



Interview

with Vincent Grivet, Chair HbbTV Association

By Melissa Cogavin, Managing Editor, SCTE

What was it like to meet in person again after all this time?

It was exciting and inspiring to get together again. Like the rest of the industry, we found ourselves cancelling our HbbTV Symposium and Awards in Spring 2021 for the second year running, so it was amazing that we were able to risk it at an in-person event in November last year. We were blessed being able to make it work.

Face-to-face exchange is vital in our industry as it is for most people and industries. We had over 180 registrations for this year's in-person event and only a few couldn't make it, mainly due to travel restrictions locally or at corporate level. The Symposium covered all relevant industry topics and the reaction amongst delegates was very positive indeed. For the first time, we were able to livestream the event on both days as well. The following week the recordings had over 15,000 hits!

The HbbTV standard was established eleven years ago. The association itself has arguably come of age in that time. What future possibilities do you see?

The HbbTV specification has evolved into a mature and recognised standard which supports real-life business

issues and services to a very high level. The Association was recently joined by major global market players such as Google, Amazon and Discovery which I think demonstrates the importance of what we do. During the Symposium, numerous presentations and discussions referred to the HbbTV specification in our fast-changing TV market. Our most important recent achievements include Targeted Advertising (HbbTV-TA), the ADB2 specifications and our new addition, our developer portal, which will go live soon. HbbTV is therefore a very comprehensive standard that meets the demanding requirements of consumers and market players and can be adapted to the most important market developments.

This is now fully recognised by the market and there is no need to promote it anymore (which sometimes feels strange!). An important tool is our Test Suite with currently more than 3,000 tests, in which we will continue to invest heavily in the coming years. But as the specification is now a "no brainer", we are experiencing growing and challenging demands from broadcasters who want to actively transform their business models in light of the changing market environment with HbbTV. They need the HbbTV specification and they need more from the HbbTV Association as it becomes mainstream business for them.

HbbTV stands for a hybrid world in which television and the Internet have grown together.



Vincent Grivet, Chair HbbTV Association

At some point presumably linear broadcast TV is going to be replaced by streaming. How do you see things developing?

In the medium to long term, daily classic TV consumption is likely to decline in all major global TV markets. The interim high consumption that we saw in many countries during the pandemic is over. In comparison, streaming of quality content, including HD and soon UHD, has grown steadily in recent years and will continue to grow. We must not forget that the total time spent consuming linear and non-linear content across all platforms continues to rise steadily. Streaming won't replace linear TV, but it does complement it. This also offers market players numerous opportunities to develop new business models.

Are two previously separate worlds merging together?

Classic linear TV is still the preferred way for most viewers to consume or access content. The rise in streaming means competition is increasingly fierce, however. Streaming platforms have experienced tremendous growth recently and in some age groups are already on a par with - or even surpassing - traditional television in national markets, particularly in the US. However, even leading streaming providers such as Amazon Prime Video, Netflix and Disney+ are starting to realise that this growth is not limitless; it is leveling off significantly.

At the same time, the market is becoming more complex and significantly more competitive due to the sheer number of

streaming services. Experts predicted an intensely competitive landscape and they were right. Conversely, we are also seeing streaming providers launching their own linear channels onto the market. Although this development is only just beginning, it is likely to only intensify competition. In addition, changes are taking place at regulatory level. For a long time, only linear TV was regulated, but now streaming services are increasingly coming under the scrutiny of national media authorities. My view is that classical linear TV and streaming will embark in a co-leadership era; one will not prevent the other one from growing, and one will not extinguish the other. There is room for both.

How does HbbTV fit into this changing TV world and environment?

More than 100 million households in Europe have smart TVs suitable for receiving streaming services, according to market analyst Omdia. On the other hand, this broad base is very fragmented in terms of technical access platforms such as Tizen, Fire OS, Android TV and Chromecast. One major broadcaster told the Symposium that if they wanted to reach all homes they would have to manage 12 distinct operating systems and technologies: this is not feasible! This is why HbbTV is the preferred technology of most European broadcasters and platforms in order to manage this change and reinvent themselves, in the evolving on-demand world and a hybrid environment.

In many countries, the environmental footprint of streaming services is becoming increasingly important. How do you see this development?

Streaming services undoubtedly cause significant CO₂ emissions. However, it is hard to put a serious figure on how high these actually are. This is because the exact amount of electricity consumed when streaming via streaming devices depends, among other things, on the electricity used by CDN providers, the consumer devices used to stream and where a video stream comes from. These factors are difficult to determine.

However, the recently released LoCaT study (www.thelocatproject.org), assessing the energy and carbon impacts of TV content across major distribution platforms, concluded that digital terrestrial broadcasting is the most environmentally friendly TV distribution infrastructure compared with IP-delivered methods. As this applies obviously only (at least for now) to linear content, IP networks must be used for on-demand services, and here we learn that OTT might be better

than managed IPTV. Mixing the two in a smart manner is exactly what HbbTV enables.

What are the challenges for HbbTV in the future?

An organisation like ours always has challenges, especially in the fast changing and intense world of digital media and technology.

One challenge that's behind us now is the constant adaption of our specification as the market develops. We have now achieved this, and users are happy with the functional content of the specification.

The major challenge of the ecosystem, no doubt, is the complexity and cost of device certification and verification, a process that is currently handled separately in each country in Europe, but does not cover all European countries. The issue of device compliance, for example, was highlighted by Salto CEO Thomas Follin in his opening speech, when he pointed to Salto's experience in launching its HbbTV service on the French DVB-T platform. He was not alone; everybody talked about this challenge as it is affecting broadcasters, service providers and manufacturers alike. Although HbbTV is not in charge of device certification per se, we cannot ignore this challenge and we need to work with the ecosystem to help develop a better arrangement. I see the positive side to this: it means that we are reaching a new level of maturity, both as a specification and also as an organisation. We are now mature enough to talk about the unpleasant side of things!

Many stakeholders also feel the implementation of HbbTV in Europe should be more aligned between the different countries in order to avoid or at least reduce technical fragmentation; the needs of consumers and broadcasters are essentially the same and probably do not justify specific local versions. HbbTV probably needs to be more involved in this respect and try to facilitate better alignment of national regulations or policies across Europe.

Are there other related challenges?

Yes - another challenge is the interoperability of market DRM solutions with HbbTV applications. Strictly speaking, HbbTV is DRM agnostic, which was perhaps OK when HbbTV was primarily concerned with the pure free-to-air broadcast world. But now, HbbTV is central to many pure on-demand and IP services where DRM is very important, and we need to deal with that. An important question for us is also how to achieve universal and "guaranteed" compatibility in the market. A fundamental challenge for the future is that for members, HbbTV Association is voluntary and we have limited budgets and resources. Meanwhile, our remit is expanding all the time; an intensified level of activity is required to remain competitive with alternative platforms led by commercial organisations.



SCTE® Podcast Series

Keeping in touch

Are you an SCTE® Corporate Member?

We are producing monthly podcasts as a membership benefit to connect with the wider industry and share our knowledge.



Do you have something to say?
Some news to share?

For more information, email melissa@theSCTE.eu

