

The World Cup straight to your pocket

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With the countdown well and truly under way to the biggest sporting extravaganza on the planet, a European research initiative is hoping the 2006 World Cup will kick-start its own plans to bring cross-media content closer to the consumer.

The IST-sponsored project, INCCOM, is taking advantage of the huge interest in this summer's soccer finals in Germany to introduce consumers to new ways of enjoying football using the latest mobile communication technologies.

“It’s the perfect opportunity to showcase the possibilities of cross-media contents for mass audiences,” explains Eduardo de la Fuente Gallego, Telefónica I+D representative of the INCCOM consortium. “From the customer’s perspective, we are dealing with a net improvement of the sports experience before, during and after a game – even between

games. End users can be kept updated wherever they may be, on the device of their choice, with access to live coverage while on the move. There is also the possibility of delivering more personally tailored content to support individual niche needs,” he says.

Although much hype has been generated around the concept of mobile television, the market is not yet producing real multimedia programs or services and the main media channels are still characterised by companies focused on single media. ‘Cross-media’, by contrast, essentially aims to distribute the same content through different media channels. The reality is that an increasing number of wireless devices with mutually incompatible data and screen formats make it even more difficult to achieve this objective to ‘create once, publish many’.

The case for cross-media content

This is where INCCOM sees a genuine opportunity to encourage all the main players to work together to accelerate the adoption of compelling platform-independent content and to create new business models to promote cross-media services. Sport, and in particular football, is seen as the ideal springboard to test the market viability of the concept.

For broadcasters and mobile operators, there are also compelling arguments in favour of collaboration to develop cross-media content specially adapted for the mobile generation.

“This is the kind of augmented experience that may increase customer loyalty, for instance by reducing customer churn,” believes de la Fuente. “It will also boost the service provider’s average revenue per user (ARPU) and increase brand awareness through partnerships or sponsorship with well-known football teams.”

Another plus is the possibility to produce and create content once and

then publish everywhere. There are other cost savings to be made as well, points out Asko Marttila, representing Siemens Communications in the project.

“Broadcasters can save expensive production and human resources costs with this approach. For example, by using DVB-H, the specification for bringing broadcast services to battery-powered handheld receivers, lots of channels may be fed with the ‘raw camera content’ without expensive programme director involvement,” he says.

According to Marttila, the rich possibilities of this technology was demonstrated at the Athletics World Championship in Helsinki in 2005, where in addition to the standard DVB-T [terrestrial digital video broadcast]/cable television programme, seven specific DVB-H channels with separate feeds for different events – e.g. short distance races, long distance running, marathon, long jump, etc – were broadcast.

Given the current situation with multiple access devices, protocols, content formats, standards and regulations all vying for supremacy, INCCOM is only too well aware of the challenge in trying to bring harmony to such competitive chaos. Sensibly, the project’s approach has been to focus on those areas that it feels it can make the most contribution, says Kristina Modée, INCCOM project coordinator.

“We’re well aware of the various obstacles and have helped to raise awareness of these key issues, but we are not really focusing on technology or regulations. Instead we try to deal with the relationships within the value chain and potential business models. This is clearly mirrored in the composition of the consortium and has been the main content of our workshops,” she says.

In terms of tangible results thus far, INCCOM has made considerable progress in advancing the cause of cross-media service adoption by

fostering debate and encouraging stakeholders to put aside their differences for the benefit of the market as a whole.

Tools for cross-media adoption

To facilitate the process, INCCOM has developed a methodology and toolset to analyse and forecast the likely cross-media service adoption, and to model the complex relationships between the companies participating in service creation and delivery.

But with every interested party eager to advance its own approach and business model, achieving consensus on the way forward is rarely straightforward, acknowledges Hannele Antikainen, Technical Research Centre of Finland, VTT.

“So far it has turned out that cooperation and even discussion between, for example, the telecom operators and broadcasters, has been hard to facilitate because their expectations on cross-media and mobile TV services differ remarkably from each other. If the industries are not able to trust each other and cooperate in a cost effective way, the business won’t take off and there will be no new revenues to share,” she says.

To break this stalemate, INCCOM believes that European-wide initiatives are needed to give the industry a much-needed shot-in-the-arm.

“We would welcome an EU-wide approach to solve the problems relating to technical standards and regulations. Just like the introduction of the GSM standard, this would enable an EU-wide market geared towards the end users and facilitate, for instance, roaming and free transfer of devices that still work after crossing borders. This would surely also be a positive step for the media industry, broadcasters, operators and suppliers as well,” Marttila adds.

Such wider concerns, however, are for the longer term. With the World Cup about to kick off, INCCOM has more pressing matters on its mind.

“It’s going to be a very busy summer,” admits Wilfried Runde of Deutsche Welle. “We will be involved in some trials of mobile television technology during the World Cup and then we’ll be evaluating whether the World Cup was really able to boost cross-media and mobile business. After that, we have a further INCCOM workshop in Cologne, Germany, as well as a pilot trial with a famous sports club in Europe to take place at the end of the summer. There are also two pilot trials in Finland dealing with podcasting and mobile television, and there is an INCCOM congress scheduled for November,” he says.

Plans are also afoot to build on INCCOM’s achievements in the form of a new European project focused on mobile television and cooperation in China and Europe.

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