

Digital Convergence at home – Media PC

You keep hearing the word convergence in the digital world at many levels – telecom players have been using it to refer to voice data convergence, thanks to “packetized” voice. Internet technologists have used the term to refer to TV and Internet convergence. Display companies have used the term to refer to digital TV that unifies computer monitor and TV projection screen. With the arrival of CD and later MP3, audio converged on to PC. Recently, with upsurge in digital photography, some users use PC’s to display high quality photographs that never get printed, while others use high quality desktop printers to print photographs, often directly from the camera. More interestingly, their mobile handset multiplies also as a camera.

Audio, Video, Photographs, Documents, even medical images all can be captured (some times converted), stored, transmitted, and retrieved across the continents, thanks to “digitization”, that is at the core of digital convergence. As the BusinessWeek June 21, 2004 article noted, the \$ 2.2 Trillion communications industry, \$ 1.1 Trillion strong computer and software industry, and the \$ 225 Billion strong consumer electronics industry are converging to an extent that the very contours of these industries are blurring and the relative role of the leading-edge players is changing so fundamentally.

Two years back HP, introduced a desktop PC targeted at the college students staying in dormitories – those squeezed for space in a small room - wanting to have a TV, a high quality audio system for music, watch movies from a VD, and of course, use a PC to check e-mail. With a larger screen, a different aspect ratio and a remote control, the device looked like a “home theater” and combined the functionality of a TV and a PC, in addition to fitting the budget and the space constraints of the college students. This “combo device” has become very popular under the name Media PC – Toshiba, the world leader in laptops recently introduced “Qosimo”– as a 4-in-1 Laptop that combines TV, Audio, DVD and PC functions - at \$ 1,500. Gateway has been selling a Media PC at \$ 1000 price points for a while. Mega PC even sells a barebones Media PC for \$ 250. Just last month there was an announcement of a Linux Media PC.

Perhaps the most interesting product to watch is Beanstalk Neo PC from HCL. A “Made-in-India” product, it has superb in design, functionality and features. With 17” LCD, it has a definitive home theater look and audio. Its operation using remote control is flawless. It is a full function high performance PC. It not only plays DVD movies, but can write CD’s too. It can multiply as a FM Radio player too, in addition to playing all Internet Radio stations. *It should make every Indian proud, though at Rs 100,000, not many can afford.*

At the heart of many media PC’s, is Microsoft Windows Media Center Edition. Targeted at home entertainment market, it combines the traditional “look and feel” of Windows with the “ease of use” for most of the home entertainment features. You get all the functionality of Windows PC; you can watch regular cable TV and control most of the functions using a Windows remote control. It can play music. You can watch DVD / TV and record online to the high-speed disk or offline to CD. It also has an excellent photograph viewer, album maker and a photo editor. Windows Media Center controls all the hardware pieces built into a Media PC – Infrared device (for remote control), graphics card (for high quality images), TV tuner (to code cable TV signals), encoder (to convert TV signals for writing on the hard disk) and high-quality audio.

It will be interesting to watch the invasion of PC's that started as office desktops, moving to the homes and emerging as the Home Entertainment Center. That is the power of digitization and digital convergence. Reaching to the masses, a promise that PC has been meeting for two decades, now goes beyond computing, to home entertainment as well.

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