



# The Mobile TV & Video Medium: What's the Message?

Canadians are tuning in to TV and video on their mobile phones

By Trevor Marshall

**N**oted Canadian media analyst Marshall McLuhan is perhaps best known for his comment that, “The medium is the message”. When he wrote this in his 1964 book, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McLuhan was telling us that new forms of communication create societal changes.

Some of these are obvious, or even expected, but others sneak up on us, taking place subtly over time. Yet often, it's the gradual changes that in the end create the greatest difference in society. Therefore, McLuhan argues, we need to identify and understand the changes, large and small, that any new medium effects on society. And we need to do so early on, so that we have the opportunity to influence, even direct how this new medium is integrated into our lives.

When McLuhan penned "The medium is the message", television was still in its infancy in Canada, having been on the air for just over a decade. Now, more than a half-century after the first over-the-air broadcast, television's effect on our lives has been nothing less than staggering. It has changed how we learn, how we work, how we play... in a word, everything.

Another, younger technology – the mobile phone – has had a similar impact, and its influence on society is still growing. When McLuhan passed away in 1980, commercial mobile phone service was still half a decade away, and it was not until the mid 1990s and the introduction of digital services that the mobile medium really took off. But one has to wonder: What would Marshall McLuhan have thought of the ability to combine these two powerful media, by sending TV and video content to a mobile phone?

## Two Years in Canada

Canada's major wireless service providers have been doing this for about two years now. In that short time, many changes have already taken place. For starters, mobile data networks have been upgraded to deliver more frames per second for better picture quality. "The TV experience is what I used to call Mobi-Slide-Show when it was on a 2.5G, or 1x network," quips Andy Wright, Director of Business Development at Bell Mobility, in referring to the launch of the MobiTV application in 2005. "But it has graduated to a full TV viewing experience of 14-16 frames per second on a 3G network."

Other improvements have been implemented, too. For example, the number of video-ready devices on the market is growing exponentially. In addition to pay-per-view pricing models, all carriers now offer flat-

rate, "all you can eat" monthly subscriptions to their mobile TV and video offerings, which let consumers use their video-enabled mobile phone the same way they watch a regular television.

And perhaps most importantly, the quality of what's on the pocket TV is improving, so there are good reasons to watch. Content providers are growing in number, and increasingly they are developing content that is not simply repackaged programming, but is generated specifically for mobile TV and video services.

"A couple of years ago, when the category was introduced, very limited choices were out there," recalls Upinder Saini, Vice President of New Services Marketing at Rogers Wireless. "However, I would say today if we look at the variety of content offered – right from entertainment to clips, to news, to weather, to comedy – pretty much all of the genres are available. And the interesting thing is that in any one of these categories, the tier one broadcasters and the content partners are providing services."

## Quick Fixes...

Meantime, the industry – and society – is learning what works in this new and compelling medium. For starters, "short" is "sweet".

"The screen is fairly small so people are not drawn to it for extended periods of time: If we think of watching The Matrix on a small screen, it would not be a great experience for anyone because it's so tiny and there's so much black," notes TELUS Vice President of Content Fred DiBlasio. "This is not where we'll be watching full-length feature films. That's why I think sports, music video and news and information are so popular – they're quick fixes."

The Co-founder and Chief Creative Officer of mobile media company QuickPlay Media Inc., Raja Khanna believes that in the long run, the market for these short pieces of content will be much broader than the market for traditional broadcasts, because of how we use our mobile devices. "There's a market for both, clearly, but if we're talking about the mass market, what we really have to capitalize on are these little five-minute windows that everybody has during their day, and give them

## If You Don't Like It, Wait Five Minutes

If there's any one thing that bonds all Canadians – regardless of where they live, their education, their income, or any other measurement – it's our obsession with the weather.

Every day, Canadians can – and do – check the weather through any number of sources. It's available in newspapers and broadcast on radio and television. We can listen to recorded phone messages, or receive e-mails, or visit Web sites. Those of us with wireless devices can check the weather via SMS, MMS, WAP, mobile e-mail, the mobile Internet... the list goes on.

So one might be excused if one's initial reaction to video weather forecasts to the mobile phone is, "Do we really need another way to check the weather?"

The answer is, "Yes – apparently we do", because this has emerged as one of the most popular forms of visually-rich content since Canada's carriers introduced mobile TV and video two years ago. And the more one thinks about this, the more mobile TV emerges as an ideal medium for answering that most Canadian of questions: "Cold enough out there for ya?"

"There are a million other places where we can get the weather," notes Raja Khanna from QuickPlay. "Despite all that, the video service for weather is hugely popular. What does that tell us? It tells us that people just love video."

And weather – especially weather that's all singing and dancing – is really compelling. "It's something that people want every day, it's something that can change frequently, and it's something that people want while they're on the go," says Andy Wright at Bell Mobility. "I check the weather before I leave work at night just to find out if the roads are going to be really snowy and if I'll have an extra hour on my commute, or whether I should just stay an extra hour at the office and wait until it dies down."

Fred DiBlasio at TELUS adds that video weather reports to the mobile tend to provide more detail than a straight text message, and include weather stories from outside our immediate area. And that, he says, satisfies our Canadian craving. "As Canadians, we're always obsessed with the weather, given our travails with the weather here in this country."

something useful to do," he says. "If we're standing in line and it's easy to check the weather on our video phone, we will – and we will do this sort of thing every day. But if we have just five minutes in line, we're not going to tune into an hour-long drama."

"There are a lot more five-minute opportunities than there are one-hour opportunities," Khanna adds.

### ...And Long Breaks

While quick fixes are popular, Bell Mobility is betting that as screens improve people will watch feature films on their mobiles, too. In mid-February, the company launched Mobile Movies, offering full-length, pay-per-view movies to its wireless customers. Bell has inked agreements with distributors such as Disney and Sony, and already offers viewers choices in several genres, including action, comedy, drama and horror. Bell Mobility also appears to recognize that people on the go may not be able to watch a two-hour film in a single sitting: the service allows movies to be paused at any time and resumed later.

### Must-see... Now

As is to be expected, items such as news reports are popular because they carry with them an element of immediacy. "Timeliness is key – people want to have their information on the go," says DiBlasio. "Let's be clear: mobile TV is not going to replace traditional broadcasting. I think it's a complement to traditional broadcasting for people who are on the go."

For the same reason, sports highlights do well in the mobile video world. Wright says Bell Mobility's mobile video feeds from the National Hockey League enjoy a strong audience – especially since the content isn't just repackaged broadcast television. "We're finding more ways to move from linear broadcasts where we have this big TV set, to getting the camera angles and slicing and dicing the content in a way that our mobile subscribers can see in an easier way," he explains.

Wright adds that Bell's mobile TV offering enhanced the coverage of the 2006 Winter Olympics in Turin, Italy for many Canadians. "We had clips at the top of every hour – a summary of what happened, of the top Canadian

stories," he says. "If we were away from our TVs – and many of us were because the time difference meant many events took place while we in Canada were at work – we were able to get our Olympic fix right away on a mobile device."

Timeliness may be determined by the clock, but a sense of urgency also works in mobile TV's favour. This can be generated by one's peers. Khanna says for younger people, music videos are very popular for this reason. "If we're sitting in a cafeteria talking to our friends and we're talking about a new artist, there's a sense of urgency there to show our friends a new video," he points out. "Anything that has an emotional sense of urgency is, I think, perfectly suited to this platform."

### The Picture within a Picture...

The carriers generally agree that video and TV content is standing on its own as an attractive service for their customers. But they're also finding interesting – and effective – ways to bundle mobile video with other mobile and fixed services. "Carriers seem very aggressive in their bundling strategies," Khanna observes. "An all-you-can-eat video-on-demand service can be bundled with anything – it could be call display, it could be text messaging – and that is very appealing to consumers."

Noting that Bell's family includes ExpressVu, Sympatico, the CTV television network and the Globe and Mail, Wright says it's just a matter of time before we see more mobile TV and video services offered as part of a larger bundle. "More and more we're going to make it easier for our consumers to participate with the content that they're viewing in a multitude of ways," he explains. "Video is very tangible, and we'll move to enrich that experience for our customers. Most of the stuff of the future is customer-driven and we're stepping up to meet the demand for those types of things."

### ...And the Big Picture

Even as the mobile video market grows today, carriers are looking to the future. They generally agree on what needs to be done to ensure mobile TV and video is a long-term success in Canada.

The good news is, the medium is generating excitement among content providers, who are critical to the success of delivering video and TV to the handset. "I think it permits the broadcasters to actually extend their brands to another screen, and I think some of them are interested in doing that," muses DiBlasio at TELUS. "But it's not just the producers – it's a whole bunch of people who are sitting in their basements whom we haven't yet discovered, who are going to come up with new and unique types of formats for the mobile phone that will make this even more compelling than it is today."

As Rogers' Saini notes, the technology and content are both ready. "Third-generation networks are here now, the bandwidth has improved, we have higher frames per second in terms of the quality of content, and content providers are making a ton of content available. And the phone selection has improved dramatically because the manufacturers have recognized video as one of the strong categories with very strong growth potential," he points out. "Now, marketing and awareness, education, and trial – these are a must. Without that, we could have the best possible thing but it won't do well. That's where Rogers and the other carriers must come in, to make sure the message gets out to the customers and that this message gets out in a simple fashion so they can see the value in this product."

For Bell Mobility's Wright, getting the message out won't be too difficult for the industry. "The nice thing about TV to our phones is that it makes sense," he points out. "With text messaging we had a slower growth curve but now you can't stop this train. But I would say if you compare the growth curves, then video is on an accelerated growth curve compared to text for the simple reason that people 'get' TV on their phone."

"I think in the next 18 to 24 months the market is going to hit an inflection point and really take off," predicts QuickPlay's Khanna. "All the pieces are in place now, and we're really excited about what's coming." ■

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