

IPTV makes it to the TV set

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Oct 03, 2007

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Delivering web TV to a mass audience has long been a dream of web entrepreneurs. As fiber deployments increase around the world, IPTV has become more of a mainstream product, but for the most part, this involves viewing the video on a computer screen.

Slingbox has been the largest commercial success so far: users connect the device to their cable or satellite service and the programming is streamed over the web for viewing on a computer anywhere there is a broadband connection. But that still leaves the large-screen TV out in the cold.

During the last year, however, there have been some breakthroughs from companies such as HP and Sony with "smart televisions" that can seamlessly move video content from the web to the home TV. Even Apple jumped in, recently introducing its Apple TV, which uses a wireless connection to stream music and movies from a computer to a TV. All of these have been ambitious attempts that have met with decidedly mixed consumer receptions.

Now there's new technology and an interesting business model that is starting to gain traction: using the web as backhaul to beam native TV programs from countries like China and the Philippines to expatriates in North America and around the world.

NeuLion, a New York-based startup, offers an IPTV platform that delivers television stations through a set-top box directly to the home TV. Earlier this year, ABS-CBN International licensed NeuLion's IPTV platform to deliver four live broadcast channels and two radio channels that originate in Manila to subscriber TVs without the use of a computer. The service already has 6,000 subscribers in Japan and recently rolled out in Canada and the US. It could well be expanded to other countries with sizeable Filipino communities.

"It's all of our programming in our own service," said Rafael Lopez, COO at ABS-CBN International. "The technology will allow us to offer consumers both a linear television experience, as well as new video-on-demand services."

Chinese service

Chris Wagner, executive VP and co-founder of NeuLion, says a similar service is aimed at overseas Chinese residents. KyLinTV, which has offices in Beijing and New York, is using NeuLion's technology to stream 33 television channels to about 25,000 subscribers in the US at a cost of about \$30 a month. Video-on-demand also is available. Wagner says the company is likely to expand the service to viewers in other countries. There are an estimated four million Chinese living in the US and an estimated 40 million worldwide. KyLin hired a Chinese company, Run Media Inc., to help obtain the rights to the Chinese TV programming.

NeuLion acts as a service provider for its partners, providing content management, subscriber management, digital-rights management, billing services and content delivery through the company's set-top IPTV platform. The set-top box is manufactured in China. It provides real-time H.264/MPEG-4 AVC encoding and transcoding; a low bit-rate of 700 kbps streaming straight to the TV; and scalable simultaneous streaming over RTP and RTSP protocol. It is an open source Linux-based platform with an integrated CPU and built-in 802.11g Wi-Fi support. "We can do HD, but we need more bandwidth," says Wagner. "We are not quite there yet."