

*The Light is not only from the North.
Wireless competition is coming from
all directions. Spain, for example.*

The Rich Encounters ... and the Poor

I had just arrived in Madrid for a welcome cocktail party after a long day in Stockholm – a board meeting and a speech followed by a long flight. And the night before I had spent in a plane from New York to Stockholm. So when Jorge Mata offered to do a demo, my heart sank.

You know the drill: Find a quiet place, a power source, open up the laptop and power up ... The whole thing takes half an hour, and can put you to sleep when you're wide awake, let alone when you're about to keel over.

But before I could even get through feeling that dismay, Mata had pulled a cell phone out of his pocket and was well into the demo.

"You want to know who's winning the Grand Prix?" he asked, misreading my interests entirely, but never mind. It turned out to be someone I had never heard of, but Mata was already buying us a T-shirt with the driver's name on it. A couple of clicks, and that was it.

Then we went on to more familiar territory – high-tech stock prices. Online trading isn't available quite yet, but just wait!

That demo illustrates the compelling nature of wireless apps, and the reason that Europe's Net use – and e-commerce in particular – is likely to explode this year. Wireless is so

much easier to use, it's local, it's ubiquitous ... and millions of people are already comfortable with the device.

In Spain, for example, 2 million people got cell phones before January 1, 2000, for a total base of 16 million. That compares with 10 million PCs and about 3.5 million Net users. Total Spanish population: 40 million.

Mata himself got started as a telecom engineer for AT&T Bell Laboratories, and then ran McKinsey's multimedia and telecom consultancy in Madrid. From there he moved to manage an Internet banking project at Banco Santander, Spain's most innovative bank on the Net. Most recently, he was VP of services in Europe for Broadvision.

But, he says, "I thought personalization should go one step beyond BroadVision's PC/Website tools to the most popular device in Europe, the cell phone.

"We created MyAlert.com in May 99 – with BroadVision founder Pehong Chen as an angel investor. The idea was to push the wireless and the personalization. It's all developed on BroadVision technology, linked to SMS (Short Message Service) and ready to be used on WAP. Anything that works with e-commerce you should be able to do on wireless."

He notes that all the wireless networks know where

you are. They are not using GPS, but rather triangulating position within 300 meters. Applications include everything from local restaurant and entertainment suggestions, to traffic advice or notifications that you'd better leave for your airplane because it departs in 90 minutes and you are 45 minutes away. (Alternatively and perhaps more likely, it can tell you to relax if your flight is running late.)

You can get an alert that your favorite singer will be in town and you can buy the ticket online, or you can get an alert that the CD you were looking for is available at a price that might interest you ... from Boxman, no doubt!

This all sounds exciting, of course, but it raises some interesting questions (in addition to privacy).

First of all, e-commerce and transactions are not all there is to the Internet. Wireless access leaves something lacking – namely, rich data. The kinds of navigation/visualization tools that make the Web easy to navigate can't do their stuff; users are likely to get a single limited answer to any query rather than a sense of all the possibilities.

Will wireless reduce the richness of the Net and turn it into a sterile place where only transactions, actions and alerts count?
Are the pundits right, that the Net limits the richness of

communication and turns us into a series of transactions rather than subtly textured human beings? Probably, that's a tendency, and one that people will fight the way they always do – by using other, richer media as well, and by using their cell phones for realtime voice-to-voice conversations even as they are driving, walking or riding towards those rich, nuanced physical encounters with other people that they have arranged by SMS.

But wireless poses another social/political issue in Europe: Just as cable operators in the US may have undue control over Internet access for many millions of customers, so do the wireless operators in Europe threaten to limit people's access to any but their own services. Imagine Minitel in the hands of private business ...

As for MyAlert.com, it is trying to maintain its independence. "We are connected to all the mobile operators we can make deals with," says Mata. "We're already in Spain, France, Germany and Italy. We are working with all the local telcos." □

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