

What's a cable article doing in Broadcast Dialogue?

by Laurie Kennedy



The lines between cable and broadcasting have become a bit blurry—worlds colliding. So I thought it would be interesting to see what they were talking about on the other side of the fence at the Society of Cable Telecommunications Engineers—Canadian Summit 2012, held in Toronto.

Over the two-day summit, topics focused on the migration to IPTV and providing content to consumers on any device, anywhere:

- Internet Protocol TV (IPTV) in the Cloud
- Home WiFi and Metro WiFi Hot Spots
- The future of the Set Top Box (STB)
- The Connected Home Gateway.

The keynote was delivered by Mike LaJoie, Executive Vice President and Chief Technology Officer at Time Warner Cable. LaJoie reminisced, talking about the cable “hub and spoke” design being around for over 100 years, the evolution of cable—including analog technology in the 1950s and '60s, franchise wars leading to an increase in content and digital starting in the 1990s/2000s.

Cable as we know it, he said, is a matured platform whose life is ending.

LaJoie believes the key success factors to staying competitive is a triage of Innovation, Operations and Education. And, as we are seeing in broadcasting, the education and IT-based skill-sets are key to driving innovation and building the new business operational systems.

LaJoie said cable engineers need to keep up with the shift. He also believes 80% of all jobs created in the next decade will require math and science skills and that “the geek shall inherit the earth”.

Sounds like a new breed—top to bottom—in an organization.

Changes Have Begun

The overall tone of the summit was that the consumer experience mattered most. Keeping up with their demands include delivery of content on the explosion of network enabled devices both within and outside the home. Consumers want content anywhere; and the general consensus was that providing this will be a rights issue rather than a technological one.

Though content rights issues are still being worked through, cable providers are beginning to move towards an IPTV platform which is away from the traditional *DOCSIS. Changes will also need to ripple out into the home to enable delivery to all of the various connected devices. Those changes will require a more sophisticated connected home and WiFi Network.

Home WiFi is widely used and Metro WiFi Hot Spots are growing. One example is Shaw's EXO HD deployment in the Calgary area. In the U.S., Time Warner offers any content on any device, however it's still working on the anywhere part (rights affected). Time Warner is also continuing to grow the number of Wireless/Metro WiFi Hotspots.

The telephone is not a forgotten service. Comcast in the U.S. is partnering with SKYPE for international phone service which, apparently, is not being considered cannibalism of their local phone service. Here at home, Rogers' One Number offering is ubiquitous access to service (phone anywhere).

IPTV in the Cloud

The new IPTV offerings by cable providers will be within private clouds, not within a public or community Internet cloud. This is a whole new world for the traditional cable engineer. Concerns include network latency, deploying updates, migration strategy to IPTV or, more importantly, an exit strategy from today's cable offering.

Cliff Mercer, of Active Video Networks, says this new environment will require rich user interfaces and will remove the burden of STB (Set-Top Boxes). STB have an operational overhead to manage, upgrade and support. As IPTV apps continue to evolve and become available it will be quite a task to keep a STB up-to-date, even for one brand and model nevermind all the different brands and models out there.

For cloud-based TV, many feel the STB will move to the server side in the cloud (not consumer home). Others have differing opinions on the future of the STB. Is it still required to support all the different generations of TV sets? Will the DOCSIS service co-exist with the IPTV service, and if so, for how long?

The Connected Home

With the premise of content on any device in the home, in addition to a home WiFi network, there was talk about also needing a connected home gateway. Alan Marks of Alcatel-Lucent believes the connected home gateway will initially include:

- Application management
- Home security
- Optimization of throughput to all home devices

- Provider CSR (customer service rep) console module with remote access.

Marks also sees the gateway expanding to include other provider services and applications, including, healthcare, eHealth, utilities, energy management and home control.

It is unclear how each cableco is positioning itself—and some of the challenges the vendors and service providers are currently working on include:

- Gateway with IP-connected devices with a URL-based client in lieu of a STB
- Various generations of TV sets; how to support old and new
- Testing/troubleshooting in a more complex, multi-service environment, dependent on the home WiFi and hi-speed Internet
- Home certification—looking to introduce a pre-qualify for self-installs and also make it easier for consumers to troubleshoot issues (self-service portals)
- Engineering/service technicians—IP Video + IPTV apps are different than DOCSIS; significant re-training is required and must be part of the build from the beginning.

Whatever the solution, it needs to be easy for the customer though most likely not so simple for the cable companies.

In the Interim

Though there does appear to be an end in sight for the traditional cable environment, it is expected to be around for some time and you may still see an evolution within existing cable services such as set top boxes supporting over the top (OTT) services, EBIF (Enhanced TV Binary Interchange Format) which enables enhanced or interactive TV apps, and advanced advertising where regional ad insertion by cable providers (available today but not allowed in Canada on stations and specialty services). The CRTC does, however, allow such regional ad insertions on cable community channels and on the TV listings channel.

**DOCSIS: Data Over Cable Service Interface Specification (DOCSIS) is an international telecommunications standard that permits the addition of high-speed data transfer to an existing cable TV (CATV) system. It is employed by many cable television operators to provide Internet access over their existing hybrid fiber-coaxial (HFC) infrastructure.*

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