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New Content MIA at CES

Telco TV was supposed to be the stage for startup content, but so far it 's just old faces in new places.

January 9, 2007

By Cassimir Medford

The hot blast of IPTV and mobile TV announcements blowing out of the International Consumer Electronics Show this week seems to be missing one critical element. Where are all the new startup content providers that were supposed to be ushered into the mainstream by IPTV and mobile TV?

It's the same content packaged in new technology wrapping. Most of the IPTV and mobile TV announcements have had the same old names attached to them: CBS, NBC, ABC, Fox, Comedy Central, Discovery Channel, Nickelodeon, and MTV.

There is little in the way of channels dedicated to customer-generated video, à la YouTube. There are few if any immigrant ethnic programs being featured. Where are the local channels devoted to Japanese-American programming, or Middle East news?

Granted, CES is devoted to flashy new devices, but the presence of telecommunications vendors pushing emerging services such as IPTV and mobile TV does make it partially about content.

Old Business Dies Hard
 "The telecom companies are limited in what they can offer so they cater to the mainstream," said Chris Wagner, executive vice president of marketplace strategy at NeuLion, a Plainview, New York-based IPTV specialist.

'The telecom companies are limited in what they can offer so they cater to the mainstream.'
 -Chris Wagner, NeuLion

NeuLion, a two-year-old startup that distributes TV content over the Internet, targets niche markets such as immigrant communities, religious communities, and other areas overlooked by the major distributors such as cable TV.

"Traditional TV distribution does not focus on the long tail," Mr. Wagner said. "The content providers and the cable, satellite, and now telecom distributors do business a certain way and it's tough for them to change that."

At Verizon's launch of its V CAST Mobile TV service at CES, a question posed about local programming went unanswered.

Verizon's fiber optic IPTV service, FiOS TV, does include about 15 channels of ethnic programming, including channels devoted to the Russian, Chinese, Polish, and Korean communities, among others.

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It also includes numerous Spanish language channels, but the promise of new or imaginative content from startup content providers seems to be missing.

Telco TV

"Telco TV is nothing more than a way for telephone companies to get their triple play of voice, data, and TV," said Mr. Wagner. "For years they lost out to the cable companies on triple play, so the phone companies got into the TV business.

"They are focused on the same programming as the cable TV companies because they want the consumer to make a price decision," he added. "They are not focused on niche markets because many of them are still geographically limited. You can't build a business in the New York market on the 100,000 Japanese residents in your area."

But NeuLion, which transmits its programming over the public network and does not have the massive overhead expense of a multi-billion dollar network, can.

"The true promise of IPTV will be realized through companies such as ours," Mr. Wagner concluded.

NeuLion's programming includes a news service for the Chinese community, TV targeted at the African community, and most recently a business channel for the Hawaiian community.

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