

## Opinion

## Watching and waiting

By Lynda Rathbone



OVER THE past month I have been reading up on technological trends: 'The best of 2005' and 'What's in store for 2006' kind of stuff. Most of it was what you might expect – trends that have been progressing slowly like the declining use of Java, or technology with a bit more spring in its step, such as wikis and the debate over the use of sites like Wikipedia.org as a factual resource.

One trend that I came across, which has received lots of attention in the US but seemingly hasn't received an awful lot of coverage here, is peer-to-peer television (P2P TV). Now there's no hard business angle on this one – I just find the concept plain interesting. After all, we all watch a bit of television, don't we? And we're all a bit frustrated at the lack of quality programming, are we not? Well then, let me take this opportunity to update you on this one.

P2P TV has been around for a number of years but has mainly been used for existing shows or for the swapping of video content published by the 'big boys'. There's usually talk of copyright and piracy, too. Although P2P TV has always been heralded as the next big thing, it hasn't really taken off the way that podcasting has. Maybe this is because audio is a little easier to record and upload.

In my opinion, however, P2P TV's heyday is just around the corner. A few years ago we didn't have video iPods or other handhelds that gave a good quality video image on the go. Mobiles didn't have the ability to play TV programmes (or this ability was very basic) and the video equipment was still a bit pricey.

But that has all changed and the required hardware is now here. The consumers are changing constantly and from what I

can tell, network TV isn't getting any better. *Viva la revolution*, I say. It's about time that I could find something interesting to watch on the box – be it a with a download onto a DVD that I pop into my player, or through the use of a digital box that allows me to have a 'my documents' space for viewing my own files in addition to what's on Channel 4.

I long to 'geek-out' on more shows about gadgets and technology. I want to watch more sci-fi movies from the 1950s, and I wouldn't mind seeing 'Twin Peaks' again. And what about all those people out there with great ideas for TV shows that the networks will never pick up because of the revenue models for advertising and audience figures? I want to watch their shows... or at least I think I do.

The point is that P2P opens up many possibilities, so anyone can be a broadcaster, or rather, a 'broadcatcher', as is the term used these days. According to [www.free-tv.org](http://www.free-tv.org), this play on words refers to "The use of really simple syndication (RSS) feeds and BitTorrent peer-to-peer file sharing as an alternative to distributing multimedia content on the internet." I recommend that you check out the website for more information on the P2P TV movement.

And while I said there was no hard business angle on this one, I must expand on that statement. This technology is changing the way content is distributed online, meaning that advertising models are being blown out of the water. The way information is consumed is changing and if you serve a large consumer audience it would be a good idea to sit up and take notice. Reaching your target consumer just got easier, but at the same time harder – harder because they will be exposed to fewer advert breaks and easier because they are refining their profiles by selecting more specific content – which enables a better understanding of what they want and when they want it.

In the UK, companies like Sky are already on top of the digital TV set-top box. They know what you watch, when you watch it and so forth. But will they allow you to supplement that with your own programming downloaded from the internet, using their digital box as your hard drive? This, in turn, begs the age-old solution for me – the need for search, classification and content optimisation so we don't make just as big a mess of our TV files as we have our shared network drives. But that's for another column one day in the future, when the P2P TV drives are up and running and we are spoilt for choice.

Until then, we can watch and wait. And, hopefully, one day soon, we'll have better programmes to view as a result. ■

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