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ABC.Com to Stream HD Video Online

Disney taps Move Networks for new browser technology

by John Merli, 05.30.2007

NEW YORK

When ABC/Disney unveiled its new primetime broadcast line-up for the fall in mid-May, it held a couple of strategic aces up its corporate sleeve that will serve to repurpose its content in two unique ways: It plans to stream full episodes of several of its primetime series on its Web site, ABC.com, in 720p HD; and to offer the same long-form content to smart phones and other portable devices via Sprint's mobile network.

In April, ABC.com had already re-launched a sector of its Web site to offer the likes of "Grey's Anatomy" and "Desperate Housewives" via a new streaming technology that proponents say dramatically improves the viewing experience compared to the often hesitant, freeze-up tendencies of today's more typical broadband streaming. The ABC.com streams currently are more comparable to SD than HD, but the higher 1280x720 resolution will begin in the fall, ABC said, following some beta-testing starting in July.

Generally, the quality, fluidity and reliability of most broadband streaming has rarely ever matched that of typical cable, DBS or terrestrial television. Yet ABC/Disney is counting on a lot of consumers getting into the habit of thinking last night's missed episode of "Boston Legal" is only a few mouse clicks away—and that the simple process of viewing it in long form via streaming will be both uneventful and positive. Adding HD to the experience is designed to push the habit-changing experience a bit further along.

While only newer computer monitors are even capable of displaying 720p video quality right now, ABC said the HD streams should appear sharper on nearly all monitors. The HD leap also gives the Disney network a leg up for broadcast networks on the emerging field of Internet Protocol television (IPTV), which telcos and cable companies are now employing in their own wired home schemes.

FULL SCREEN

More than 85 million complete episodes of its various TV series have been accessed since ABC.com's media player was re-launched last fall, originally using Flash technology, according to ABC.com. This spring, the free downloadable player switched to a new streaming technology created and marketed by Move Networks, a firm of about four dozen staffers based near Salt Lake City, Utah. (This same player will be used for HD content, too, according to an ABC spokeswoman).

Move Networks had ramped up its first large commercial venue in 2006 via a couple dozen Fox Television affiliates, and the popular online site MySpace.com. In early 2007 came new deals with The CW and ABC.com, with a big caveat for ABC: While streaming options are similar at all the sites, only ABC.com's media player allows viewers to stream video in a large, nearly full-screen window.

Taking advantage of ABC.com's menu of free content requires all PC and Mac users to download free software with the player. Jim Ericson, vice president of marketing at Move Networks, said the software will prompt each computer to adjust the streaming at its fullest potential—depending on a variety of variable conditions that will be different with each desired viewing (i.e., online traffic, broadband connection, computer speed, type of content, etc.). But, Ericson said Move's software is working hard on the other end of the line, as well.

"We do multiple things to optimize the video for playback. The actual encoding process is the same for on-demand or a file-based feed," he said. "When content comes in, our technology cuts it up into small stream loads. So instead of dealing with an entire 2 GB file, for example, we're actually cutting up and dealing with much smaller files to maximize video flow and image quality."

Ericson said where the technology makes the most noticeable difference is for live streaming (unlike the series content ABC currently is offering). "We can do a dual-pass variable bit-rate encode on live content. There's a delay [for live feeds] of maybe 15 seconds, compensating for the time it takes to encode and propagate the content out to the network."

COMMUNICATION OVERHEAD

One of the priorities in the ABC-Move Networks deal was to make the ABC.com player as easily downloadable for Apple Mac users as for the far more ubiquitous Microsoft PC user, which is not typical for most new software introductions.

Another difference in approach is that Move's streaming protocol is controlled by the downloaded media player, Ericson said.

"Rather than streaming being controlled by a media server, in our solution the server is just a standard 'http' Web server [because] our delivery protocol is based on http [Hypertext Transfer Protocol]—the same that's used to serve up a page of any other online content. We simply have much lower 'communication overhead' taking place. So versus something operating in a similar broadband, we actually get more bits delivered to the video."

Ericson said Move's technology automatically upshifts and downshifts to enable the best streaming experience possible, based on each end-user's local computer environment.

"If we're retrieving the same content and you have a higher bandwidth connection and a faster processor than I do, our player takes all that into account. If something happens with your bandwidth, or there's heavy congestion or some other problem, our streaming technology will gracefully downshift to a lower profile, but it won't stale out and it won't buffer."

Alexis Rapo, ABC.com's vice president for digital media, said Move's type of streaming "allows the network to dramatically improve the user experience and operational efficiency" on the newly available player for streaming "long form" (full episodes) of TV series. These typically run under an hour and often have somewhat fewer commercial breaks than when the same content is aired on ABC's broadcast network.



Earlier this year, ABC.com added a new player, using a new streaming platform from Move Networks.

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ABC hesitates to comment directly on the reaction of its traditional broadcast advertisers, thus far, to the enhanced ABC.com service, although Rapo said "we believe this [long-form content] will lead to increased viewing by users and to improved economics for our streaming product." He said the switch to Move Networks' streaming software does not require any significant additional technical commitment on ABC's part, nor does it cause any stress on his Web site's infrastructure.

HD streaming next fall could change the entire online video picture in more ways than one, but currently evaluating what is "better" than something else can be simply a matter of opinion, said analyst Dan Rayburn, executive vice president of StreamingMedia.com.

"Everybody judges quality in a different way, such as how sharp or how soft the image is, or maybe by the aspect ratio. The quality of [ABC.com's] streaming is good, no question. But as a technology, you have to take into account how people judge it. For example, can you fairly compare [streaming schemes] if the bit rate for one maybe is encoded three times higher than anything else you've just seen? I haven't heard from ABC on what encoding their service is using." (ABC also will not reveal what encoding might be used when it begins streaming in HD.)

Rayburn thinks a lot of content-oriented companies are "focusing too much on the technology itself and not enough on what they do best, which is to provide content and what that content is. It's distracting them."

ABC News also revamped its Web site on May 1, but is not using Move's streaming software.

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