

Television goes mobile

Public broadcaster Prasar Bharati is experimenting to provide television content on Android devices



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Missed an interesting show or a debate on TV? Soon you will be able to carry your TV wherever you go and watch all free-to-air television channels on your android phone and tablet without internet connectivity. Prasar Bharati is experimenting to provide television content on mobile phones. The state-owned public broadcasting network has come out with a prototype device — a dongle with an antenna — which can be plugged into smartphones to view broadcasted channels. “The future of the media and entertainment industry lies within the grasp of the smartphones,” Jawhar Sircar, CEO, Prasar Bharati, said at an industry gathering held recently in New Delhi.

But how can one access television content on mobile phone without using internet? Prasar Bharati refers to the technology as DVB T2 -- digital video broadcasting terrestrial two -- a digital video broadcasting standard. “This mobile television can be activated either using a dongle or a chip which could be inserted into android device to receive signals,” said another Prasar Bharati official. The DVB T2 technology provides a more robust system and better transmission. Through a dongle and a small antenna attached to it, viewers can watch up to 20 channels on their phone.

“Right now we are broadcasting signals enough to carry 20 channels in four metro cities [Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata]. Test runs have been taking place in the past six

months,” said Sircar. The dongle costs approximately '1,800. Since price is a function of volume, the cost of these devices can be brought down to '100 or '150 when procured in bulk. As of now the dongle is not being manufactured in India and is being imported from several countries, including China.

Prasar Bharati have clarified that the whole project is in the research and development stage, and a policy decision is yet to be taken by the government. At present, the DVB T2 is being tested only on Doordarshan (DD) channels. The public broadcast network is considering auctioning some of the channels to the private channels but it is a decision that has not yet been finalised.

How does it work?

The technology transmits compressed digital data, including video and audio in moving pictures experts group (MPEG) form through coded OFDM (Orthogonal frequency division multiplex) modulation. OFDM is a form of transmission which is robust and allows for the reception of data signals in the presence of some interference or missing channels.] It splits digital data stream into a large number of slower data streams. Each of these streams digitally modulates a set of sub-carrier frequencies.

The system has several new features including a powerful coding that allows multilayer programming, which allows initiatives like the broadcasting of multiple advertisements in different locations.

Hiccups in the content cup

On paper the DVB project sounds good, but there are some implementation glitches that DD is facing. The lack of appropriate content is a major hassle. With television moving to mobile platform, there is a need to create content that is apt for that device. An hour long serial will not work for mobile television, as phones have limited battery.

Not just the length but the choice of channels will also affect the popularity of the technology. Relaying of DD channels, will ensure that the technology is not commercially viable.

Deepak Gupta, director, AMTS Engineering Private Limited, a company which manufactures set top box for DVB, said, “It will be content that will drive this technology. If the channels offered are popular, people will buy the dongle.” Another challenge is that the technology works only on android devices, iPhones do not have a system where a dongle can be inserted.

Lack of awareness about the technology is another thing. As Srivastava puts it, “It will take 5-8 years for the technology to be implemented fully in India.”

Also, lack of proper utilisation of infrastructure is a problem. “Prasar Bharati and the

ministry of information and broadcasting have 1,400 towers. At present, we have digitised 63 of them. These towers come in pairs for the bigger cities and single for the smaller cities. Double towers can broadcast 20-25 channels easily. Still, nothing is happening,” said Sircar.

The government alone cannot achieve a breakthrough in technology development. “It is time for the industry to get serious about this idea and approach the government,” he said. The government on their part will extend all support to the industry.

“If the industry wants to test the transmitters, we are ready for it,” he added. The industry can also utilise the broadcasting spectrum (white space), which is otherwise lying idle. “Convergence is not just a term that we have to offer, convergence in reality would be an offer to the television and FM industry to come forward and take advantage of the elephant in the room,” he said. Sometimes it is all about looking at the bigger picture.

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