Digital interactive TV: Voluntary standards best way to achieve roll-out of new digital services in Europe, says European Commission

Compulsory technical standards imposed by regulators are not necessary for the roll-out of interactive digital TV in Europe. This dynamic market is best served by voluntary, industry-led standardisation initiatives, said the European Commission in a new Communication on interoperability of digital interactive TV published today. The Commission’s priority is now to work with EU Member States to ensure a smooth and rapid switchover to digital TV. To this end, Member States should continue to promote open, interoperable standards. The Commission will complement this by promoting European digital TV standards in other regions of the world.

“I want to accelerate the take-up of digital television in Europe,” said Viviane Reding, EU Commissioner for Information Society and Media. “Our policy is to encourage investment and promote freedom for industry to innovate. It is good news that interoperability is no longer a major obstacle for interactive TV, thanks to the growing number of technical solutions supporting it. This is proof of the successful development of digital TV standards in Europe, which increasingly ensure that TV buyers get the maximum benefit from their investment.”

Digital interactive TV enables the viewer to interact with the broadcaster via a ‘return channel’. The viewer can interact directly with TV broadcasts, to play games, or send messages. Interactivity requires a software stack in the receiver called an Applications Programme Interface (API). To ensure that markets of scale can develop and technical incompatibilities to the detriment of the consumer are avoided, open interoperable APIs play a crucial role. Their use is therefore encouraged under EU legislation.

To contribute to interoperable solutions and to ensure that interactive TV can be rolled out successfully, the Commission has been working since 2004 with stakeholders, including ministries and regulatory authorities, broadcasters, network operators, manufacturers, industry associations and research project members, in the Multimedia Home Platform (MHP) Implementation Group. Following this work, and after regulatory enquiries and public consultations, the Commission now has concluded that mandating a particular EU-wide technical standard is not necessary because Europe’s digital TV market is dynamic, and already benefits from a range of robust digital TV standards, initiated by the industry and covering both transmission and interactive applications.

Today there are over 47 million digital receivers in use in Europe, of which about 26 million have a proprietary API and about 4 million have MHP, which is recognised as an open interoperable standard by the European Commission.
The two most successful digital terrestrial TV roll-outs in Europe rely on standardised APIs (MHEG-5 in the UK and MHP in Italy). Such successful developments demonstrate how flexibility and consensus among market players can achieve genuine interoperability, and generate economies of scale that lead to price reductions for consumer equipment.

The Commission will continue to promote open, interoperable standards for digital television in Europe and worldwide. It has established and funded a series of actions to promote international co-operation in research, development and standardisation for digital TV. This could in the future be extended to international collaboration in implementing standards and digital TV production.

So far, the growth of interactive TV services across Europe has been slower than many expected. The Commission sees a need for business models to evolve further, and for more investment, before the practice of delivering on-line government services via TV, for example, can become more widespread. In May 2005, the Commission therefore published a Communication on accelerating the transition from analogue to digital broadcasting\(^1\) proposing a target date of 2012 for Member States to make the transition to digital television and switch off analogue TV transmission (see [IP/05/595](http://europa.eu.int/information_society/policy/ecomm/info_centre/documentation/communic_reports/index_en.htm)).

The Communication on interoperability of digital interactive TV is published at:


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