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Silver screen in the palm of your hand

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Millions of people around the world will flock to their televisions and the Internet today when Barack Obama is sworn in as the new President of the United States, while hundreds of thousands will watch the inauguration on the tiny screens of their cellphones, thanks to QuickPlay Media.

If you've ever watched a video on your cellphone, chances are good it was the Toronto-based company's technology working in the background.

QuickPlay chief executive officer Wayne Purboo claims QuickPlay has captured "close to 100 per cent" of the Canadian market for the video services his company provides. And as established carriers ramp up their smart phone video offerings and a new slate of entrants enters the wireless fray, the company is scrambling to stay on top by selling to all sides.

"They're all ramping up for a war, and in this case we're the arms dealers," Mr. Purboo said.

QuickPlay was bringing video to mobile devices in 2004, in the early days of smart cellphones when "we had no business launching on those handsets," Mr. Purboo said. Now the private company, which has 70 employees in Toronto as well as staff in Britain and the U.S., is determined to corner the market for mobile video services before the rest of the industry catches up.

The company has prospered by solving a big headache for carriers, by doing the back-end work of collecting and formatting videos - about 25,000 every week - for mobile phones from more than 170 sources, including CNN, YouTube and the NHL.

At the same time, QuickPlay has agreements in place with 14 mobile operators - including Rogers Wireless Communications Inc., Bell Mobility Inc. and Telus Corp. as well as AT&T Inc. and Sprint Nextel Corp. - to provide videos to the phones of their users.

QuickPlay also provides telecom companies with detailed statistics and analytics that are not only used to bill consumers, but also to determine what users are watching, and when.

Mr. Purboo said he could not comment on any discussions the company may have had with the new entrants into Canada's wireless industry.

Rogers uses QuickPlay for its popular Rogers Vision on-demand video and audio service, while Bell tapped QuickPlay to provide the virtual nuts and bolts for its new NHL video service.

Although the Canadian launch of cellphones featuring large screens suitable for watching videos - such as the iPhone, Samsung Electronics Co. Ltd.'s Instinct and RIM's BlackBerry Storm - are encouraging more users to test the mobile waters, the global economic slowdown and a softening consumer market could have a negative impact on the growth of the industry.

"What has held people back, especially in Canada, are price plans and even awareness of these types of services," said Tony Olvet, vice-president of research for IDC Canada.

"We've just entered a slowdown in North America, and Canadian consumers are starting to look at their spending and will probably ease up on spending on novelty services."

QuickPlay has cut back on the number of trade shows it plans to attend this year and has slashed various other expenses as a result of the economic climate, while Mr. Purboo expects the company's growth to slow.

In the U.S., only seven million people, or 3 per cent of cellphone users, watched a video on their handheld in October, according to data from comScore Inc. In Canada, only about 1 per cent of users reported watching a video on their cellphone, according to data from IDC Canada.

"We're reaching a critical mass," Mr. Purboo said. "Within a year or so, the number of subscribers to wireless video services will surpass a number of cable companies in Canada."

Video on the go

Much of the video that is viewed on mobile devices comes from a Canadian company called QuickPlay.

-Video comes from 170 different sources, including YouTube, NHL and CNN; QuickPlay collects about 25,000 clips a week.

-QuickPlay formats the video for use on more than 200 devices. Meta information, such as the date and name of the video and blackout restrictions, are encoded into the final product.

-Video is pushed out to the mobile devices on behalf of media and telecom companies through QuickPlay's platform.

BLACKBERRY

HANDHELD DEVICE

TV

COMPUTER

KATHRY TAM/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

SOURCE: QUICKPLAY MEDIA

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