A Disturbance in the Force: The Smartphone Market is Changing

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Can you hear it? That's the sound of the device market changing. It sounds a little like the whispers that RIM just might have something with BlackBerry 10. It also sounds a little like rumors that Amazon has the right kind of content ecosystem to launch a smartphone of its own. You might even hear, way in the background, the soft, sweet melody of Stephen Elop hinting at a possible Android device. And don't overlook the complex rhythm of Apple actually looking slightly out of step, if a bit behind the times.

It's true. I have to admit it. I've never seen so many iPhone users craning their necks to get a better look at the new Android devices. And when is the last time a Samsung device saw the kind of pre-launch hysteria that this latest Galaxy IV is generating? The Android OEMs and the other players in that ecosystem are finally pulling it together, from more seamless content systems to better hardware, and finally driving scale and actually seeing adoption of standards like DLNA (yeah, its been around for a while, but few smartphone users actually knew what is was for or how to use it).

And then there's the return of BlackBerry. The carriers have to be in love with RIM's new BlackBerry devices, because it just might give them that magical third platform they've been looking for. While Microsoft and Nokia are making a run for it, I'm more inclined to place a bet on BlackBerry. All signs--and leaked videos--point to a seriously polished UI in BlackBerry 10. I, along with many others, had a lot good things to say about the Playbook's UI when it came out, and from what I can see it looks like RIM might have pulled off some of that same QNX TATA-inspired magic with these new smartphones.

Even with all the reports of falling iPhone 5 component orders, don't think for a second that Apple is out of it. But the playing field is leveling, as most suspected it would eventually, and it looks like we actually have a ballgame. The best part about this recent shift is that it can only mean better tech and lower prices for consumers. A rebounding RIM, a resilient Nokia, a stellar Samsung, are brillant examples of the best aspects of competition.

And let's not forget all those interesting little side projects blossoming out there in right field. There's Mozilla's Firefox OS, and the open-sourced Tizen. While maybe not exactly ready for primetime in mature markets, these kinds of platforms may see a big uptick in emerging markets. The sub-$100 smartphone might not be the sexiest device on the planet but it could be one of the more democratizing pieces of tech ever produced.

Lastly, the maturation of the platforms themselves, along with a reduction in component prices, has allowed a number of new OEMs to flourish. Look at Yota out of Russia, with it's second e-ink screen. Look at how ZTE and Huawei, which have always been there, but recently dominated the high-end smarpthone show at CES. This is a very different market than the one dominated by Apple, Motorola and Samsung only a couple years ago.

We'll have to see how 2013 shapes up after the first reviews and sales numbers come in on BlackBerry 10. Nokia's first quarter could also paint a picture. But one thing's for sure, the smartphone market is about to get even more interesting, if that's even possible.

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