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IMDA Charts Course for Internet Radio

Heralds Comprehensive Standardization in This Fast-Developing Arena

COMMENTARY

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The development of Internet radio services able to command large and loyal audiences has taken place at a phenomenal speed — so quickly, in fact, that it can be rather difficult to keep track.

The inherent accessibility and ease of use of these services mean that they were destined for popularity, but it was perhaps surprising that so many consumers were prepared to migrate to the new platform in its nascent stages.

The adoption of Internet radio by renowned public and commercial service providers means that this sector is likely to continue its rate of expansion for some time yet, while the advent of streaming services such as Spotify, Pandora or last.FM could add to the underlying momentum.

But this new area of the broadcast world requires standardization if it is to continue to flourish and, equally importantly, if the quality of its offering is to be upheld.

To this end, a new organization is bringing an industry-wide approach to the development of Internet radio guidelines and marketing support that aims to ensure and accelerate the continued growth of this exciting new market.

THE BACKGROUND

As recently as two years ago, it might have been argued that Internet radio was a



Mark Ester for IMDA
Selection of IMDA base profile certified devices at IFA show in Berlin in 2009. 'The PC-only phenomenon has been superseded by a mass-market one in which Internet radio is no longer regarded as a luxury,' Jan Nordmann writes.

fairly marginal activity; but that claim certainly couldn't be made now.

Sophisticated home and in-car audio systems, as well as next-generation mobile devices such as smartphones, mean that Internet radio can be enjoyed at home or on the move — any time, any place. The PC-only phenomenon has been superseded by a mass-market one in which Internet radio is no longer regarded as a luxury — indeed, it is an integral part of the modern, multi-platform broadcasting world.

As with TV-on-demand and other comparable services, content is king, and only those providers able to offer a variety of

high-quality material will be able to make an enduring connection with consumers.

But what might sound like an appealingly straightforward supply/demand dynamic is complicated by the diversity of the sector, wherein systems based on open and proprietary standards continue to coexist.

Now, no one could argue that this duality has brought some short-term commercial benefits for service providers, but it has also resulted in confusion among consumers, and in the long run it actually could hinder growth.

Fortunately, there has been increasing recognition of this issue for a while now, and in 2009 a number of key market players announced the formation of an organization dedicated to pursuing standardization, the IMDA, or Internet Media Device Alliance.

Leading broadcasters, aggregators, chip vendors and device makers pledged their support for the IMDA, which has two primary objectives:

- 1) To define a series of end-to-end technical standards, functions and profiles that will encourage the development of a range of compelling, mainstream Internet media devices. There should be a degree of consistency to these devices, although product difference and variation are encouraged to ensure that the market remains lively and competitive.
- 2) To provide B2B marketing support to member organizations and to promote the concept of Internet-capable devices to consumers, potential members and retailers. Research commissioned by the IMDA helps to establish viable business models throughout the value chain, while the organization's collaborative nature allows members to share experiences and expertise.

THE STANDARDS

Although it's still fairly early days for the organization, it already has introduced a baseline certification standard for stand-alone Internet radio players.

Requiring devices to decode both WMA and MP3 codecs, employ HTTP streaming, accept various playlist formats (M3U, ASX, PLS) and render stereo streams faithfully even on mono speakers, IMDA Profile 1 is turning out to be a huge hit with manufacturers.

For proof, consult the list of companies with Profile 1 Certified Devices, which includes Audiovox, Awox, C. Crane, Freecom, Frontier Silicon, Lenco, M3 Electronic GmbH, Ministry of Sound, Pure, Revo, Roberts Radio, Rotel RDG, Sangean, Sonoro, Tangent and Terratec.

It's a great start, and one that will bring benefits all round.

For manufacturers, the standard will speed up the process of bringing a new product to market and reduce the risk of competitive clashes. Online broadcasters adhering to IMDA Profile 1, meanwhile, will be able to reach target audiences using fewer audio codecs, thereby cutting associated costs.

With this scheme up and running, the imminent focus of attention shifts to metadata and its coordination and control by manufacturers or aggregators.

For the first time, the IMDA Service Identification XML specification defines streamed radio station data to identify the station and stream information. It is already proving to be an invaluable resource for device design companies and aggregators, as well as for broadcasters, who can express their preferences about representation with greater clarity and simplicity.

Moreover, the specification is set to be expanded in the future with guidelines for services including electronic program

BASICS OF THE CERTIFIED DEVICE SPECIFICATION

The IMDA is in the process of publishing an XML document format that allows broadcasters to describe their live Internet radio streams in a structured way.

This will simplify the automated aggregation of Internet radio content and consequently enhance the accuracy of station information displayed on Internet radio devices.

In its current state, it consists of three parts, describing:

- a) the broadcasting media organization itself; for example name, description, logos and location
- b) the individual programs (brands); for example name, description, logos and genres
- c) the technical details of the associated streams; for example URLs, audio codecs and bitrates

Soon the IMDA intends to extend the document format to describe on-demand content, integrate with EPG data and include support for hybrid radio devices, among others.

The specification is available for free at <http://bit.ly/imdarart>. Feedback and questions can be addressed to metadata@imdalliance.org.



IMDAlliance.org

information and on-demand content. IMDA is opening up version 1.0.0 (Beta) of the Service Identification specification on its website — <http://bit.ly/imdasib> — for the industry to review.

This is an initial publication, which broadcasters, aggregators and device makers alike, will use and provide feedback. Details on how to do this most efficiently are available at <http://bit.ly/imdasibetacontact>.

It is with an eye on the expanding nature of Internet media devices and services that the IMDA is working on its next device profile.

Anyone involved with the Internet radio

world — directly or tangentially — is advised to follow these developments. The IMDA has made great strides in pursuing Internet radio standards that everyone can depend upon, but now the organization is positioned to help bring about a whole new generation of devices and services that will add a further dimension to the market.

Yes, these are exciting — occasionally daunting! — days, but thanks to the IMDA's efforts, Internet radio seems to be destined for a bold and dynamic future.

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