

Digital Lifestyles : our new virtual world

Introduction

Digital lifestyles of today has been made possible technologies that allow different types of data and media to come together on a single platform – more commonly referred to as Digital Media Convergence (DMC). DMC is built around few basic themes –information, content and entertainment. For the end user, DMC transcends into information push to the consumer across different media formats, different access devices and gadgets, personalized packaging and convenience, mobility and portability etc. DMC enables services to facilitate high speed transfer of data and high quality of multimedia content be it at home, office or on the move. Technologies especially in the wireless space have matured quickly and boosted this phenomenon. Let us take a look at how this is starting to impact our lives.

Defining digital media

Today, digital media practically surrounds us – data at the office – websites, blogs, video emails, desktop video conferencing; music and videos on the move; at home – fast emerging IP TV services; satellite and online radio (Worldspace, Yahoo) ; virtual universities; virtual newspapers and magazines (Olive, Newsstand, Pressmart, Zinio etc); interactive kiosks for everything; VOIP based communication (Skype, Yahoo); online commerce including simple shopping / e tickets to complex financial transactions such as virtual banking, trading in futures, derivatives and stock etc; E Governance initiatives from the government pushing everything from simple bill payments, statutory registrations to filing tax returns online.

The most visible transformation is company store formats concentrating on digital lifestyles and offering a complete range of seamless solutions – good examples are Sony, Panasonic, Philips, Samsung and LG that stand out amongst several players.

Technologies behind the scene

End users see the more glamorous side of the technology i.e. - gadgets and access devices. A good example of DMC is that of the new generation communication devices that combine cellular telephony, music, video, PDA, GPS, email, IM and office productivity tools and also allows video conferencing – available from companies like Sony, Nokia, Motorola, HP, O2 etc. Another example is that of multifunction devices that combine printing, fax, scanning and digital photography – e.g. Canon, HP, Samsung etc.

Another emerging phenomenon is that of media center PCs at home that are touted to be the center of information for families and combine TV, Movies, satellite radio, live content feeds (news, stock, commodities), the internet and even bring together home devices such as air conditioners, refrigerators, home security & utility systems etc under one point of control (maybe your mobile phone or PC) through a home based network. Key players include Microsoft, HP, Apple, Sony, HCL etc. Some of these companies have already launched PCs, large screens and high end sound systems to cater to this market and get it ready to receive direct-to-home (DTH) services.

Technologies behind the gadgets work at different layers – Access devices (gadgets), Operating environment (software and digital content formats), databases and storage (data management, conversion and storage), network access (wired and wireless bandwidth providers) and large data centers that are managed by the content players or telecom companies.

Cost of digital lifestyles

A digital lifestyle does not come cheap be it access devices, storage, hardware, software, accessories and early adoption will be seen more in commercial applications (airports, hotels, sports facilities, public utility systems etc) unless you are super rich to afford all of these. Costs beyond the acquisition include accessories, software, media and storage, utilities and bandwidth to run all of these and support / upgrades for all the equipment. Last but not the least is the content companies and service providers/aggregators that support this digital economy.

In a nutshell, digital lifestyles can be very expensive and demanding as well as addictive so if you are planning to be a digital junkie or a digital nuclear family, better be prepared for the costs. You can start by counting the number of mobile phones, televisions, MP3 players, satellite radios and PCs/laptops in the house and estimate the running expenditure and you might be more than a little surprised at what you are spending!!

In summary.....

Digital lifestyles come with information fatigue or overload especially with the amount and types of information that we are inundated with and keeping track of all the online transactions can be quite a challenge especially since we hardly get to see real money these days. Looks like George Orwell's Big Brother did come true in a way with all these devices running our lifestyles and making us pay for all of it....