

CES spotlight on smartphones' growing role as command center

January 13 2013, by Troy Wolverton

The smartphone is evolving from a communications and computing device to a command center and control panel for a wide range of other devices.

At the [Consumer Electronics Show](#) here, various manufacturers demonstrated smartphones that allow users to control ovens, washing machines and other appliances. They also can drive remote-controlled toy helicopters and cars, monitor [security cameras](#), lock doors, play videos on televisions and collect photos wirelessly from digital cameras to share online.

Some of these functions aren't new to smartphones, but taken together, they illustrate the device's growing capabilities. They also indicate the degree to which smartphones and tablets are pushing aside the traditional PC. The control-hub role these new devices are assuming is one that Microsoft and its allies long sought for the PC.

Among the developments here at CES:

LG announced that its new "smart" appliances will include chips that will allow smartphone users to monitor the temperature in their oven, say, or turn on their washer and dryer while lying in bed.

Alarms.com is developing a technology that will tap into smartphones' location abilities. If users leave their house without locking their doors, the service will send an alert to their phones asking them if they forgot to

do so and allow them to lock the doors remotely.

Numerous companies showed off the ability to steer toys such as remote-controlled helicopters and cars using apps on a smartphone. The Scara Bee buggy from France-based BeeWi, also includes a camera that transmits video from the car back to the phone.

Parrot demonstrated a new gardening device called Flower Power. The gadget transmits information - including the [moisture level](#) of the soil, light levels and the need for fertilizer - back to a smartphone or tablet.

Samsung announced that its latest cameras include a Wi-Fi radio that will allow users to automatically upload their pictures to their smartphones.

In some cases, these new roles come at the expense of PCs. Until now, for example, uploading pictures from your camera has typically meant plugging it or its memory card into your computer.

In other cases, smartphones and tablets are taking the place of dedicated controllers. Having a remote-controlled toy car that didn't include a remote control would have been unthinkable not too long ago.

In some cases, smartphones and tablets are muscling out other nascent "smart" devices. If you can control your oven with your tablet or can get Pandora onto your car stereo via your smartphone, you may not need a touch screen, a sophisticated processor or even a display on those devices.

But smartphones and tablets are also taking on control tasks that couldn't be done before, or at least not easily. Geofencing - the ability to trigger actions based on a person's location - is something that's generally not practical with PCs.

The post-PC devices are assuming these new roles because of their growing popularity and the growing number of radios and sensors that allow them to collect a wide range of data and communicate with and transmit data to numerous other devices.

To be sure, you may not want to ditch your TV remote or your PC just yet. As capable as smartphones and tablets are becoming, they do have their limitations. They tend to burn through batteries faster than the typical "dumb" remote. And their limited storage and computing power tend to make them less useful than a PC for long-term storage or manipulation of data.

But it's a good bet you'll be using a [smartphone](#) or tablet to control other devices in your life in the near future - if you aren't already. In the post-PC era, smartphones and tablets are quickly assuming control.

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