

Commission's DVB-H drive leaves grey area for mobile-TV alternatives

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The European Commission's move to push ahead with supporting DVB-H as the mobile-TV standard in the EU has left open to interpretation the scope for operators to deploy alternative technologies. This follows the backing of DVB-H as a non-mandatory standard by the Council of Ministers, which represents the EU's member states.

The Commission is set to add DVB-H to its official list of standards by end-February 2008, following the Council's endorsement of its proposal to do so on November 29. The Commission's proposal was outlined in a July communication.

The designation of DVB-H as a non-mandatory standard means that, technically, operators will still be able to choose alternative technologies for mobile TV. This is in line with the Council's response to the Commission's proposals.

The Council outlined its conclusions on the proposals at end-November, inviting the Commission to "acknowledge the importance of innovation, technology neutrality and a market-led approach for the successful, long-term deployment of mobile-TV broadcasting services".

It therefore appears unlikely that member states would support a Commission attempt to make DVB-H mandatory in future.

Nevertheless, Martin Selmayr, spokesman for the Commission's Information Society and Media directorate, says that "it will become more difficult" for operators to use alternative technologies. This is partly because national regulatory authorities (NRAs) will be obliged to give preference to DVB-H.

And a number of member states have expressed reservations about the Commission's decision to favour a single standard, including the UK, Germany and the Netherlands.

A spokeswoman for the UK's Ofcom says the regulator is opposed to attempts to force NRAs to give priority to particular standards or technologies, and that the market is best-placed to make such decisions.

Further, although Ofcom acknowledges that the Commission is initially making DVB-H a non-mandatory standard, it believes that it could be the first step towards a mandate. "Although we may understand this is not the

Commission's intention, industry may not, which may influence them to go down a particular path," the spokeswoman adds.

Others in the industry also believe that such a move could be difficult to justify given the general trend towards technology neutrality in the mobile industry.

Indeed, in its conclusions the Council has attempted to guard against a single standard by urging the Commission to consider bringing forward proposals to add other mobile-TV standards to its list.

Jan Willem Beaujean, a spokesman for the Dutch Permanent Representation in Brussels, says the Netherlands "is happy with the balanced conclusions of the Council", which refrains from supporting mandatory standards.

It is unclear, however, whether the Commission will ultimately seek to mandate DVB-H. Although Selmayr says that achieving political consensus is very helpful and that the Commission supports the Council's aims, it does not necessarily need to follow them.

And in July, the Commission said it "may come forward with proposals in mid-2008 including, if appropriate, steps to make an open standard mandatory".

The Commission's present position, says Selmayr, is that "we keep all options open, and we have this power [to mandate] under the EU Framework, but in view of the current irreversible trend towards DVB-H, this is a rather hypothetical question". Selmayr adds that the Commission will reserve any action for cases of market failure.

No mandate

The Broadcast Mobile Convergence Forum (BMCO-Forum), an international mobile-TV lobby group that counts major mobile operators, vendors, broadcasters and media regulators among its members, also says it would be wrong for the Commission to mandate a particular technology.

"We think that the technological decision should not be made by government or by the Commission, but by the market," says Claus Sattler, the body's executive director. He says, however, that the BMCOForum supports any

move like the Commission's to strengthen Europe's market for mobile TV.

And although Sattler believes it is clear that DVB-H will be the main driver of mobile-TV deployments in Europe, he says that in some cases there might be a business case for favouring other technologies. Sattler cites previous moves towards DAB-IP in the UK and DMB in Germany.

Although neither of these technologies appears to have proved particularly successful so far, Sattler says commercial rather than technical reasons are largely the cause, as well as the fact that broadcast mobile TV is still in its infancy.

UK incumbent BT pulled the plug on its Movio DAB-IP service earlier this year after it achieved low subscriber uptake in a collaboration with MVNO Virgin Mobile. Sattler points to obstacles such as a lack of handsets and availability from only one MVNO.

Similarly, he says the German DMB service run by mobile-TV provider MFD has so far been hindered by a lack of devices and availability from service-provider rather than operator partners.

Despite these obstacles, he believes it is too early to say which alternative technologies could succeed. And even those that deploy DVB-H could see commercial sense in rolling out a combination of technologies, he says, seeking, for instance, to deploy alternatives in rural areas.

MFD is pursuing a technology-neutral approach and in October also won preliminary approval to operate Germany's DVB-H platform. It is not yet clear whether it will continue rolling out DMB alongside DVB-H.

Early days

Meanwhile, the FLO Forum, which supports the rival MediaFLO technology, contends that mobile TV is at a very early stage and that many operators are still looking at the business case for the service even before deciding on a technology.

Kamil Grajski, president of the FLO Forum, says it is not obvious that there would be a rush towards DVB-H even if more spectrum does become available. "If one looks at the number of commercial launches relative to trials, it is very low and much less than anticipated," he says.

And although there have been DVB-H trials in most EU countries, a service has been commercially launched only in Italy and Finland. The BMCOForum's Sattler says that even operator 3 Italy, which recently reported some 750,000 DVB-H subscribers, has seen only a fair amount

of success with the technology. The figure represents less than 1% of mobile subscriptions in Italy.

Grajski says he is "cautiously optimistic" that the Council's conclusions will open the door for other technologies to be added to the Commission's list of standards. He adds that favouring one technology too heavily and allowing non-market forces to dictate the technology could actually hinder deployments.

One of the Commission's aims in selecting a mobile-TV standard is to speed up rollouts ahead of next summer's European Football Championship, Euro 2008, in Austria and Switzerland. Brussels is also seeking a joint approach to licensing and to free up spectrum, potentially in the UHF band.

A variety of factors are holding up mobile-TV deployments in countries including France, Germany and Spain. However, the BMCOForum believes that four to six countries will have commercial services up and running by next summer, with most major European countries to launch by the end of the year.

The Commission hopes there will be a few more by Euro 2008, but Selmayr says six "would be a good start".

Infoma Telecoms & Media, meanwhile, forecasts that European broadcast mobile-TV users will exceed 100 million by end-2012 (see fig.)

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Country	End-2007	End-2008	End-2009	End-2010	End-2011	End-2012
France	0.0	0.0	0.3	1.7	5.7	13.9
Germany	0.0	0.1	0.5	2.4	7.7	18.5
Italy	0.9	2.1	3.9	6.2	9.7	13.5
Spain	0.0	0.1	0.6	2.1	4.7	8.2
UK	0.0	0.4	1.6	5.3	11.4	17.1
Rest of Western Europe	0.0	0.1	0.4	1.8	5.5	12.5
Russia	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.3	1.1	3.9
Rest of Eastern Europe	0.0	0.3	2.0	5.5	12.5	21.4
Europe total	0.9	3.1	9.4	25.3	58.3	109.0

Source: Infoma Telecoms & Media