The End User: Lonely quest for unity
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EDINBURGH Daniel Harris is waging a brave, lonely quest to make it easy to consume any kind of digital media on any kind of device through any kind of Internet provider or portal. Did I mention anywhere in the world, in any language?

Actually, there are quite a few people, companies and organizations that have embarked on similar campaigns. But they all seem to be making their own separate ways in the world. Harris has the huge, perhaps impractical, idea to bring them all together under one master plan. It is a noble, idealistic goal. Imagine an open marketplace where all news and entertainment media are findable, buyable and playable without any technological fuss.

That's a far cry from what exists today, with Apple Computer in control of some kinds of digital media, Microsoft and Real Networks commanding others and the twain not coming close to meeting. Every middleman has a stake in the outcome, but few are working together.

Through a nonprofit group called the Kendra Initiative, Harris has been beating his drum for several years, trying to build an open-source framework for anyone in the content distribution industry, from producer to consumer.

His challenge is to get consumer electronics makers, software companies and Web merchants to agree on a single system.

"Take where we are now," Harris said in an interview this week at the International World Wide Web Conference, an annual gathering of people who make decisions about how the Web is organized.

"Almost every place on the Web you go to get digital media has a different system - a different format, a different payment system, a different software player," said Harris, a self-described entrepreneur. "We want to simplify that."

Harris has gathered 500 participants so far, people and companies willing to devote some time, brain power or computer server time to the project. He has a few small trials under way, but nothing ready for broad use.

Once there is more widespread agreement among the players, Harris sees most of the next stage of work as technical in nature - trying to establish a set of standard terminology so that what one peer-to-peer network calls a "song" is the same thing an online store halfway around the globe calls a "track."

The music industry, Harris said, is "in a quandary between whether to make money or to protect their content. We think they can do both."

The dream is admirable, the way there nearly impossible. But Harris's ambition should be lauded. The World Wide Web itself, of course, started out nearly 30 years ago as a dream.

By **Victoria Shannon**

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