



Project Canvas – Free-to-Air Savior or Internet Killer?

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What do you get when you cross broadcast television with the Internet? Is the joint offering like the Internet, open and unregulated, or like broadcast TV, strictly controlled and heavily regulated. I think there are many companies, governments and NGOs asking themselves this one. Well, if you live in the UK the answer could be a project code named Canvas. And by the looks of things, it will be the Internet that suffers! In two consultation documents released by the BBC last week, the picture that emerges of Project Canvas is both confusing and a little disturbing.

Canvas – A Short Hop from Kangaroo

The BBC, in partnership with Channel 4 and ITV, has just had their plan for an online video on demand platform, called Project Kangaroo, quashed by the Office of Fair Trading as anti-competitive. Undeterred by this failure, the BBC is now proposing to save free-to-air TV by uniting it with broadband in a hybrid “free” service dubbed “Project Canvas.” Widely touted as the successor to Freeview, the service would:

“...promote a standards based open environment for internet-connected digital terrestrial and digital satellite television devices.”¹

This wide-ranging project, which would establish a platform suitable for Kangaroo, seeks to create a standard for the delivery of Internet content to the television and drive adoption of the standard through partnering with CE manufacturers, ISPs and content provider. A noble effort indeed! Keeping free-to-air TV vital and competitive with PayTV services was the key driver behind creating Freeview in the first place. But wait, don't you need a broadband subscription to enjoy these new benefits? The answer, of course, is yes. So, if we are to believe the Canvas proposition, the way to save free-to-air TV is to turn it into a pay service!

¹ Consultation by the BBC Trust on an application from the BBC Executive to define and promote an IP Television Standard ('Project Canvas'), February 2009

But why is the BBC proposing such a broad project in the first place? Is it really necessary or can the core goals of the corporation be achieved with a much simpler approach?

Not Another Browser Standard, Please!

One of the main things the Canvas proposal does is seek to establish a new standard for the delivery of Internet content on the TV. The project proposes doing this in two ways: establish a standard based Internet TV browser and provide a "guide" to allow the content to be found. However, there are already two suitable browser standards in existence: CE-HTML, part of the CE-2014-A standard, and WTVML, aka *ETSI TS 102 322*. Why the BBC feels a third is necessary is mystery.

The adoption of a "guide" standard is also very contentious. The importance of the guide in the tightly controlled world of linear television is well established. But how is this applied in the open market of Internet media? The Internet certainly can't be squeezed into the traditional grid guide offered on the TV today. One of the strengths of the Internet is that a content provider can define their own look and feel. These providers certainly won't appreciate the BBC defining their appearance on the TV. The area of TV search and discovery is desperate for innovation and there are many companies working in this area. For example, Intel/Yahoo! has the widget bar approach, game consoles are experimenting with virtual worlds, Blinkx is working on contextual search engines. The last thing that's needed is the BBC setting in stone how content is found on TV.

But perhaps more disturbing still is that the BBC clearly sees itself as one of the control points of the TV Internet world, as illustrated in the following statement from the proposition and public value case document:

"The BBC has an editorial opportunity to shape this market on behalf of audiences in a way that is consistent with its purposes."

Despite the BBC's description of the new service as "open" and "fair", making statements like this should give companies such as Google and Fetch.tv, both of which will be anxious to deliver on such platform, pause for thought. The Internet has evolved into the most useful communication medium since the invention of the printing press because of true openness. I think it can manage on the TV without the helping hand of the BBC.

The description of Canvas sounds very much like a commercial UK venture called Miniweb² which is currently running on the Sky satellite TV service. However, the BBC seems to go out of its way to exclude any mention of commercial ventures such as MiniWeb and PayTV companies participating in the project. Since Sky and Virgin are both major UK ISPs, including them in the discussion could well lead to a unified standard for hybrid Internet/TV across PayTV and Free-to-Air. Wouldn't a unified platform be better for the British Public? There's even a chance it could result in an International Standard. Remember that TV is finally just becoming unified behind HD, it would be a shame for hybrid standards to fragment around the world.

² The author wishes to disclose that he has previously done unrelated consulting work for Miniweb in the US market.

A Lighter Touch

The BBC has been doing a great job delivering their content to the British people through the multiple outlets available, including the Internet. The iPlayer is a beacon to the rest of the world in how to do web delivery of TV and audio very well. Extending this approach and leveraging this market-leading technology might be a better approach. The BBC could simply chose to do the following:

- Create a version of iPlayer for WTVML or CE-HTML browser
- Make the iPlayer freely available to any device manufacturer implementing the browser
- Add the browser or browsers to the Freesat and Freeview STB specification.

This would establish a hybrid TV platform, open to all comers, upon which the iPlayer is guaranteed to run. It helps seed the market by extending the existing platforms and drives demand by making the BBC content available on them.

The Canvas approach makes two huge mistakes:

1. It does not take into account the whole UK TV industry
2. It attempts to control or regulate the delivery of Internet content to the television

Taking a lighter approach avoids these problems completely leaving them in the truly open domain of the Internet, where they rightfully belong.

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