



# Standards, specs

and watching on catch-up

By Melissa Cogavin, Managing Editor, SCTE

**If you have a television, the chances are you are engaging with elements of HbbTV every time you pick up the remote. Perhaps one of the more obscure industry organisations, its reach is broad, its legacy is powerful and its influence large.**

*HbbTV is doing valuable work behind the scenes of your smart TV. Concerned with providing open standards, testing specifications and directives for advanced interactive TV services, we talked to Vincent Grivet, Chair at HbbTV about the important work they are doing, how AI will impact the streaming world and what the future holds for TV viewers.*

***How are things going at HbbTV? What are you working on at the moment?***

HbbTV fundamentally produces two things. One, we produce specifications, and two, we produce the tests. There are many services that come with HbbTV, but there are two archetypes we offer in the main.

***Tell us something your average man on the street understands about that.***

Everything started with what was called 'the red button'. A good example of a red button service was the 'watch from

start' option, so viewers can watch the programme from the beginning, by pushing the red, blue or green button. It's a high-value service for end users and we feel it's really the sweet spot of HbbTV; where you create a service that is leveraging both the linear broadcast legacy transmission of TV as well as the new broadband internet transmission. That's B2C anyway.

Then there's targeted advertising, which is B2B; the end user will not notice that it is targeted advertising. And there will be a replacement with a frame accuracy, and the broadcast advertising will be replaced by targeted advertising; that's another typical use case of HbbTV. The specification is now published and starting to be deployed.

***Do you find that the red button concept is widely used across Europe?***

Well, across Europe would be a bit optimistic because regrettably the country where I am – France – is not using HbbTV a lot.

***Really? Why not?***

15 years ago French telecom operators dreamt that they could become US cable companies and invested heavily in TV services; they introduced something called Tripleplay, and now maybe more than half of the country is getting TV from the telecom companies through ADSL or fibre.

But that's likely changing, as these operators now realise it wasn't such a good idea because they never got the big money that they were expecting. TV Channels on their side now also realise they lost a lot of product and service freedom as well as direct viewer relationship so that they are less prone to push IPTV/Tripleplay.

***In what way?***

Anything they wanted to bring to the viewers, they had to negotiate first with the telecom operators to see if it was technically feasible, among other things. And now with targeted advertising, they have realised that it is actually a very costly - and not particularly friendly - mediation between them and the viewers.

In Germany, Italy and Spain though, HbbTV is very big. In the UK, Freeview Play is probably the most organised use case of HbbTV. And then, you've got newcomers. In the Czech Republic, TV channels are super active and super smart in using HbbTV.

***It's important work that you are doing. All this stuff is going on in the background and most of us don't have a clue.***

Exactly. HbbTV is definitely a B2B thing and we certainly don't aim to be visible and known to the consumer; the trust of Broadcasters and TV manufacturers is what matters.

***What about addressable TV?***

Addressable advertising is one of the major benefits which HbbTV can bring to broadcasters and to the market at large; the HbbTV-TA specification was published in 2020, and HbbTV now offers a complete test suite to support implementation of TA. The real life deployment and value generation of TA is now starting, and this may be accelerated by external related market activities such as the establishment of ATVI – the Addressable TV Initiative which is a consortium aiming at certifying TV sets against TA.

***You've been very busy. What are the other important things happening now in HbbTV?***

We are introducing the 2.0.4 version and because we are bringing that version to the market. We also placed an order for the test of another specification, which is called ADB2. The technical meaning of ADB2 is application discovery of broadband.

***What does it do in practice?***

The historic use case of HbbTV is that you use it when you are connected to a broadcast network, whether it is DTT or satellite or cable. But increasingly TV does not use either DTT or satellite, it goes through an internet network to the television. The native HbbTV doesn't work with IP so this would be a big limitation, especially if half a country is receiving TV through IP. And the potential issue is getting bigger and bigger as IP delivery continues to grow.

***So what's the solution?***

That is why HbbTV introduced ADB2, a watermarking system which is added to the TV signal, and that watermarking will be





the starting point for the HbbTV application to work on the TV set, although the TV signal was not received by a broadcast network but by IP.

### ***'Europe' means different things to different people these days. Where does the remit of the HbbTV extend to?***

Well, we don't have an official remit. Historically it was Europe where the UK was part of Europe. The UK is a super important country from an implementation point of view and UK contributes in a big way to the organisation. We have a steering board of 16 members; probably at least eight of them are British. And they are extremely competent and committed. As a community the UK is super important, and the fact that UK has left European Union does not affect what we do in HbbTV at all. We'd like definitely to keep it like that. And then beyond Europe, we see interest in more remote places like Thailand, Vietnam, Turkey, Iran. Russia used to be an important adopter. Obviously we have much less interaction now.

### ***What role will AI likely play in HbbTV?***

AI could well have a big role in TV services without us doing anything, because HbbTV is really a rather deep layer of technology in the TV set. AI happens higher up, in the smarter layers. AI probably already exists if you think of the Netflix or Amazon Prime algorithms.

Incidentally, Netflix and Amazon Prime don't use HbbTV, but there are equivalents or smaller equivalents of Netflix and Amazon, which do use HbbTV and which probably use AI. HbbTV is very much associated with traditional broadcasters like BBC. These companies probably want to protect a more human curation of content and services, and will probably be very careful in their usage of AI.

AI may also play an important role in the process of software development and TV testing; these activities are quite important and costly, and AI may bring a significant improvement there.

### ***Is there any message you want to get out to our readers and our members about what you are doing?***

Behind the scenes, I want to stress that HbbTV is a very important enabler of modern TV services. I feel that the traction with TV manufacturers, with broadcasters in Europe is intensifying every day, every year. HbbTV is also an important element of the European TV landscape; we can be very happy and very proud in Europe that we have that. And definitely, I include the UK when I use the word Europe. British people contribute a lot to HbbTV.

