

Globe Talk: Bets are on for mobile TV

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An alliance between some of the biggest names in information technology is always bound to pique the interest of industry analysts, and the latest collaborative effort between titans is no exception. Still, there is concern among some analysts that too many hopes are being put into the future of mobile entertainment, and perhaps that there simply aren't enough people out there who want to watch television while on the go.

Such concerns are not, however, in the minds of many of the industry's top executives.

Earlier this week senior officials from Intel, Motorola, Modeo, Nokia, and Texas Instruments met in Las Vegas and announced that they would be working together to encourage the development of mobile television by forming an organization called the Mobile DTV Alliance.

The group will be collaborating to create an open procedure standard for broadcast digital TV reception on mobile devices, a move welcomed by many in the industry.

"Good for them for coming together to create some kind of standard," said Kurt Beyer, president of digital media solutions provider Riptopia, pointing out that companies have oftentimes failed to collaborate in working on technological developments, which ultimately hurts consumers.

Meanwhile, hopes are high for a market that wants to watch television on the go.

"The mobile TV market is heating up, with both trials and deployments accelerating over the next 12 to 18 months," said David Linsalata, research analyst for mobile markets at Framingham, Mass.-based technology research group IDC. "The support of key industry players in promoting the advantages of the digital video broadcasting-handheld standard will significantly aid mobile TV deployment efforts in North America," he added.

At the same time, however, some analysts are more cautiously optimistic about the potential of portable television sets. So unlike the digital music player, which has revolutionized the way people access and listen to music, they anticipate mobile TVs merely to be one way to watch the tube rather than starting up its own culture as the ubiquitous iPod has.

"Mobile TV is not a substitute for traditional television -- it will complement, not replace, the media preceded it. The most obvious difference is in usage patterns and the length of viewing sessions," reported London-based research group Ovum.

It pointed out that mobile TV devices will be popular during morning and evening commutes, that is to say for 20 or 30 minutes at a time, rather than an hour or two.

"It's about TV snacking, not TV dinners," Ovum said.

Meanwhile, there is the question of whether people actually want to watch programs on a small screen whilst on a train or plane, or waiting in the car to pick up their children from soccer practice.

"In the Washington area, people use their iPods mostly in mass transit," Riptopia's Beyer said, adding that unless mobile TVs can be seen on moving underground trains, it might not have the potential of the MP3 player.

Still, if mobile television viewing does catch on, it will change the way broadcasters provide content, as they will be encouraged to produce shorter, self-contained programs that take a small screen into account, as opposed to a huge flat-screen TV at home.

For now, trials to get digital mobile television networks going are under way worldwide, including Australia, Finland, France, Italy, Britain and the United States. The alliance for digital TV said that by 2007, most major U.S. markets are expected to have the needed infrastructure built out and ready for use.

"Consumers are demanding more content, such as live TV, from their mobile devices, and open procedure standards are key to delivering that content in a cost-effective way," said Kevin Jones, director of business development for Intel's mobility group.

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