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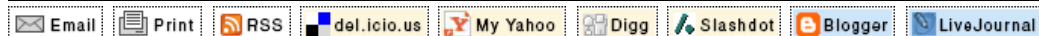
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STORY TOOLS



ABC.com Unveils "HD" Video Player

Full-screen broadband approaches broadcast quality

By Garth Johnston -- Broadcasting & Cable, 4/2/2007

In an effort to set itself apart from the TV pack, ABC became the first broadcast network to offer a new full-screen, high-quality video player to online visitors.

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[ABC First in Full-Screen "HD streaming"](#)

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ABC.com quietly relaunched its broadband player with two new display sizes: a startlingly crisp full-screen player and a "mini" 240-x 136-pixel screen. Other networks are also at work improving their players. Just as it was announcing a new online-video consortium with News Corp. and others, NBC also relaunched its broadband player, NBC Rewind, with social-networking features and a full-screen option.

But where NBC's new player and others like it employ Flash Video, the industry leader owned by Adobe Systems Inc., ABC's new player embraces the technologies of a Salt Lake City-based company called Move Networks. For Web surfers accustomed to grainy, jerky video, Move's players can show video that looks surprisingly similar to HDTV.

ABC First in Full-Screen

Move, which is partially funded by Disney's venture-capital arm, Steamboat Ventures, has allowed Fox and The CW to use its software as well. ABC is the first, however, to offer its video content in full-screen, and the difference is clear. "The quality of ABC's video is simply way better than NBC's in full-screen," says Dan Rayburn, executive VP for online industry Website StreamingMedia.com.

Where other networks have dabbled with online video in various forms, ABC has consistently offered its content on controlled environments like its Website and on Apple's iTunes.

Other networks have tested various strategies, putting clips and full-length content on their own Websites as well as on such Websites as YouTube and MySpace.

CBS' InnerTube uses RealMedia's RealPlayer, not Flash (although CBS does put content on Flash-based YouTube). That means that, of the major networks, only NBC still uses Flash.

Founded in 2000 but incorporated last year, Move Networks says it is in discussions with all the major networks about its broadband-video technology. The company's executive team has moved fast and comes with a wealth of experience in computer technology: CEO John Edwards was formerly the executive VP of networking-systems company Novell and CEO of I-link; Move Chairman Drew Major was chief scientist at Novell and also founded Arroyo Video Systems and Edgix.

Move's method of delivering video to personal computers differs from Flash's in a few crucial ways. While Flash streams video at a constant rate using the proprietary Flash Media Server, Move Networks streams its videos at an adaptive rate off commodity components on standard HTTP servers.



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This means that, when “you start watching a show on ABC or Fox,” explains Jim Ericson, VP of marketing at Move, “you’ll see that the quality quickly ramps up according to your bandwidth availability and the CPU on your computer.”

As the show continues, Ericson points out, the stream is “completely adaptive to Internet congestion. So, if there is some latency in the network, we might have to shift down again to a lower-quality stream, but it makes all those changes multiple times per second.”

Its videos require a small, one-time-only download. During playback, a video can be paused, supplemented or replaced midstream with advertisements in other formats (such as Flash) before returning to the Move stream. “So we have quite a bit of flexibility when it comes to serving ads,” Ericson says.

The difference in video quality between Flash and Move depends on how the video is encoded. Flash is streamed at only one bit rate, while Move video adapts its bit rate to the network it is running on; Move proprietary software allows it to encode at multiple bit rates in one pass.

“HD streaming”

A Move video being streamed on a clear network to a fast computer can approach HD video quality (Fox refers to it as “HD streaming”), whereas a Flash video could approach that quality only if it had been encoded at a high rate in the first place. That could congest a suddenly popular site.

HD is not necessarily a game-changer. However, video on ABC.com “looks much better than it ever has,” says Mitch Oscar, executive VP of Carat Digital, “but technological challenges are easy to overcome, and the issue here will be the content.”



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