Personal TV: A Qualitative Study of Mobile TV Users

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Abstract. This paper describes a qualitative user study of mobile phone TV usage undertaken during September 2005 and centered on the real world Mobile TV usage of paying subscribers of live Mobile TV service in Seoul, South Korea. The study identified four primary use cases: at home; during the evening commute (both likely to be significantly culturally dependent); macro-breaks; and secret use. Barriers to use include: battery life; screen size; lack of compelling content; poor coverage and design implications are discussed. The study suggests that if the current barriers to use can be overcome Mobile TV is a viable competitor to existing forms of entertainment and media consumption. Actual usage suggests that Personal TV is a more accurate description for this kind of service than Mobile TV.

Keywords: Mobile TV, Personal TV, Radio, South Korea, Seoul.

1 Introduction

Digital Mobile TV is currently being hyped as the ‘next big thing’ for mobile phones. Given the difference between the mostly stationary television viewing habits and the inherent portability of mobile phone use what kind of user experience is possible? To answer this question a research team conducted a field study of Mobile TV service subscribers. Seoul was selected as a destination for the study because TU Media, the South Korean telecommunications operator launched the first commercial live Mobile TV service in May 2005.

1.1 Background

Seoul has an official population of approximately 10.3 million; however when proximate satellite cities are factored in the size is closer to 48 million. The subway system is the easiest and fastest way to move around the city. The Seoul subway has good cellular connectivity and use of mobile phones is a common sight. These factors suggest this to be a prime location to understand the potential of Mobile TV.

Consumers in South Korea have a number of ways to watch TV on their mobile phones: downloading via PC; streamed via web sites; video-on-demand; and via broadcast. Many conventional TV programs are widely available for live streaming and downloading from the internet shortly after being broadcast. From the user’s
perspective the digital broadcast of live Mobile TV is similar to conventional TV prior to the personal video recorder (PVR) [1]. Once switched on a TV channel, the user can switch channels but the pausing of content is not available [2]. Mobile TV refers to live Mobile TV broadcast in this paper.

1.2 Prior Research

The literature was surveyed including: the VTT Mobile TV trial [1], MobiTV, DVB-H trials [3] and a few prototype systems [2, 5]. In a VTT Mobile-TV project, a prototype system was setup in 4 WLAN hot-spot areas. The user research found out: (i) Mobile TV was considered similar to television, rather than wireless multimedia; (ii) users normally watch short programs or segments from long programs. (iii) it was used generally as a replacement for reading the newspaper; and (iv) watching Mobile TV was a serial-solitary activity [1].

DVB Mobile TV trials showed that: (i) familiar conventional TV programs were the most popular content, followed by sports and news channels; (ii) that the primary context where Mobile TV was watched was traveling on public transport; an that it was also a popular compliment to home TV watching [3].

Knoche ran a series of experimental studies to explore questions of image resolution, video bit rate, and text legibility [5]. He proposed that Mobile TV viewing was transient, involving low user commitment; that users were worried about being too absorbed and becoming distracted from other tasks [2].

The prior studies observed participants who were recruited to use the service for the duration of the study. In our understanding, this is the first study of actual subscribers of the commercial service [1].

1.3 South Korea Mobile TV Field Study

The aim of the South Korea Mobile TV study was to explore the range of factors that would affect the Mobile TV viewing experience from understanding whether it changes mobile phone use, and consider the aspects of the South Korean experience would apply to the broader context.

2 Research Design

The research study was conducted in Seoul, South Korea, in September 2005, 4 months after TU Media launched their mobile TV service.

2.1 Methodology

A major study in South Korea had already collected extensive quantitative data [6]. We therefore decided to conduct contextual interviews and observations such as on public transport and combine these with home based in-depth interviews. All interviews were conducted in Korean by a native speaker and later transcribed, and translated into English.