



Service to give remote access to digital media anywhere

By May Wong, Associated Press

SAN JOSE, Calif. — In a move sure to raise the eyebrows of Hollywood and its partners, a California startup will unveil a service Monday that allows subscribers to remotely access their digital media files — even watch live television — from any gadget with an Internet connection.

Want to watch your HBO while waiting at the doctor's office, or use your cell phone instead of a portable music player to listen to songs from your home's digital jukebox?

The technology from Orb Networks, based in Union City, grabs a user's music, video, or photo files stored on their home PCs and streams them to Web-enabled devices such as cell phones, laptops, or personal digital assistants. A user's cable or satellite TV can also be accessed as long as the video output is somehow hooked up to a home computer network.

"We think of this as a personal media portal," said Orb's chief executive, Jim Behrens. "Your media is always with you."

Orb contends any files on a user's PC — including copy-protected ones, such as songs downloaded from Apple Computer Inc.'s iTunes Music Store, or films from online movie service MovieLink — will be playable on-the-go through their service.

Orb's streaming technology essentially keeps the same copy protections, including the usual restrictions against making digital copies and sharing them freely over the Internet, but lets users access their media however they choose, Behrens said.

"We want content creators to get paid for their content, but once users have paid for it, they should be able to play it on whatever device they want and wherever they want," he said.

It's a notion Hollywood has challenged in the past, battling the pioneers of VCRs, such as Sony, to the makers of digital video recorders, such as TiVo.

So far, TiVo, which will soon let its subscribers access their recorded TV shows on other devices outside the home, has prevailed over Hollywood's piracy and broadcast rights concerns. But that won't stop the powerful studios, analysts say.

"Media companies are terrified about their content going on the Internet, and they'll fight until they're sure that the content is being sent to you and only you," said Josh Bernoff, a digital media analyst at Forrester Research. "It's not even a question of whether it's legal, it's whether or not they'll get sued, and there's a significant possibility of that here."

A startup faces tremendous hurdles in fighting deep-pocketed opponents. Just consider how former small companies with controversial video-related technologies, such as SonicBlue and 321 Studios, went bankrupt, crushed by the costs of fighting Hollywood.

Neither will companies like Apple or Sony, which have designed the tunes downloaded from their music stores to be transferrable only to their respectively branded portable players, necessarily appreciate how the Orb

service eludes their restrictions.

Orb executives expect opposition but said they have worked closely with lawyers and are confident Orb would prevail if confronted in court.

The Orb service will be available in mid-November starting at \$9.99 a month or \$79.99 per year. Additional users off the same home-based account would have to pay \$3.99 per month or \$29.99 per year.

Users must download Orb software onto their home computers and set up a password-protected Orb account. To access their home media files over the Internet, users need to be able to launch a Web browser and have a media player — either Microsoft's Windows, RealNetworks's RealPlayer, or one provided by Orb — on their portable devices.

The service is targeted at households with high-speed broadband connections, though during the streaming process, the quality of the videos or photos would be limited to the connection speeds and screen resolutions of the devices.

Orb claims it can access any digital media file off of a user's PC, but its reach into a set-top-box connected to a home computer network, such as a TiVo or a cable DVR set-top-box, is blocked until Orb gets permission from those companies to place its software in those boxes — a business strategy Orb is pursuing.

"If Orb could get its technology working properly, it's a promising idea," Bernoff said. "But anything with a subscription fee is also going to have to be incredibly useful to get people to pay."

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