

Phones have TV signals, TVs have Internet feeds, computers have a bit of everything

January 14 2010, By Wailin Wong

"Convergence" is too bulky a word to do justice to all the pretty gadgets on display at the Consumer Electronics Show, or to describe how they are increasingly doing more to give consumers the content and connectivity wherever and whenever they demand it.

Here's what it means, though: Televisions are becoming more like computers. Computers are becoming more like mobile phones. And mobile phones are becoming more like both computers and televisions.

The idea of breaking down barriers among these electronic devices has occupied the personal technology industry for years. The latest crop of products at CES may be the first to start making good on this promise.

Consider Toshiba's flagship product at the show, Cell [TV](#). It's a 3-D-ready plasma set with a processing power 10 times faster than a standard desktop computer. Cell TV can connect to the Internet and comes with a video camera and microphone for [videoconferencing](#).

Not all of the Internet-connected TVs hitting the market will have the bells and whistles of Cell TV. But the coming generation of sets, unveiled at CES last week, showed that the line between characteristics of a TV and a PC continues to blur. Skype, the [Voice over Internet Protocol](#) service, is available on LG and [Panasonic](#) TVs, enabling videoconferencing in high definition.

The universe of portable, Web-connected devices also is expanding to

encompass not just smart phones, but netbooks and tablets. These computer-like hand-held gadgets made a splash at CES this year, with many manufacturers getting into these product categories for the first time.

And third-party applications, similar to the ones consumers put on their mobile phones, are proliferating for TVs. Samsung announced at CES that it is creating an [application store](#) that will serve up content for a variety of gadgets and be open to all developers. Partners including [Blockbuster](#), [Netflix](#), [YouTube](#), [Twitter](#) and Picasa have signed up.

"TV can be your DJ, your gaming opponent or your weatherman," said Tim Baxter, president of Samsung Electronics America.

In consumer technology, trends that seem visionary at the outset often go nowhere. Most consumers probably have forgotten about WebTV, a service in the mid-1990s that connected the TV to the Internet using a special set-top box. Microsoft acquired the company, but the service faded into obsolescence.

This time, advances in Web-connected TVs are encouraging more device manufacturers and content providers to jump onboard, said Ronald Jacoby, senior director and chief architect of Yahoo! Connected TV. In other words, it's not just a handful of companies pushing the trend, which means the chances of the technology's survival is high.

As an example, Jacoby pointed out a new TV and remote control by Vizio that is integrated with Connected TV. The remote has a slide-out keyboard, making it much easier to navigate the TV like a PC. Also new this year: A box by Viewsonic that can connect an older TV to the Internet.

These new products represent small steps that will lead to a

fundamentally altered concept of TV, Jacoby said. "We're getting to this ubiquity of platforms and democratization of content," he said. Rather than a model in which several content providers determine the programming, tech companies are "enabling anyone to go out there and make a widget and get your content out there."

These changes don't come without friction, however, and companies disagree on how to deliver on an industry buzz-phrase like "TV everywhere."

For Vivek Khemka, vice president of customer technology at Dish Network, "'TV everywhere' should mean you pay one time for your content and take it everywhere."

Dish Network is launching a service this year that allows customers to watch live and recorded TV on a laptop or Web-enabled mobile phone. They also can use these portable devices to instruct their home set-top box to record programs. This is a similar service to one recently announced by Comcast, which is allowing subscribers to watch TV via a Web browser.

But streaming content on a mobile device is problematic because of bandwidth issues, said Bill Stone, president of Flo TV, which is billed as the only national mobile broadcast network in the country. Many consumers experience network hiccups, which result in a halting feed, he said.

"The premise and the hype is that, 'Everyone's got a mobile phone and everyone's watching TV, so how hard can it be to put them together?'" Stone said. "It's darn hard."

It may take several more years for consumers to sort through the array of products and services as more choices hit the market. But the industry is

moving toward a future where personalized content is available at any time on any device, said John Burke, senior vice president of broadband home solutions in Motorola's home and networks mobility division.

"I think the scale and magnitude of the shift from analog TV to digital TV to the Internet era of television is an unprecedented evolution that's happening today," Burke said.

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Citation: Phones have TV signals, TVs have Internet feeds, computers have a bit of everything (2010, January 14) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-01-tv-tvs-internet-bit.html>

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