

Are consumers ready for television watching back?

January 9 2013, by Rob Lever



Attendees walk through the Panasonic booth during the 2013 International CES at the Las Vegas Convention Center on January 8, 2013 in Las Vegas, Nevada. Panasonic used CES to show its new Viera smart television which can recognize users and create a home screen allow programming tailored for each.

In the new world of technology, television is not just for watching. It is also watching you.

So-called [smart TVs](#) being unveiled this week at the International

[Consumer Electronics Show](#) offer technologies that watch the viewer, in an effort to offer more relevant programming.

The idea may sound eerie to those familiar with [George Orwell](#)'s novel "1984" but people in the industry say this is the next step in the evolution of TV viewing.

Chinese manufacturer TCL unveiled at the show a new TV and set-top box to be sold later this year in the US using the [Google TV platform](#) which recognizes who is watching in order to suggest potential programs.

The new TV developed with Marvell Technology Group uses sensors and [voice recognition](#) to determine who is viewing and can offer streamed or live programs which appear to appeal to an individual or family.

"We have developed many innovations to personalize the viewing experience," said Haohong Wang, general manager in the US for TCL, a major global manufacturer which has made TVs under the RCA and Thomson brands.

This offers a "game-changing entertainment experience for consumers around the world that will drive the smart [TV market](#) forward at a rapid pace," said Weili Dai, co-founder of Marvell.

Panasonic also used CES to show its new Viera smart television which can recognize users and create a home screen allow programming tailored for each.

Other manufacturers are working on similar technology which take advantage of television over Internet.

This new interactivity opens up possibilities for advertisers who will be able to develop more targeted pitches, but raises some of the same

[privacy concerns](#) of data collection on the Web.

"The concept is not so much Big Brother as Big Marketer," says Thomas Coughlin of the data consulting firm Coughlin Associates, who is attending the Las Vegas gathering.

"This could be creepy to some of us because it is making use of data in a way that has not been done before."

Coughlin said consumers will want to know where the data is and how it might be shared, and says there also may be questions about security of the data in the cloud.

Rob Enderle, an analyst and consultant with Enderle Group, said this model will become the norm as television gravitates to Internet platforms.

"Increasingly, TVs will know who is watching them and I expect advertisers will know shortly thereafter. This should result in shows and commercials you like more and even better products, but far less privacy."

Stu Lipoff, a fellow at the Institute for Electrical and Electronics Engineers, said TV on mobile devices will have similar characteristics, with considerable amounts of data which can be gleaned about viewers.

"The website not only knows you are interested in Chevy, but knows where you are," he said.

James McQuivey at Forrester Research said consumers will accept these privacy tradeoffs if they see an advantage to the new style of television.

"If you ask people, of course they will say no," McQuivey told AFP,

while noting that millions have accepted this type of tracing by connecting their TVs to Xbox consoles with Kinect motion detection where "the camera is tracking you all the time."

"This tells me Orwell got it wrong," he said. "Orwell's camera did the bidding of the state and these cameras do your bidding."

But he said companies should be prepared to develop privacy policies to avoid government intervention.

TCL's Wang says, meanwhile, the TV makers are not interested in tracking people and will allow them options.

"We are an equipment company. What we want is to give a good user experience," he said. And if viewers feel uncomfortable with being monitored they don't have to use those features, he said: "They can just turn it off."

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