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Wall crumbling between TVs and computers

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The wall between televisions and computers is crumbling and internet pioneer Yahoo! is swinging a virtual hammer.

On the eve of the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas in rapid-fire succession, Sony, LG Electronics, Toshiba, Samsung and Vizio showed off attention-grabbing new flat-panel television models embedded with Yahoo! "TV Widget" software offering links to popular websites.

By day's end, MySpace revealed that some new Toshiba televisions are being built with Yahoo! widgets, mini-applications, letting viewers access the popular online social networking website by clicking on remote controls.

"We've been cooking this up in the lab for three or four years," Yahoo! spokesman Lucas Mast said as his team displayed Connected TV technology in Las Vegas on Wednesday.

Yahoo! has built 20 widgets to link television viewers to internet destinations including YouTube, Twitter, eBay, MySpace, Amazon, CBS and The New York Times. Mast expects that number to grow to 50 by June.

A YouTube widget allows videos from the hot website to be streamed to television sets, while a MySpace widget allows members to watch TV while connecting with online profiles and friends.

"We're giving our users an entirely new way to easily enjoy, share and access MySpace content through the new MySpace experience for TV," said MySpace vice-president of business development Jason Oberfest.

Yahoo! developed the technology in collaboration with computer chip making colossus Intel.

"We believe bringing MySpace to the TV will transform the way people think about social networking and provide a seamless experience for users to enjoy MySpace while watching TV," said William Leszinske Jr, general manager of Intel's Digital Home Group.

"This effort is aimed at enhancing today's traditional TV watching with complementary widgets that will bring rich web content to the TV through internet-connected consumer electronics devices."

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Yahoo! and Intel announced in August they were working together on a "Widget Channel" for televisions.

Major television makers are using the CES gathering this week to debut televisions embedded with the Intel-Yahoo! technology.

"This isn't a television partner dipping their toe in the water," Mast said. "We are talking about millions of units. Samsung alone will be selling them in 13 countries."

Yahoo! and Intel on Wednesday made available a "Widget Development Kit" for software engineers, gadget makers and others in the industry to use to create enticing TV mini-programs.

"Yahoo! has combined key attributes of the internet, including openness, community, and personalisation, with the power of television," said Patrick Barry, vice-president, Connected TV, Yahoo!.

"By creating this revolutionary new internet experience, and combining our technology with the global distribution of major consumer electronics partners, we enable consumers to access the relevant information and content to enhance their television watching experience."

Barry joined Samsung executives at a news conference extolling a new line of televisions that act increasingly like computers.

"We hope to bring some of the values inherent in the consumer internet to the TV domain," Barry said.

"We think this will make TV bigger, better and more exciting than ever before."

The merging of television and the internet is shaping up as a major theme of the annual CES, which opens on Thursday.

Panasonic is showing off Viera brand televisions that let viewers watch films or television shows on-demand from major online store Amazon.

LG Electronics unveiled high-definition sets linked to Yahoo video, YouTube as well as the US online movie rental service Netflix.

"For more than 60 years TV has been the centre of family entertainment," Microsoft chief executive Steve Ballmer said while discussing the future of the consumer electronics industry during a CES keynote presentation late Wednesday.

"Over the next several years we will see TVs become more sophisticated and more connected. The boundary between the PC and the TV will dissolve.

Yahoo's starring role in making televisions "smarter" puts a shine on a veteran internet firm that's image and stock price has been battered by a contentious takeover bid by Microsoft and daunting competition from Google.