

Mobile Communications

EU-backed consortium to help operators launch TV services

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An EU-backed consortium that includes manufacturers Alcatel and Motorola and French mobile operator Bouygues Telecom has begun work on a €10 million project aimed at delivering satellite-TV content directly to 3G phones.

The consortium, dubbed mobile applications and services based on satellite and terrestrial interworking (Maestro), is partly funded by the EU. It aims to explore the most suitable formats, content and delivery mechanisms for satellite-to-mobile services.

Bouygues Telecom, France's smallest mobile operator, will focus on establishing a commercial business case for the service. Motorola will develop the handsets while Alcatel will supply the relevant (satellite and 3G) network technology.

Other Maestro members include French content provider TF1, systems integrator LogicaCMG and UK fixed-line carrier BT.

Satellite technology is seen as more efficient than cellular networks for delivering TV broadcasts to thousands of users at once. 3G networks are largely unfit for the purpose since the amount of available bandwidth per base station diminishes as more users join the service.

Any large-scale delivery of TV programmes is therefore likely to quickly clog up a 3G network, according to Juan Aguirre, an executive with consortium member UDCast. Mobile networks are best suited to delivering bursts of content to individual users at varying times. Satellite systems, by contrast, have long been used to broadcast content to millions of users simultaneously.

One of Maestro's main challenges will be to integrate satellite and mobile technologies to ensure users can switch seamlessly between satellite broadcasts and nonsatellite services such as voice calls.

Motorola is working on developing a small device that can be plugged into a 3G handset, enabling

it to directly receive satellite signals. UDCast, meanwhile, is supplying technology that guarantees that satellite content always reaches the phone – for example, if data packets go astray as a result of radio interference. UDCast's solution sends replacement packets to the phone via the operator's own UMTS network.

Alcatel Space, an Alcatel subsidiary, leads the Maestro consortium. It will offer mobile operators a package of technologies allowing them to run a TV broadcast service in parallel to their 3G service.

Friend or foe?

Industry experts say there is growing mobile-operator interest in satellite-broadcasting services, which are already being offered by South Korea's SK Telecom.

But there could also be interest from broadcasters aware of the huge opportunity that lies in being able to deliver their services to mobile devices.

Satellite broadcaster BSkyB, for instance, could in theory deliver its programmes directly to mobile phones and set itself up as an MVNO if it wanted to offer additional mobile services.

Satellite is not the only overlay technology in development, however.

A number of consortia in Europe are, for instance, looking at reusing digital-terrestrial TV transmitters to broadcast programmes to mobile phones (*Mobile Communications*, 334/1). The handsets and software for such services are based on DVB-H, a version of the digital-TV standard optimised for delivery to mobile devices.

Nokia, a major proponent of the technology, has been trialling it for some time with Finland's main broadcaster.

It has even developed a handset, the 7700 media device, capable of receiving television signals. The handset will be released at the end of June.

Nokia plans to launch a DVB-H trial in Berlin later

this year in partnership with Dutch manufacturer Philips, content provider Universal Studios Networks Germany and Vodafone Pilotentwicklung, Vodafone's research centre in Germany.

The project manager of the trial, professor Claus Sattler, says the aim is to develop compelling content for this type of service. One idea is interactive TV services. Users watching an MTV programme, for instance, could use their phones to vote via SMS for a music clip to be broadcast, and go on to buy ringtones or merchandise tied in to the clip.

Commercial deployments of satellite-overlay networks are not expected for some time, however. Significant technical limitations, such as high handset power consumption, still must be overcome, and satellite overlays could also be expensive.

DVB-H networks are technologically more mature, and largely ready to roll out. But deployment is being delayed by political and regulatory factors.

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