



It's Not About Video.... It's About Me!

By: Kurt Michel

As an industry insider, I am continually amazed at the innovation that the internet has unleashed for the everyday viewer. At the turn of the century (yes, this one), I certainly did not think we would be watching video over the Internet. Managed IPTV networks? Sure, that made sense. But the wild west of the unmanaged Internet seemed too great a challenge, given the stringent requirements of video delivery.

But then came a variety of new streaming protocols which made Internet video possible, from Flash to Adaptive Bitrate (ABR) over HTTP, enabling the use of Content Delivery Networks for high quality streaming. Companies like Microsoft, Adobe, and Apple were all pushing in the direction of video delivered “over the top” of an Internet connection, and the packaging competition between HLS, Smooth, and HDS ensued, with MPEG-DASH pitched as the “everything” format. We also had the codec battles: MPEG2, AVC/H.264, VPx, WMV, Theora, HEVC/H.265... and a variety of other skirmishes along the way. Being an industry participant, I’d read the articles, talk to peers, and do whatever is needed to stay on top of the tech.

As all of this was going on, the constant question was “will OTT ever take over traditional TV delivery (cable, satellite, terrestrial, etc)?” I knew smart people in both

campus who made compelling arguments on both sides. Coming from almost a decade in the Voice-over-IP (VoIP) space prior to shifting my focus to video, many of the “con” arguments sounded familiar, and most boiled down to this: “The Internet was not designed for that.”

Since I came from the VoIP space, I should have known how this would go. The internet brought new competition to the telephone companies on the “wired” side of the network. New types of telephone devices and services emerged – “IP Phones” that simply connected to business IP networks, and services such as Vonage that allowed us to plug our traditional phones into an internet-connected device. In the face of this, the phone companies continued to tout the benefits of “toll-grade voice” provided by the traditional phone connected to that copper loop coming into your house - even as they switched the core of their networks to use VoIP technology for the cost savings. And then came “Free global calling” from Skype and others. Many consumers were willing to give up “toll quality” for “free”.

On the wireless side of the network, mobile phones also lacked toll quality, but consumers were willing to give that up for mobility, as long as the quality was not too bad... remember “can you hear me now?” And then along came HD voice, which made



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toll grade voice sound weak, so long as the IP connection was good. The telephone companies no longer even had the quality advantage. Today, I had a Skype call while driving my car, and the voice quality was better than many of the mobile “on-network” or landline calls that I make.

Along the way, our mobile phones became text and email handlers, cameras, recorders, music players...feature upon feature, in the palm of your hand. We called that the “smartphone.” I look at a wired phone now – even the IP phone in my office, and it strikes me as dumb. The dumbphone.

And finally, to the everyday consumer, all the innovation, buzzwords, and tech – the HOW – was irrelevant. They only cared about the call. Anything that got in the way of that was bad. Anything that made it easier was good. Very simple.

But another thing happened on the way. The voice device became personal. The wired phone, at least for the general consumer, had been a shared device. Some of you may remember being on the phone when someone picked up another extension in the house, and suddenly, without warning, you were on a 3-way call! We can argue whether that was a feature (parent perspective) or a problem (teen perspective), but it was certainly not personal.

Can you think of anyone who shares a smartphone? It is one of the most personal devices you own.

Does any of this sound familiar?

So back to video – which once was just television. I find it interesting that the word



television, when used alone, refers to the programming; but when used with an article (“the television”, or “a television”) it refers to a device. The television was – and still is, for the most part – a community device. Impersonal, like the wired phone. In fact, it was generally THE video device in the home, and television (programming) was designed for that device, taking into account the inherent technical limitations and everything about the way that device was used. The ad-based model, the way content was designed for ad-breaks, the way the audience was measured, what time the show would be broadcast... an entire paradigm and industry built around community viewing on impersonal devices.

And then the Internet happened to television.

As an industry, we have done a great job with innovating around the technical limitations of the Internet. I can stream 4K video today!

But our industry continues to struggle with the shift to personal viewing devices, and the impact they are having across the entire video business, from content creation to distribution and delivery. From measurement to monetization. Many innovators are looking at the mobile world for insight, which should not be surprising, given the analogies between the evolution of the “personal smartphone” and the personal viewing device. Hence, we have apps for content. Lots of apps. Too many apps!

As a result of these inherent qualities of the “television” experience, I try very hard to limit my use of the “TV” and “television” terms to mean specifically that experience, which is just one of a variety of video viewing modes. We are now in the video age, and we own video devices. The television is just one of many video devices. It is probably the best device to present television programming, but a “smart TV” or “connected TV” is also great for the broad array of video programming,

and can be used for both personal and community viewing. The message here? It’s about viewers and the video they want – all of it, not just the traditional TV experience.

Once again, we must start with the consumer. All the innovation, buzzwords, and tech – the HOW – is still irrelevant. They only care about the content. Anything that gets in the way of that is bad. Anything that makes it easier is good. Very simple. Our challenge as an industry is to make that happen, so that one day, hopefully soon, the viewer can say “show me something good”, and their personal device, using everything it “knows” about the viewer – the who, what, when, where, and why of the moment – has anticipated this request, and does exactly that. And by content, I include not only the entertainment, but also the ad content that is relevant to the viewer.

For our viewers, it is “all about me.” Without a firm focus on that, you someday might find yourself offering dumbTV. □



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