

MPEG-4 Will Be the New Streaming Video Standard

Robert Batchelder

Gartner believes that major vendors, including Microsoft, will adopt MPEG-4 as a standard, but they need to integrate security, especially to protect copyrighted material.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Event

On 4 October 2001, the Internet Streaming Media Alliance (ISMA) announced publication of its first specification, ISMA 1.0, to standardize MPEG-4 streaming video.

Analysis

There's no question MPEG-4 is going to succeed MPEG-2 as the standard for streaming digital video. Faster processor speeds and inexpensive (already under \$200) video capture and playback cards will help promote much wider use of video on the desktop. MPEG-4 will help open up new business opportunities for Internet-enabled video distribution as the new standard is used to broadcast over corporate LANs and consumer broadband connections. The Internet still has a long way to go before end-to-end delivery of video streams offers the same quality as traditional broadcast systems. But, as Steve Jobs foresaw with iMac, the age of video as just another file type to be manipulated on the desktop is here.

Among the major vendors, Microsoft alone seems to be balking at adopting the new standard, claiming its Windows Media 8 is technically superior to MPEG-4. However, Microsoft's remarks are best viewed from the perspective of a company struggling to establish its proprietary digital video distribution standard to further its own technological and economic ambitions. MPEG-4 will be backward-compatible with MPEG-2, the video compression standard used on billions of DVDs and millions of satellite receivers. It seems illogical that the successor to a standard which has been an overwhelming success with people viewing video in their living rooms will be unsatisfactory for use on smaller computer screens.

Besides, it is neither compression technology nor video quality that should be vendors' chief concern. Both are "good enough" for most users. The real challenge for vendors is the need to integrate security into MPEG-4-compliant distribution systems. Today, broadcast video that's captured and compressed using MPEG-4 software encoding is already being exchanged through peer-to-peer file swapping systems. Content providers wishing to protect copyrighted material will need to integrate security into their products. RealNetworks and Microsoft have done so for their proprietary systems, but Gartner believes companies that rely primarily on proprietary compression formats will ultimately fall out of the mainstream. For all but the most demanding applications, the world only needs one video compression standard, and MPEG-4 is it.

Analytical Source: Robert Batchelder, Internet Strategies

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