TV Or Not TV? What the Internet is Not

John Colette explores the commercial viability of the move to "video-on-the-Net" and the misconceptions behind it.

Most organisations charged with "modernising" themselves through addressing the Internet face an underlying challenge to deliver things that "work" in this new environment. For at least two years after Tim Berners Lee demonstrated the HTML protocol to fellow academics, the World Wide Web consisted mostly of the same grey pages, (numbering in the thousands....) concerning the academic world which originated them.

In the few years since then, the medium of the millennium has been seen as the contested ground for the next generation of businesses. All businesses. From traditional media companies, to software developers to companies without a history prior to 1992, the Internet is looking for its "killer apps" - the breakthrough ideas that will leverage players into this new market into a dominant position.

DRIVING ELEMENTS OF THE MEDIUM

So what do we have? A medium, with the ability to carry different media types that utilises an addressing system that pre-empts the "portable" telephone number in terms of mobility. We have a medium which is able to be produced on technology that costs a fraction of that required for print production and publishing, or traditional broadcast media. We have a medium that allows a global footprint which draws an audience to the media, rather than delivers pieces of media (broadcast signals, bits of paper) to the audience.

For many, the most important feature of the medium is that it allows the audience to respond, to reconfigure the content as it is experienced.

What is being offered in the face of this possibility is (drum roll...) television.

For some, the only thing that the Internet can aspire to, is to mimic television. From the "channels" model of megadollar network websites, to the push to "video-on-the-Net" there seems to be an imaginative vacuum that cannot understand a screen based media outside of television. Marketing doublespeak like
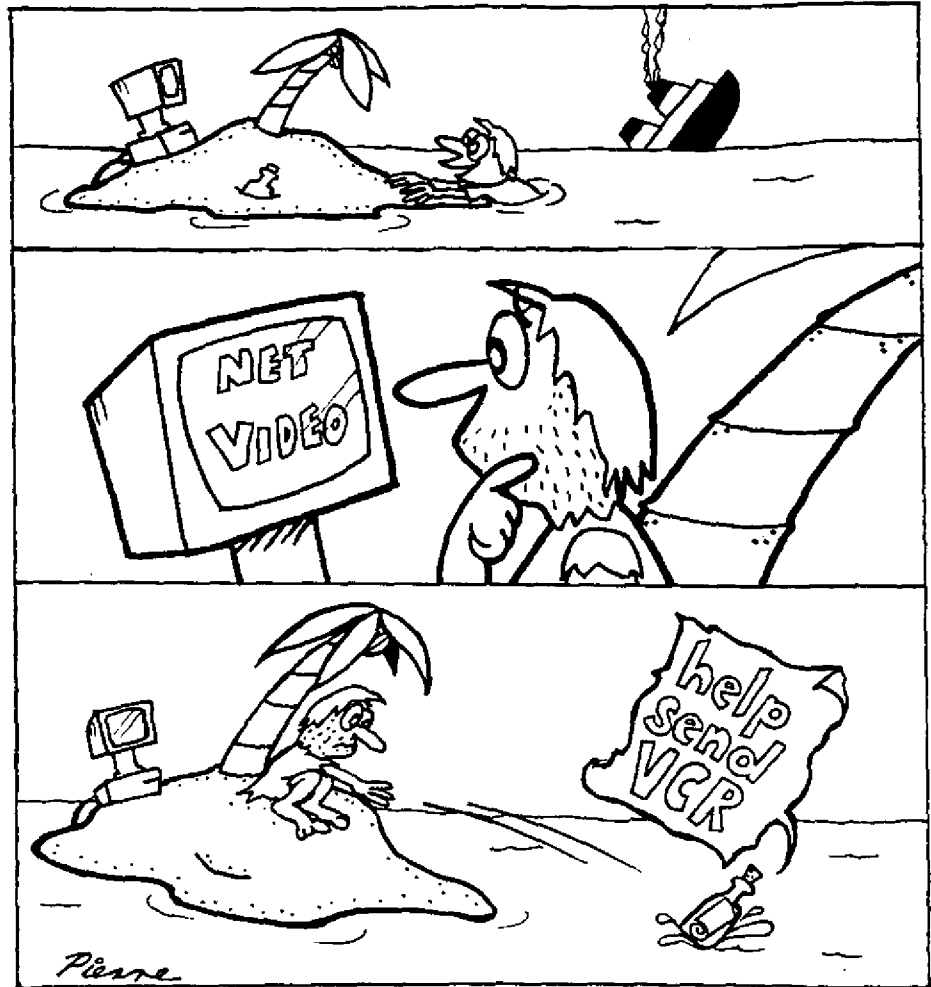
"media rich experience" or "content diversity" mean that television is seen as the "aspirational" model for conceptually challenged media pioneers.

PROBLEMS WITH VIDEO-ON-THE-NET

Lets get it straight. Video-on-the-Net is hopelessly far behind the early "postage stamp" experience of video on a PC. There is already an existing means of distributing video based material - it's called TV. There is already a full screen, full motion, stereo sound video replay device with that is capable of deploying content in 80% of Australian homes and businesses. It's called a VCR. Video on the Internet runs at 1/100th of the speed of a x2speed CD ROM. And how popular was CD ROM as a medium for video distribution?

Looking at the facts, the Internet is a packet switched technology. Video is a streaming technology. Even with the use of severe compression and buffering, the size and quality of a "video" feed is a joke. Why would anyone bother to download video across the world when every design guide for web content stresses that still images should be kept to a minimum size?

THE BANDWIDTH MYTH

Forget the myth of "soon the bandwidth is coming". There is nothing to suggest that foreseeable bandwidth will allow an improvement. Accessing Fox News online's video feeds on a 256k ISDN line is still very slow compared to a first generation CD ROM. This is partly due to the fact that the point-to-point bandwidth people have available is one thing, but the switching technology to

carry data packets is not available in a form that will allow "the bandwidth" the video-on-the-Net cargo cult is hoping for.

From a purely practical viewpoint, what is the business case for providing all of this bandwidth? Both major telecommunications providers are involved with providing multiple video feeds to the home - it's called cable TV. The type of market share available is far short of the slice available for broadcast media. What additional benefit is there is providing more bandwidth in an environment where consumers are prepared to pay around $40 a month in total for ALL services delivered on the cable?

It is true that cheap digital video ("DV") cameras, desktop editing systems and new enabling technology have lowered the entry point for producing video content. However, it still is not that cheap, and in a perfect world, where a media democracy of "many-to-many" content prevailed, what would we watch? Each other's home videos?

My assistant at work used to make short 3D movie clips, compress them, optimise the frame rates and deploy them on his web site. I questioned him about his intentions in this activity, and he said it was a way of "getting things out there". Would you care to spend five minutes logging on and downloading some?

LITTLE VIABILITY AS A MASS APPLICATION

The factors of quality of experience, cost of delivery and specifity of content all affect the video-on-the-Net question. For specialist applications, like remote approval of film and video post production, there is a strong case for highly specific content at a premium price - but the motivation is completely different. This is not a "mass" application - it is more like using video bearers in traditional broadcasting applications.

The cost of delivery is important, because originating good content costs money. For this to be practical, the cost of production needs to be recouped over range of paying markets - even offset against the cost of multiple productions with different profit differentials. This is how the studio system in Hollywood emerges as a means of consistently producing viable, mass market, entertainment properties. Once the investment in these is made, the technical quality of the delivery medium is controlled, as well as the revenue streams to be gained from that delivery. Will people pay per view for Internet TV?

Overall, the quality of experience is the most important factor in determining the viability of a delivery medium. Internet based video is likely to improve in quality, but at the same time it is unlikely to reach VHS quality within a reasonable planning period for serious consideration by business. At the same time, the recent US launch of domestic DVD, (about to take off locally during the Christmas season) delivers Dolby surround sound, video way past VHS quality, no tape drop outs and enhanced media features (including additional film notes) in a package the size of a CD ROM. Give me the choice between a Hollywood movie, and some bumf lurching like a pixilated postage stamp across the Internet at two frames a second and the choice is a no-brainer. Someone will be on the Internet looking at video, but that's a hobby, not a media business.

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