



Focus on satellite services: Mobile TV: Moving pictures

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DVB-SH still needs to gain traction in an already fragmented market.

A NEW SATELLITE standard still in the trial stages promises to boost operators' IP-based media and data services as well as become a key technology for owners of hybrid satellite-terrestrial networks.

But Digital Video Broadcasting Satellite services to Handheld (DVB-SH), the satellite extension of mobile broadcast TV standard DVB-H, will need to gain traction in a market that already suffers from fragmented mobile TV standards, and at a time when new commercial services could struggle to attract advertising support.

One advantage of the technology is that it is based on Internet Protocol. "DVB-SH combines terrestrial and satellite capabilities," says Claude Rousseau, senior analyst at Northern Skies Research (NSR). "And it is based on IP, [which] is the way to go for a lot of video and data content."

But the jury is still out on the cost of the satellite increment in chipsets, says Rousseau. "The satellite part is likely to mean the chip will be at the high end of the cost scale," he says.

That could mean early devices at least may be prohibitively

expensive for large parts of the consumer market. For now, the DVB-SH ecosystem is in flux.

Herbert Mittermayr, vice president of marketing at Alcatel-Lucent, one of the main vendors behind DVB-SH, says “it’s a chicken and egg situation” as to whether networks or devices should come first.

Last year saw the arrival of a new multi-mode chipset from Dibcom that supports five standards including DVB-SH. Sagem Mobile has produced the first DVB-SH handsets for trial purposes, while other DVB-SH devices also in trials include a portable media player from Archos and in-car set-top boxes from Quantum.

Mittermayr says it’s encouraging that devices are now emerging, and says the criteria in the European process to allocate a harmonised frequency in the S-Band (see analysis) will ensure the launch of at least two hybrid satellite/terrestrial networks that could use DVB-SH applications.

But Mittermayr says Alcatel-Lucent sees two potential uses for DVB-SH and is looking at both. He says the technology could be used not only for hybrid networks but also to extend existing DVB-H networks in the UHF band.

Mittermayr says the business case is not good enough for DVB-H on its own, and thinks the better solution will be to combine DVB-T free-to-air services with paid-for DVB-SH services, for example.

In February, Alcatel-Lucent teamed with mobile operator 3 Italia, TV broadcaster RAI and satellite operator Eutelsat to launch a trial of DVB-SH technology in Turin. “We are complementing the existing [DVB-H] network with satellite services,” says Mittermayr, who claims that using DVB-SH can halve the cost of deploying DVB-H. He also adds that Alcatel-Lucent is interested in taking on the management of outsourced mobile TV networks.

Michelle Abraham, principal analyst at In-Stat, says the satellite technology could be used to extend mobile TV services on a pan-European basis. "DVB-SH has an opportunity not just for in the car but also for other portable devices," she says. "You use satellite to offer popular national and pan-European channels, then use DVB-H for more national TV. They could be used in combination, but perhaps not at first."

Solaris Mobile is looking at DVB-SH as one service platform option for its hybrid satellite-terrestrial network. But CEO Steve Maine does not want Solaris to be seen solely as a DVB-SH company. "DVB-SH is a transient market," he says. "It's definitely a good technology for broadcasting TV from satellites to moving objects. But there is little equipment available currently. We have to decide: do we invest in our own equipment, or do we invest in existing equipment?"

Maine says Solaris has been talking to handset manufacturers, in-car equipment makers, service providers, and terrestrial network operators and manufacturers. But the extent of the task is clear: "At present there is no ecosystem there: no handsets, no in-car devices, no terrestrial network, and no service providers...We need to make sure the other parts of the value chain are in place" through co-investment with partners.

But DVB-SH could get the backing of powerful content providers. "Broadcasters like the idea of satellite, they are used to the idea," says Rousseau. "Mobile TV is a major thrust for broadcasters, and mobile operators will have no choice but to go there. For mobile operators, the satellite can be seen as another leg, another tower in the sky."

Mittermayr says mobile operators will be key to the mobile future of next-generation TV because they can provide 3G and interactivity as a complement. They also have the existing billing relationships with users.

Nonetheless, Maine thinks DVB-SH will have limited use as a broadcast TV standard for mobile handsets. "Our view is that the opportunity to deliver normal broadcast TV is very limited. We think there is an opportunity for TV in cars, but broadcasting to phones is very difficult. We believe TV will be streamed over broadband networks, not broadcast over DVB-H."

In that way he says Solaris currently has a very different view from Nokia. "We're not convinced about DVB-T for the same reasons," he adds.

Carlos Placido, analyst at NSR, says the main opportunity for satellite services is in-car video and TV. "Europe is the best prospect for a mobile TV subscriber model. There is a mix of technologies, but expect DVB-H and DVB-SH to prevail," he says. "Everything will depend on developments in the mobile advertising channel," Placido adds. "Operators are getting nothing from this but it's potentially huge."