

Internet Protocol Television: The Coming Television Revolution

Saturday, 13 January 2007

The revolution is just getting started and will begin to make its mark this year. By 2010, it will begin to take off. By 2025, it will be the standard for all TV viewing. It's called Internet Protocol Television, or IPTV for short. IPTV works with a set-top box connected to any broadband interface and to a TV. It will allow users to choose among thousands (and eventually hundreds of thousands) of hours of programming, including movies, sports, classic TV, etc., and download their selections from the internet to the hard drive of the set-top box.

Initially, set-top box hard drives will be able to store up to 300 hours of programming at a time, but capacity will expand as the technology becomes more refined. Also, download times will become shorter and shorter as broadband connection speeds become faster and faster. Eventually, a two-hour movie will be fully downloadable in a couple of minutes. Once the programs are downloaded to the hard drive, they can be viewed on the connected TV at any time via a DVR-type interface provided by the set-top box.

Besides the convenience of an all video-on-demand (VOD) environment, IPTV will provide a much wider range of programming than broadcast, cable, and satellite TV, or even major video chains, could ever provide. Because the programming is available from the internet, it will be almost completely unlimited and unconstrained. Programming from all over the world will be available along with every imaginable genre of niche programming. Also, previously unreleased independent films that have been sitting on shelves for years due to the lack of a distribution source will suddenly become available to the masses via IPTV. Films that previously could not be made at all will become a reality and be available on the IPTV services. Long forgotten films and TV shows will have new life breathed into them by IPTV. To top it all off, much of this programming will be eventually be available in high definition (HDTV)!

Most IPTV platforms will be divided into "channels", but not the same kind of channels that we have grown accustomed to with traditional TV services. In this case, a "channel" is defined as a division of an IPTV service by individual content provider. Each content provider carried by a given IPTV platform will have its own guidelines for delivering programming on its channel. Some will provide their content for free to everyone who owns a given IPTV product. Some will be subscription based, i.e., everything on their channels will be available for a monthly or annual subscription. Others will be all pay-per-view. Still others will provide a combination of all of the above.

Several entrants into this market have either already debuted or plan to debut sometime this year. Among those are Akimbo (www.akimbo.com), DAVETV (www.dave.tv), TimeShifTV (www.timeshiftv.com), and VCinema (www.vcinema.com). Please see their respective websites for more details, as each one will offer a slightly different variation of IPTV technology. In addition, a joint venture between TiVo (www.tivo.com) and NetFlix (www.netflix.com) will be starting up later this year. TiVo plans to eventually make the entire Netflix DVD library available to its customers on an on-demand basis via a broadband connection to a TiVo box and a TV. Other potential IPTV contenders will be announcing their intentions over the next year or two. One of these nascent IPTV services headquartered near my home has already started placing "help wanted" ads in my local newspaper.

Within the next 20 years, all the fuss over broadcast TV indecency will become irrelevant, as there will be very little other than news and live sporting events on broadcast TV. The major networks will shift most of their entertainment programs to IPTV to avoid all the broadcast content restrictions currently being enforced by the FCC. Eventually, broadcast TV will cease to exist. Cable and satellite services as we know them will also become extinct. Yes, there will still be cable and satellite platforms, but they, along with DSL and wireless internet services, will exist merely as conduits for bringing broadband internet into homes and offices. There won't be any more cable and satellite TV, per se. The now 60-year-old paradigm of television schedules in which programs air at specific times on specific days of the week will pretty much be a thing of the past. Everything, except what's left of broadcast TV, will be exclusively available on demand via an IPTV platform.

These developments in no way mean that all TV programming will become more risqué. While there will be plenty of risqué programming available to those who want it, there will be an almost unlimited supply of family and religious programs available. With a veritable smorgasbord of entertainment options at your fingertips, there will be something available for all tastes. IPTV may not turn out to be a TV utopia, but it's at least going to come close that ideal.

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