TV Your Way

FROM IPTV TO CELL PHONE SERVICES, NEW TECHNOLOGIES ARE POISED TO CHANGE HOW AND WHERE WE WATCH TV—NOT TO MENTION THE PROGRAMMING ITSELF. BY DAN TYNAN

To co-opt an old slogan, the revolution may indeed be televised—but not on the TV that you grew up with.

The idiot box and the Internet have finally collided. From Internet Protocol Television (IPTV) to video over broadband and cellular networks, the nature of TV is changing before your eyes.

Such services intend to let you watch whatever you want, whenever you want, on devices ranging from big-screen displays to cell phones. They may also provide broad access to alternative content—and to smarter, weirder, more personal forms of television.

TRIALING FOR DOLLARS

Simply put, IPTV employs Internet protocols to deliver TV shows and other content over private high-speed networks. The technology promises to combine the interactivity of the Net with Hollywood's vast vaults of content. But most people may have to wait several years to get IPTV—and even longer before it delivers on all of its potential.

Someday IPTV will bring the latest Web collaboration features to your living room, so you can rate TV programs, view other people's recommendations, or even exchange messages while watching. IPTV's massive pipes will deliver high-def channels, movies on demand, fantasy sports and gaming, and (eventually) user-controllable multiple camera angles for live concerts and sporting events. IPTV carriers will also gather anonymous viewing data that will help marketers send you more-precisely targeted ads.

In addition, the technology might even let you turn your home into a mini-broadcast studio, says Ed Gracyzk, director of marketing and communications for Microsoft's TV division, which provides software for IPTV services such as AT&T's U-verse TV.

"If TV brought the world to your living room, IPTV can bring your living room to the world," Gracyzk says.
A bigger draw for most people may be so-called “triple play” services, in which a single company delivers entertainment, broadband access, and phone services via one fat pipe (followed up by an even fatter bill). If your mom calls while you’re watching Survivor, her Caller ID information appears on your set, so you can hit the pause button and pick up the phone (or not).

Such technology is “the stuff of The Jetsons,” says Gartner analyst Laura Behrans, “and it’s tantalizingly close.”

However, to deliver IPTV to the masses, telephone companies like Verizon and AT&T (which gained its IPTV service by buying SBC Communications) must expand their fiber-optic networks, which are currently available only in parts of the United States (see the chart on the next page).

IPTV providers also must jump through the same regulatory hoops that cable companies have faced. “Having to secure a FiOS franchise in every town has been our biggest roadblock,” says Shawn Strickland, vice president of product management for Verizon’s FiOS TV service.

Today’s IPTV offerings are more like typical cable or satellite service, albeit with spiffier program guides and search tools. For example, most of FiOS TV’s 180-odd channels are delivered via the same technology as cable TV; only the interactive programming guide, search tools, and video on demand are true IPTV services. More advanced features are still several years away.

**FROM NET TO SET**

Other options for disgruntled cable and satellite subscribers are available now via broadband. Buy a set-top box from a company such as Akimbo, Dave TV, or ITVN and hook it up to your cable or DSL modem, and you can discover a brave new world of TV programming. Typically, services offer channels of content, either streamed “live” like traditional broadcasts or delivered on request as a download to watch later.

The problem is unearthing something worth watching, let alone paying for. For example, the freebies among Dave TV’s 100 channels of streaming or downloadable video include BBQTV (where you watch people cook meat) and Wheels.tv (collections of racing videos). But some shows, like The Girls of Asian Love Palace, cost up to $25 apiece. Because Dave TV distributes or sells content from virtually anyone who has a video and a marketing agenda, it’s a bit like the Web equivalent of a public-access cable station.

For a fee of $5 per month (plus a $99 set-top box), ITVN offers content ranging from “Live TV” (obscure streamed programming—a recent entry showed Lance Armstrong playing Frisbee golf) and the Lacrosse Channel to the Silver Screen Network (old movies) and an impressive quantity of X-rated material. ITVN’s remote control even has a panic button you can press to blank the screen if someone walks in while you’re watching, say, Miss Piggy Gets Jiggy (an actual ITVN movie).

Akimbo’s 111 channels feature content you may actually have heard of, including programming from the BBC, Cartoon Network, CNN, Discovery Kids, and the History Channel, as well as original Web video from sites like Rocketboom.com and iFilm.

But Akimbo is strictly a download service. Select the shows you want from an on-screen guide or from Akimbo’s Web site, and they will show up on the $70 set-top box within an hour or two, or overnight. Also, since you frequently must pay for the programs (on top of the service’s $10-per-month charge), your monthly costs could end up exceeding your cable bill.

Higher-quality programming might be on the way, however. At press time ITVN was planning to roll out an...
on-demand music video service called Pulse, while Akimbo has signed a deal with MovieLink that will make Hollywood movies available for download (for fees).

**SMALLER SCREENS**

When Steve Jobs announced last fall that iTunes fans could buy episodes of *Lost* and *Desperate Housewives* for $2 a pop, a market for portable TV shows emerged overnight. And services like MobiTV and Verizon’s Vcast let cell phone owners watch TV on the go.

If your eyes can handle TV shows playing on screens as small as an inch on the diagonal, MobiTV’s $10-a-month service (available in the United States on Cingular, Sprint, and a few regional carriers) streams content from CNN, MSNBC, and other stations to a supported handset.

Verizon’s $15-per-month Vcast lets you watch live TV, but only on phones that support Verizon’s high-speed EVDO wireless service—and only in markets that offer it. Cingular recently announced plans to offer 18 channels of video as part of its $20-a-month Media Net package. The service will include 3- to 5-minute clips from popular programs such as *King of the Hill* and *That’s So Raven*.

But don’t expect to be watching *Desperate Housewives* on your handset any time soon. Mobile TV is more likely to promote conventional TV than to supplant it, says Kurt Scherf of Parks Associates. NBC, for example, says that iTunes helped boost ratings for *The Office*. And the producers of ABC’s *Lost* plan a spin-off for Verizon phones called *Lost Video Diaries*. Each 2-minute “mobisode” will have characters and plots that don’t appear on the TV series. Similar mobisodes for Paris Hilton’s *The Simple Life* are also said to be on the way.

**TUNE IN TOMORROW**

New ways to distribute digital video may change the way you find as well as view programs. In the future, Gartner analyst Allen Weiner predicts, you’ll discover your favorite shows via recommendations from friends on social networks, or through video sharing sites such as Reverb and YouTube or search engines such as Blinkx and Truveo.

You can’t yet watch *Monk* or *Firefly* reruns on demand, but that day is certainly coming. Don’t touch that dial.

**NEW TV OPTIONS FOR LIVING ROOMS AND CELL PHONES**

**EMERGING SERVICES DELIVER** TV programming either in streams (much like live TV) or as downloads on request.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>IPTV</strong></th>
<th>Format</th>
<th>Platform(s)</th>
<th>Availability</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AT&amp;T U-verse TV</td>
<td>Live programming</td>
<td>Set-top</td>
<td>San Antonio, TX</td>
<td>AT&amp;T’s offering will feature more than 200 digital channels, plus on-screen Caller ID and the ability to record four different programs simultaneously. Pricing and future availability were unavailable at press time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verizon FiOS TV</td>
<td>Live programming</td>
<td>Set-top</td>
<td>Boston; Dallas; New York; Southern California; Tampa; FL; Washington, DC</td>
<td>Base package provides 180 channels of digital TV, including 22 HD and 47 music channels, for around $35 a month. Add another $35 for basic broadband and $400 (standard definition) to $1300 (high-definition with DVR) for the set-top box.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Akimbo</td>
<td>Download</td>
<td>Set-top or Windows Media Center PC</td>
<td>Nationwide</td>
<td>Akimbo has an easy TiVo-like interface and lots of mainstream content, including programs like <em>Family Ties</em> and <em>National Geographic</em> specials. Besides the $30 set-top box and $10 monthly fee, most shows require an additional on-demand charge between 50 cents and $4.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dave TV</td>
<td>Streaming and download</td>
<td>Set-top or PC</td>
<td>Nationwide</td>
<td>Much of Dave TV is free (that is, ad-supported) and downloadable to portable devices as well as to your PC or set-top box ($160 to $200). But the content is weird and hard to find, and on-demand programs cost from 50 cents to $25 apiece.</td>
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<td>ITVN</td>
<td>Streaming</td>
<td>Set-top</td>
<td>Nationwide</td>
<td>If you love obscure sports, old B-movies, and adult fare, ITVN might be for you. The service costs $5 a month, plus $100 for the set-top box. Lacrosse TV and XTV Network (adult) cost an additional $10 and $30, respectively.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MobiTV</td>
<td>Streaming</td>
<td>Phone</td>
<td>U.S., UK, Canada</td>
<td>For $10 a month, MobiTV streams live and packaged content from 3D-plus channels, from CNN to ESPN to TNN, to your phone, Alltel, Cingular, Sprint, and some regional carriers offer the service; you’ll need a phone capable of displaying high-quality video.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verizon Vcast</td>
<td>Live programming and download</td>
<td>Phone</td>
<td>181 U.S. metro areas</td>
<td>Service beans music, video, and 3D games to your Verizon cell phone for $15 a month (plus on-demand fees).</td>
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