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China Mobile HK launches cross-network TV

New UTV mobile broadcast services do not count against data allowances, and can be viewed using dongles or the cloud

By CAROLINE GABRIEL

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There is a growing trend for operators to launch services which run on rivals' networks, as they seek to fend off over-the-top media players. Most have focused on core cellco applications like voice - as seen at T-Mobile USA's Bobsled and Telefonica's TuMe - but China Mobile Hong Kong has extended the approach to mobile TV.

The operator has launched the services under the 'UTV' brand, using the CMMB (China Mobile Multimedia Broadcasting) platform, a standard developed and specified in China by SARFT (the State Administration of Radio Film and TV). The services will be accessible to all Hong Kong cellular users regardless of their network provider.

Initially, UTV comes with eight channels, two of them free to view, with monthly packages costing HK\$58 (US\$7.50) per month. The smartphone or tablet does not have to include a CMMB radio, as the cellco will offer a dongle for viewing the programming, which can also be used to watch the same channels at home on an HDMI television set. Portable media players with CMMB software can also be used.

Otherwise, UTV content can be streamed over the internet using an application - currently only available for Android, but with an iPhone version to come next year. This streaming service will use a cloud-based content delivery network developed by the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, which claims to improve picture quality and cut bandwidth costs by 70%.

As well as being network neutral - because it runs on its own infrastructure - the service also follows another important trend in operator thinking - to exempt certain types of content from counting towards a user's monthly data allowance. No data charges are incurred on top of the TV subscription fee.

"Hong Kong provides us a special testing ground to develop new services. We have spent about two years preparing for today's launch," said China Mobile Hong Kong's CEO Sean Lee Fan-fung. He told local newspaper The Standard: "We can see there is room for mobile and multimedia platforms to emerge."

The CMMB technology was launched three years ago in China, at a time when other mobile TV standards were also vying for attention - though MediaFLO, DVB-H and others have now largely faded away precisely because they required separate networks. Many cellcos are now focused on delivering TV over LTE. CMMB occupies 25MHz of bandwidth and in mainland China, this supports 25 video and 30 radio channels.

In April 2009, Hong Kong's regulator OFCA allocated the 678MHz-686MHz band for broadcast mobile TV, and the following June, China Mobile Hong Kong beat two rivals - City Telecom and PCCW - to win a 15-year mobile TV licence, including those frequencies, for a fee of US\$22.5m. The licensee is required to use at least 75% of the transmission capacity to deliver mobile TV content, and to provide service coverage to at least 50% of the population within 18 months.