

## Law, order and mobile TV

In October 1931, the quick-thinking and relentlessly determined police detective Dick Tracy made his debut in a newspaper comic strip written and illustrated by cartoonist Chester Gould. For the next 46 years, Gould's hero would apply an ahead-of-its time combination of forensic science and inventive technology to solve crimes committed by some of the most memorable and macabre bad guys ever—grotesque characters like the Nazi spy Pruneface, the sinister 3-D Magee and the bizarrely deformed Flattop Jones.

Gould armed Tracy not only with a hard-boiled detective sensibility, but with fanciful inventions bankrolled by an industrialist with the unlikely name of Diet Smith. Among Smith's technologies put to use in service of justice were Tracy's Space Coupe (a sort of hovercraft propelled by magnetic energy), a miniature



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ring camera, and a “voice-o-graph” that identified disguised criminals by the pitch of their voice.

But the archetypal Tracy tool dreamed up by the author was a wristwatch that doubled as a two-way video device. With it, the cool-headed Chicago detective could dispatch instructions to his fellow officers and receive from them communiqués that kept him hot on the trail of the bad guys.

Introduced in the 1950s as a successor to an earlier two-way wristwatch radio, Tracy's wristwatch TV captivated readers who calculated instantly the awesome possibilities mobile video presented. The wristwatch TV or radio remains such an enduring cultural reference point that today the combination of the words “Dick Tracy” and “wristwatch” produces roughly 37,000 articles from the Google Internet search resource. Gould's drawings of Tracy, clad in his signature yellow overcoat, arm upturned to position his two-way wristwatch near his face, are pulp-comic classics.

What's remarkable about the Dick Tracy wristwatch of Gould's imagination is how presciently it divined the future. What seemed to be merely a delicious technological fantasy in the 1950s—the idea of a wireless portable television you carried with you—is becoming the foundation for a big business. A

March 2006 report by JupiterResearch projects revenues from mobile video content will reach \$501 million by 2010, from \$62 million in 2005. Jupiter thinks the growth will be propelled by an uptake in adoption of new mobile phones that feature video screens and processors—and allow users to talk over the things in the same way that Tracy once shared coordinates with Chief Brandon back at the station.

In fact, about the only thing Gould got wrong was the watch part. Most of the wireless, go-anywhere mobile video devices in use today are plucked from pockets and purses, not worn on wrists. Not that manufacturers haven't tried. Seiko introduced in 1982 the Seiko TV Watch, billed as the world's smallest TV. It did indeed slip nicely over the wrist, but you had to stash in your shirt pocket a companion receiver, about the size of a cigarette package, that connected to the watch-style screen through a thin wire. Also departing from the Dick Tracy script, you heard the sound not through the watch itself but through headphones also attached through a wire. The whole contraption cost about \$500, rendered a barely visible black-and-white picture, and must have left its early adopters looking as silly as those people who talk into the air using Bluetooth-enabled mobile phones of today. Japan mobile phone giant DoCoMo got closer to the mark in 2003 when it began selling the Wristomo, a 3.9-ounce, self-contained wristwatch TV and Internet access device from Seiko for \$318.

The more sweeping mobile-TV revolution relies not on wristwatch derivations but on handheld devices that are now being fortified to perform feats that might have delighted even a world-weary Dick Tracy. In April, Motorola unveiled a new video-phone, the Razr V3x, that siphons TV shows from a digital video recorder so users can watch them anywhere they carry their phone. Upstart Sling Media Inc. has released a mobile version of its Slingbox media player that sends TV channels from home to wireless video-phones employing Microsoft Windows Mobile software.

More announcements are certain to come. The economic possibilities associated with moving television from bulky living-room appliances to lightweight, on-the-go devices are making business development executives across the content, cable TV and mobile phone sectors giddy. What Chester Gould imagined as a highly specialized crime-busting technology is instead being devoted to catching music videos or last Sunday's prime time drama on the train to work. That may not keep the city's streets any safer, but it does fulfill a heady technological vision once deemed to be pure comic book fantasy. Now, if we can just get working on that hovercraft. ■

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