies who have an interest in building expertise and understanding of “what is needed to deploy HbbTV solutions both in Europe and elsewhere.”

While deployment of HbbTV in the U.S. presents no major technical hurdles, Morris states, “The biggest

factor would probably be the relationships between the different parts of the value chain, and how these relationships differ between Europe and the U.S. However, this would largely depend on the markets in which HbbTV was deployed in the U.S.”

Stefan Schneiders at Nokia-Siemens says it is difficult to forecast how HbbTV will be received in the U.S. He says, “Even in Europe the success depends very much on national demands [and] the U.S. TV market is very different from European TV markets. The offering from public TV stations and cultural behavior regarding revenue streams are totally different... Therefore, we don’t expect a fast penetration of HbbTV in American markets.”

#### **A Matter of Comfort**

It is by no means a foregone conclusion that HbbTV will take off in the U.S. Certainly, the coalition has made its marketing overture, complete with an appealing, giftwrapped package singing the praises of HbbTV. However, the reality is that cable TV is deeply ingrained in the viewing habits of Americans, and this presents more of an obstacle to HbbTV than the cablecos themselves. Even the most tech-savvy Americans can be a bit phobic of newfangled things coming out of Europe, and some may even be willing to pay more for non-converged and non-interactive cable and internet. But, this might boil down to a matter of maintaining individual comfort zones. To succeed in the U.S.—a market where IPTV has underperformed relative to OTT and Cable offerings—and elsewhere, the HbbTV coalition may find that it needs to appeal more directly to the IPTV providers who stand to benefit the most by leveraging HbbTV.

So, for now, all the overworked sofas of America can breathe a sigh of relief, as we couch potatoes will have to wait for HbbTV to make its way over here.