



Freeview managing director Ilse Howling says the threat to free TV has never been greater

Arguably the single biggest change to hit the TV landscape since the launch of Freeview a decade ago has been the rise of IPTV and the development of catch-up, typified by the BBC iPlayer, and subscription video on demand services like Netflix, and Lovefilm. The Freeview platform may have evolved and adapted as a result, but the aftershocks of this techquake continues to rock the foundations of the platform. The latest breed of Freeview+ digital TV recorders now come with their own IPTV toppings as standard, such as Pure's Avalon 300R PVR (see review in April issue), which builds in support for the brand's proprietary music services, and the assorted proprietary Smart portals operated by the big TV vendors. The biggest game-changer though is YouView.

Although built on the foundations of Freeview, YouView's mash-up of over-the-air television and internet delivery could be construed as the logical evolution (and inevitable replacement) of the Freeview service.

Formerly known as Project Canvas, YouView was developed at a cost of £70m (£10m of which came from the BBC's public purse) and limped to market two years late, but it's nevertheless impressed with its slick delivery and ease of use. The first non-subscription TV service to offer both linear Freeview HD and a full complement of internet-delivered mainstream catch-up, with fully integrated BBC iPlayer, ITVPlayer, 4oD and Demand 5, not

to mention Sky's Now TV movie and sport offering, it additionally has heavyweight backing in the shape of the BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Five, TalkTalk, BT and Arqiva.

The initial hardware proposal, Humax's DTR-T1000, may be a pricey proposition but it's more polished than a baby grand and boasts cutting-edge functionality, such as a retrospective EPG that allows viewers to access shows aired during the past week. Significantly, that particular example of brinkmanship can also be found in the latest D-Book 7 specification guidelines for Freeview. Howling herself caused a frenzy of speculation at the annual DTG (Digital Television Group) conference a year ago, by word bombing the label Freeview Smart into the audience.

But she now tells us that there are no plans to develop a sub brand along those lines ("In a sense Freeview Smart is already out there, all Freeview HD equipment has an Ethernet connection..." she suggests), and indeed pours a modicum of cold water on the whole concept of internet-delivered TV. While Howling expresses interest in the connected smart trend, she suggests caution over its impact.

"YouView's launch is very important," she concedes "and we're watching with great interest what's happening with connected televisions in general, but our focus at the moment (from a technology

point of view) remains very much on Freeview HD." High definition being the most sought after new technology, according to Freeview's market research.

On the ubiquity of the BBC iPlayer and the growth of IPTV in general, Howling adds: "in terms of consumers being able to get to the programmes they love faster, it's a good way to do that, however, while there's a large group interested in iPlayer, for the majority of mainstream viewers it's yet to happen. It's not clear yet if that's going to become something that's massive, mainstream or niche." The Freeview topper goes on to warn that analysts underestimate the resilience of linear television at their peril. "Even with the wider availability of these catch-up services, most people are watching live via the broadcast signal coming through their TV."

The Freeview MD adds: "Despite our excitement about tablets and connected TV viewing, most people in this country still watch broadcast TV in their own homes on their own TVs. I think that's going to stay that way for a very long time to come."

By way of example, Howling cites the 2012 London Olympics. "If you recall the hype, this was going to be the first internet connected Games, and yes there was a rich online offering, yet only one percent of overall Olympic viewing was actually through an internet connection. The majority of the Games was consumed via traditional means."