European researchers usher in Telco 2.0

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OPUCE business model, from market place to service incubator. Source: OPUCE

(PhysOrg.com) -- European researchers have created a platform that allows users with no special expertise to generate telecom plus internet services. The backers hope the platform will pave the way for the Telco 2.0 era.

Next year could be the date when, finally, we enter into the era of converged internet and telecom services. Call it Telco 2.0.

It is well due. Up to now, the promise of converged telecom and internet services has remained just that, a promise. Those solutions that do work seamlessly are very effective, like the Blackberry, but they require proprietary software and special devices. This is hardly the promised happy marriage of two telecom worlds.

That is about to change. European researchers have created a service development platform, called OPUCE, which makes two important breakthroughs. First, it offers a way to create converged 'Telco-Internet' services from scratch or using already created basic services; second, it is so simple to use that non-experts - regular surfers with no programming skills - can create their own compelling services, reportedly in minutes.

OPUCE allows users to create converged services by combining internet technologies like instant messaging, email, maps, photo albums and directories with telco services, such as SMS, MMS, voicemail and so on.

It may sound a bit vague, but the real-world applications enabled by the OPUCE platform are specific, unique and very compelling.

Mashups

They work just like mashups; small, software driven services on the internet that combine data from two or more sources to create exciting new information. The classic example online is services that combine, for example, Google maps with real estate listings; users can instantly see where there are new houses for sale.

Now imagine that service delivered automatically to your mobile phone whenever a house in an area you are interested in hits the market. Or perhaps you are looking for a new job, and when listings you want to apply for get published online alerts are automatically forwarded to your phone using whatever channel - voice, SMS, MMS.

But the second innovation from the OPUCE team is even more revolutionary. These are not services that users must wait for someone to develop; these are services that users can set up themselves, in minutes.

This is a huge paradigm shift, particularly in the telecom world. Up to now the telecom network was a walled, even secret, garden. But the OPUCE platform moves it to an open garden, says Alberto Leon Martin, the project's coordinator.

"Users access the front end via the web, but the back end is still controlled and kept secure by the network operator," he explains.

It is an apparent paradox; a system that appears both open and secret. OPUCE resolved the paradox by using application programming interfaces (APIs). This is a standard web technology that provides a 'socket' for services to plug in to, like selecting a particular map, for example. The map API is plugged into other APIs that deliver, for example, real estate listings for a particular area.

OPUCE has added telecom services to these internet-based APIs, and by combining them in interesting ways, users can create all sorts of compelling services.

"In the past, the internet has been about user-generated content: photos on Flickr, videos on YouTube and blogs everywhere. OPUCE is about enabling user-generated services," explains Leon Martin.

Huge shift

This is a huge shift, and could have an enormous impact on information technology generally. Users are, as a mass, enormously creative, adaptable, dynamic and imaginative. It is impossible to predict what new services will emerge, but there is every probability that some of them will be "killer apps", those pieces of software that are so appealing, useful and simple that they completely change culture and society, like SMS and blogging have done before.

The EU-funded OPUCE project, led by Telefonica I+D, has completed the technical platform, and feedback from users has been positive. Now they are concentrating efforts on creating commercial models that will make the OPUCE platform a reality.

“We are looking at a variety of scenarios. One that interests us very much is revenue sharing, where the creator, whether it is a user or an SME, and the network share revenue generated by new services. We like this scenario. Everybody wins,” reveals Leon Martin.

Other options are also under consideration, for example a free and premium model, where some user-created services are offered for free, and some are charged for. Telecom companies are also looking at a move beyond network traffic generated revenues. They want to become part of the value chain - something that has been hugely difficult for them to do in the past; they were essentially used as a pipe.

“The OPUCE platform was conceived to allow networks to become part of the value chain,” Leon Martin notes.
Time will tell, but sooner rather than later. Leon Martin believes the era or Telco 2.0 will begin to go live next year, as the telecom players start deploying OPUCE functionality across their networks.

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OPUCE project: www.opuce.tid.es/

This is the first of a two-part special feature on OPUCE.
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