

MOBILE WORLD CONGRESS 2014

MEC'S TAKE-OUTS FROM THE MOBILE WORLD CONGRESS IN BARCELONA, 24-27 February 2014

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It's hard to know which was the biggest news in Barcelona this year, Mark Zuckerberg's keynote speech or the launch of the Samsung Galaxy S5? The S5 delivered the evolution of design that we've all become used to. Faster processor? Check. Better camera? Check. Finger print scanner? Seen it already. Waterproof? Check, but everybody's jumping on that bandwagon anyway. So the S5 might have dominated the headlines at the start of the week, but for me, Zuckerberg was talking about a real revolution.

Sure, the WhatsApp acquisition was always going to be a topic, but some of the thinking behind it is what is interesting. Apparently it was Zuck's internet.org project that convinced Jan Koum to sell up to Facebook. WhatsApp is on its way to connecting a billion people, and Facebook is looking at how it finds its next one billion users, as well as how it connects the whole world. Currently, *only* 2.7 billion people have access to the internet. If we can connect the rest of the world, then they will have much better access to education and health care, as well as much more business transparency. While not quite delivering world peace, bringing better education and healthcare to developing countries is surely one of the most altruistic objectives that an organisation could have.

LAUNCHING THE NOKIA 220

But it's not just about delivering connectivity, these newly connected people will not be able to afford the latest iPhone (which apparently costs around £1,000 a year to own), so handset manufacturers are looking at low cost handset designs. Firefox announced a £15 handset at the start of MWC, whilst Nokia were exhibiting their Nokia 220 handset on their stand. The Nokia 220 costs £24, has a one month battery life and is water and dust proof. I had a little play with this handset, which has Twitter & Facebook baked into the menu, and it was actually a really decent phone.





While these new devices will be much more affordable in developing countries, the networks will have to work out commercials for the data plans, as not many people will be able to afford a £15 per month data plan, never mind a £5 surcharge for 4G. This is where internet.org, and even Google's Project Loon come in to play, but they weren't in Barcelona, so on with the wrap up!

In other handset news, LG were exhibiting the G Flex, a handset with a curved screen for optimal viewing of video content. The cool thing about this phone was that it actually flexes under pressure, meaning it's not going to break when you sit on it. It also has a self-healing back cover, which means that scratches should be a thing of the past! Another notable handset was the Acer Liquid E3, which has the first 2MP front facing camera, with flash – improving the quality of selfies the world over!

Wearables were also a big theme. Samsung were showing their revamped Galaxy Gear, the Gear 2, as well as the Gear Neo and the Gear Fit. The Gear 2 and Gear Neo are very similar to the original Galaxy Gear smart watch that Samsung launched last year. The big upgrades include a shift from the Android operating system to Tizen, an open source OS, based on Linux, and the inclusion of a Heart Rate monitor.

The Gear Fit is more of a fitness band than a smart watch, but with additional functionality compared to the Fitbit or Nike Fuel band. The Gear Fit lets you track when you walk, run, cycle or hike (which seems pretty similar to walking, if you ask me!), again with an inbuilt heart rate sensor, but also with a flexible OLED screen. It has limited smartwatch functionality, in that it will connect to your phone, via Bluetooth, and show you notifications for email, SMS and other apps, such as Facebook. The Gear Fit won the Best Mobile Device at MWC, and it won't be long before other manufacturers release similar devices, blurring the lines between fitness bands, smartwatches and smartphones.



THE GEAR FIT AND GEAR 2

THE SONY LIFEBLOG CAMERA

Sony were also exhibiting their Smartband with removable Core, which they first announced at CES in January. The Smartband is more of a life tracker than a fitness band, and consists of a strap and a removable core unit, which is the brains of the product. The core can track body movements and communicate with an Android phone via Bluetooth, providing data to Sony's Lifelog app. The app "lets you keep track of everything you do – your movements, your communications, your entertainment", and Sony are set to launch a Lifelog camera, to be worn around your neck, that will capture photos throughout your day to accompany the data logged via the Smartband. Useful or creepy? You decide.



More exciting for me were Sony's 4K TVs, which had the most amazing picture clarity and depth. The photo below doesn't really do it justice, but it was the most real looking TV picture that I have ever seen.

Another big theme was the Internet of Things, or IoT. This has been a theme at MWC for a while now, but each year you see more use cases, demos and real products. First up was Qualcomm's connected home demo. This showed off various products powered by AllJoyn, which is another open source project that has been created specifically to allow IoT devices to communicate with each other. A home application allows you to configure all of your IoT devices and set rules around how they work together. Thus, when you unlock your front door using your smartphone app, you can program the lights to come on in the hallway. Heating systems, such as Nest (now owned by Google) can also be part of the network and can learn the most efficient settings for your central heating, saving money as well as being greener. The connected home demo featured lots of other devices, such as smart fridges, which will send a notification to your phone, or even your smart TV, if the door has been left open or the temperature rises above a set level.

The smart router is used to balance bandwidth across different devices in the home and can even send an alert if a child is using their tablet instead of going to sleep. Sure, some of the applications can border on creepy (the smart teddy bear being one of them) but I'm really excited by this technology and will definitely be buying in to it as it becomes commercially available.





Continuing the connected theme, there were lots of connected cars at the show, from BMW, General Motors, Volvo, Chevrolet, Mazda, Mercedes and Ford. BMW were showing the connected i3, which is available now and features a smartphone app that enables you to set the temperature in the car before you leave the house. The connectivity allows for smart navigation, updating your route with available charging points and automatically rerouting you round any traffic incidents. It also connects direct to your service centre, providing up to date vehicle diagnostics, making any servicing or repairs quicker and more efficient.

Whilst BMW were showing an existing car, Ford were showcasing their driverless concept car. The car uses a series of lasers to create a real time 3D image of objects around it, enabling it to “see” where it’s going and to avoid any obstacles. More seriously cool concept technology, which will hopefully make a real impact on our future.

3D IMAGE FROM FORD’S DRIVERLESS CAR

Aside from all the cool tech, there was also the serious business of lots of mobile infrastructure being sold, as well as a whole hall (albeit one of the smaller ones) dedicated to mobile apps and advertising. Lots of the people that you will be familiar with were there – Millennial Media, InMobi, Appsflyer, Airpush, Linking Mobile, Yahoo. It’s a great place for them to meet clients from across the world, and to recruit developers to increase their inventory pools, but few new products are announced and your local rep is still the best person to talk to about latest targeting opportunities.

We’ve had some space on the Mastercard stand to demo their new m-wallet, which was distinctly underwhelming. It’s pretty much O2’s priority moments improved to cover all of the networks, instead of just O2. The real excitement will come when they introduce payment functionality, supposedly later this year.

So, whilst Mobile World Congress is a place where lots of business gets done, from developers hooking up with ad networks, to infrastructure giants signing multi million pound deals, it is also taking on more of a consumer tech aspect as “mobile” becomes so much more than just “mobile phones”. From femtocells to fitness trackers, MWC is the place to show your wares, and 80,000 people will be back next year to do it all again!

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