

Living Digital

IPTV: The wire fights back

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features



IPTV: The wire fights back

The trusty telephone wire is giving DTH operators a lot of headache, and thanks to IPTV, consumers now have greater choice when it comes to digital TV for their homes. There has never been so many options to watch television

■ VISHAL MATHUR

Mr and Mrs Gulati are very annoyed with the mess in their home. They have multiple wires snaking along the various walls of their home. There is the land-line phone wire snaking along the entire living room. And it is not alone because they are joined in by the cable TV wire which sneaks in through the window and then snakes its way to wherever the television is set. Their son however was not happy with the picture quality of the cable service and had gotten a DTH dish installed. Since the dish is installed on the roof, that wire seems to have descended from the skies into the room and straight into the set top box. As if that's not all, their son needs his daily fix of music downloads, online chatting and social networking. Hence, broadband Internet seemed like a perfect solution, but that also came with its own dedicated wire and a wireless router.

The Gulati household is not the only one annoyed with the multiple wires running around the house. Anyone who has a television, land-line telephone and broadband connection at home faces this issue. But now, there seems to be a solution. It is called IPTV (Internet Protocol Television). Though the name may lead you to believe that it is only a television service, but it offers a lot more. And you thought that the good

old telephone wire is not good enough for anything else! We try to explain the technology, and how it can be useful to you.

IPTV basically survives on the Triple-Play Technology. In simpler terms, a single wire connected to a single piece of hardware will provide television signals, telephone and high speed broadband connection. The service provider, whoever you choose, will stretch a single wire into your home through the junction box outside on the street. This wire terminates with a connection to the wall point which is installed by the tech team. A wire from this point is used for the land line telephone connection. A second wire from this wall point terminates at the DSL modem or a Wi-Fi router. From the router comes another wire which is connected with the IPTV capable STB which is connected to your TV. Normally, during this whole setup, you will not have multiple wires running around in the same room without achieving much purpose. Apart from this, there are a lot of other features which are unique to the IPTV experience. We try to explain them in greater detail, and how it compares to the other kid on the block—DTH.

Single Bill

There definitely must have been a

time when you would have felt annoyed by the sheer number of bills which you get through mail at the end of every month; telephone, broadband, television, mobile, gas, electricity etc. But with IPTV, you can cut down on this clutter by combining the telephone, broadband and television bill into one. A combined bill makes it simpler to pay, less time consuming to analyze for any errors and keep tabs on. It also makes it easier to assess the tariff and packages you are subscribed to and the cost impact that will have. This will enable you to choose schemes and packages which suit your requirement, thus saving you money. All in all, it is meant to make life easier.

Broadcast vs Unicast

What happens with DTH television is what is known as broadcast. It means that a single message, in this case television signal or interactive service, is sent out to all its receivers. We will all get the same message irrespective of our location or taste. With cable, there are only television signals broadcast without any personalized services.

With the principle of Unicast as followed by the IPTV operators, apart from live television signals, there are a lot of personalized interactive services catering to individual tastes. For

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"Television signals are directly dependent on the Internet bandwidth. For smooth functioning of Internet Protocol TV, a minimum of 2 mbps speed is required. We, at MTNL guarantee our customers of this bandwidth speed and thus the chances of poor quality TV signals are next to none. As IPTV doesn't require spectrum space or satellite, therefore IPTV will never face space constraint problem anytime in the future. DTH will always face such problems when they would be planning to increase number of connections or channels."



Ashok Kumar Wahi, Head-Strategic Initiative, Aksh Optifibre

example, Airtel Digital Interactive TV offers a pizza delivery service, wherein you can order your pizzas over the telly, quite literally! Since it is you who is ordering the pizza for yourself, the other users of the same IPTV service across the country will not receive the same. This is extensive personalization using the Unicast technology.

Unicast epitomizes in personalizing the television experience for the consumer according to his needs since by definition, it means sending out a message to one single receiver. This means that there can be a service provided to you which is totally different from what is offered to someone else. The IPTV solution provided by IOL has a personalized advert feature where you can select which advert you want to watch from the list at any time, according to your need. Time Shift TV and video on demand are also a part of Unicast technology.

Time Shift TV

Remember the Tatasky+ DVR reviewed in LD Jan 2009? It records live TV on a built in hard drive. The constraint there was the fact that you

had to set up the recording in advance and the capabilities were limited by the space on the hard drive. But, with IPTV Time Shift TV, we have moved onto the next realm of recording capabilities. With IPTV Time Shift TV, you can access all the programs broadcast on certain channels for the last few days. This duration depends on the service provider and the amount of storage space he has on his server. Since the video is stored on the service provider's server, you do not need to buy expensive DVRs if you have missed a program the previous day. Airtel offers seven days worth of programming gone by on its IPTV offering while Aksh Optifibre's iControl offers 3 days for MTNL and BSNL subscribers. The number of days and channels is bound to increase in the future.

On Demand Access

Video and content on demand is a feature which has been around, in many variations, for years. But with IPTV, this goes a one step further. What is being offered is the next generation of personalized interactivity. We can order movies instantly with the touch of a

button. Even though DTH operators claim that they also offer a lot of instant interactivity with this service, but a subscriber still has to either call up the customer care or sms a movie code to be able to get the request registered. But with IPTV, the service providers are offering video on demand at the actual touch of a button. You do not need to call or SMS any customer care number to get the request registered.

How does it compare with DTH?

IPTV is superior to DTH in a lot of features, but in certain areas where DTH still has the advantage. We try to explain in detail.

Cost: IPTV is cheaper right now since the packaged rates for the three services are lower than TV, telephone and broadband individually (Initial cost of hardware and registering is similar in DTH and IPTV). Though the higher cost is not the fault of DTH operators alone, but this does matter to the customer, who does not care about anything else but his expenditure. But, we are worried about seeing something similar to DTH package rates which went skywards once a lot of subscribers were in the bag. If the same happens to IPTV rates, then it will lose the cost advantage. But currently IPTV has to be given the benefit of doubt. Result- Advantage IPTV.

Quality: the picture quality in IPTV depends on the bandwidth from the service provider's side, while it depends on satellite signals in DTH. Bandwidth prone to a lot of fluctuations and if speeds do drop a lot, which they tend to do, then you will lose TV signals till the time the speeds are regained. DTH does find trouble with KU band signals in the rains, but that is less frequent than bandwidth fluctuations. The debate is

Airtel Digital TV Interactive	
Initial Cost: Rs 3,999	Includes Installation, activation, modem/router & Set-top box (Compulsory costs)
Magic @ Home Pack: Rs 999 p.m.	135 channels including 256 kbps broadband speed with unlimited download and a land-line connection.
Interactive Combo Pack: Rs 599 p.m.	Rs 599 per month that gives 117 channels including 256 kbps broadband speed with download limit of 2.5 GB
Premium Pack: Rs 399 p.m.	135 channels and bandwidth and voice as per plan opted by customer has base fixed line and Broadband plans
MTNL'S icontrol IPTV	
Initial Cost: Rs 999	Refundable security for the set top box. No cost for installation
Rs 199 IPTV Pack	Rs 199 gives you 120 channels. You can choose a telephone and broadband tariff plan of your choice over and above this.

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Q What is the technology used to enable triple play through one wire?

We are delivering our IPTV service through a fiber backbone enabled using MPEG4 Technology over Carrier Ethernet Network and last mile delivery on copper using ADSL2+ technology which enables high-speed broadband and delivers superior digital video and audio quality.

Q What all interactivity options does Airtel Digital TV Interactive offer?

A viewer will have access to Interactive 2.0 which offers real-time interactivity giving him the freedom to order pizzas and book movie tickets

on his TV. Time Shift TV gives the power to pause and rewind live TV and also auto-records and stores programmes for 7 days. You also get on-demand access to the largest library of movies with 'Movie on Demand'.

Q Are the television signals directly dependent on the internet bandwidth?

We are offering our IPTV service over a closed user group IP backbone which is controlled and has the highest Quality of Service (QoS) in place to offer trouble-free IPTV services to the end customer. This has no relationship with Internet hence there is no fluctuation of quality impact on the TV signals.



Atul Bindal,
President, Telemedia Services, Bharti Airtel

on about whether a fall in Internet speeds affects IPTV but the truth is, once bandwidth drops, it will have an effect. Also, comparing between DTH and IPTV picture quality on the same 42" flat screen TV, we found that the images were sharper and clearer with DTH, but only just. But on a smaller screen size, the difference will not really be visible. Result- Advantage DTH.

Reach: DTH uses satellite signals, and can thus be installed, accessed and enjoyed across the length and breadth of the country irrespective of geographical location. But IPTV uses broadband ready telephone cables to reach your home. Thus, it will only be available if your area is wired by the telephone service provider. Keeping in mind the size of our country, IPTV may not be readily available in a lot of areas for quite some time to come. But you will be able to choose from 5 different DTH operators and get connected

immediately. Result- Advantage DTH.

Interactivity- IPTV offers the next level of convenience and interactivity. Ordering a pizza while watching TV, using the TV's remote is something great! Secondly, one click of the remote and you can order the movie from the listing without having to call or SMS anyone to order. Multi-player gaming is also a feature of IPTV and is offered by Aksh Optifibre's iControl to MTNL and BSNL subscribers. These are examples of the convenience offered by IPTV offering interactivity using the process of Unicasting. DTH cannot offer these services due to technological and transponder space limitations. Result- Advantage IPTV.

What do we suggest?

The comparison between IPTV and DTH shows that there is no clear winner in terms of which is better. If you are

more interested in keeping the monthly cost down while subscribing to all three- TV, telephone and broadband, then we suggest IPTV which will offer a lot more interactivity options as well. However, if cost does not really matter to you but you want stable services, then we would suggest DTH, separate from your Broadband and Telephone. DTH is more stable (except for small durations in heavy rains) and not prone to image loss due to frequent internet bandwidth fluctuations and as we found much to our surprise, is clearer, particularly on big screen flat televisions.

Overall, the final choice depends on what your requirements are and if your area is even connected with IPTV connectivity. But if it is, then we recommend you do check out the service demo once at a nearby outlet. And we are sure that the simple cost advantage will swing most people towards IPTV.



Sudarshan Boosupalli,
Country Head
Ruckus Wireless

Q How different is IPTV over WiFi compared to conventional IPTV? How does it work?

Delivering IPTV within the home over WiFi is different from conventional IPTV because there is no need for traditional cabling to connect televisions. More importantly, it returns freedom and control into the hands of consumers by letting them install TVs where they want and when they want at a lower cost. The biggest problem with wireless IPTV is that WiFi is inherently unstable and can't support real-time streaming of high-definition content. Recent technical advances in WiFi that radically increases the range and reliability of signals has forever fixed this problem. Ruckus Wireless is the only proven WiFi vendor on IPTV over Wi-Fi and works with over 100 telcos globally.

Q How does IPTV benefit the end consumer- The consumer may already have television, telephone and broadband connections at his home. Does it offer any real value add over the three services individually?

IPTV is predicated on the IP networking protocol and is inherently more flexible for the provider, making it easier for them to offer bundled voice, video and data services over a single broadband connection, provide interactivity and tie conventional TV services with the Internet.

IPTV also now enables wireless support because of its use of the IP protocol. This means that TVs could now be placed anywhere in the home without costly, disruptive, unsightly and cumbersome cabling.