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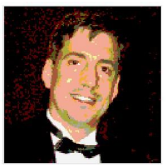

Online HD: Coming Faster Than You Think

Written by R. Scott Raynovich RSS
Monday, February 11. 2008 at 06:12 PM EST 3 comments

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Either I'm delusional, or the pace of high-definition (HD) technology is advancing fast enough that it may make online streaming HD downloads a legitimate competitor to traditional media -- within the next 12 months.

It's anecdotal evidence only, but I think a big indication of this trend is that my wife has been watching episodes of "Lost," in HD, on the ABC site. My wife is typically not an early adopter of technology, she usually waits until it's more mainstream. I was a bit shocked to come home one night and find Lost streaming across a 19" flat-screen computer montor in crisp, clear glory. In simple terms, the quality of the picture was better than you got on a traditional TV set just five years ago.

For those of you who have switched over to HD cable, you know how addictive it can be. As soon as you seen some of your content in HD, you immediately want all of it in HD. This is why I think moving to HD online can be so powerful -- the online properties have an opportunity to satiate the consumer's real, pent-up demand for HD content.

As Mark Cuban writes about often in his blog, HD content in itself can be a real differentiator. If you are, for example, a provider of niche content who hasn't managed to break into the cable line-up, chances are you can find and audience online. That's because there's not nearly enough HD content available.

The best news here is that while only a year ago one would have thought we would be waiting years to see viable streaming HD technology, it now appears to be coming faster than I thought.

I just got back from a trip to L.A., where I talked to a lot of people with insight into what's going on with technology that enables the content providers to more expediently delivery HD. There are many companies working to speed up HD downloads, including Move Networks, FastSoft, Itiva, and BitGravity (there are many more -- those just came of the top of my mind). Judging from the ABC site, the Move Networks stuff really works. I've also recently seen impressive demos by BitGravity and FastSoft.

I think that several technologies are coming together to speed up the high-def experience. What are they?

- **Client Technology.** Media standards such as Adobe Flash, Microsoft's Windows Media, and Apple Quicktime have been upgraded lately to improve the way that rich media is handled and streamed. Or, in some, cases, people like Move Networks have built an embedded client for their content provider
- **Codecs.** Tied to the topic above, H.264/MPEG-4 are being more widely distributed through the improved codecs, meaning higher quality content with less bandwidth.
- **Last-mile bandwidth.** Maybe I'm just lucky 'cause I have a 10 Mbit/s FiOS connection to my house, which makes streaming HD realistic. But really, this is going to become a lot more common. And coming soon, we'll have 4G and mobile WiMax. Or, read about today's announcement from Comcast on Cable Digital News.
- **Acceleration technology.** Whether it's a caching device or a server optimized for high-bandwidth delivery of media applications, more technologies are being applied to speed up the delivery of HD. For one example, FastSoft is accelerating media delivery using a WAN optimization approach with TCP that sits on only one box on the server side.
- **Content Delivery Networks (CDNs).** A new crop of CDNs such as Edgecast and BitGravity are specifically targeting high-definition media applications. They are building networks that are optimized for this type of content.

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Put it all together with a sudden interest from the networks and studios in getting more HD content in the hands of the consumer, and you have a recipe for this market taking off. It's shocking, really. I can't remember the last time that technology actually suprised me by arriving before I expected it.

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There's a way to set your favorites so you can switch to those channels in succession without hunting them down in the higher ends of the channel spectrum, but that's a kluge solution to the true problem.

But I don't know why an HD box can't automatically map to the HD feed if there's an HD and SD simulcast happening. It may be that they just "haven't gotten around to it yet." They are already doing it in digital simulcast markets...ie. if the digital box tunes to channel 9, it uses the digital feed, rather than the analog feed, of channel 9. I don't see why this can't be done in HD, too.

Early on, my HD-DVR wasn't smart enough to record the show from the HD feed automatically. Unless I manually set it up otherwise, it it would default the recording to the SD feed, which is really stoopid. But they fixed that glitch eventually. It may be that they havne't gotten around to these other fixes yet, but there's no technical reason I can think of that would prevent it.

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rayno
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"standard-def wasteland" -- Ha!

Another Pet Peeve -- why are cable channel guides so stoopid?

1) All the HD channels are banished to the hinterlands... like Chanell 8** or something. But, as you observed, if you have an HD box, they are likely the first channels you visit! Shouldn't the cable company be able to flop the channels so the HD Channels are 1, 2, 3, 4, e.t.c.

2) Why are the channels inflexible? You should be able the ASSIGN your channels no? Line them up like customized bookmarks. There is not a chance in H*ll I'm going to the Oxygen channel, ever. And neither is my wife, for that matter

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Jeff Baumgartner
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I totally agree on the HD thing. Once you have an HD set getting hd signals from cable, satellite or the telco, you're hooked. The first thing I do when I turn my HD set on is browse the HD tier. If nothing's there, I'll see my DVR has any HD stuff ready for vieweing. Then, only then, do I enter the standard-def wasteland.

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