Firefox OS is Not the Third OS U.S. Operators Are Looking For

Andrew Berg

The idea that Mozilla's Firefox OS will compete for significant market share on the same court as iOS and Android is laughable but that's exactly what much of the mainstream media seems determined to report.

I have read a number of articles desperate to make the case that Firefox OS is aiming to be the "third ecosystem," possibly edging out even BlackBerry and Windows Phone. Cheaper phones, powered by the Web, would mean less subsidies and greater margins for the carriers these articles argue.

That's all good and fine, and perhaps Mozilla has its sights set on a time in the future when its HTML5-based platform will eventually mature into a contender as browser technologies improve and networks get faster. But at least in the near-term, the not-for-profit Mozilla, I assure you, is not so deluded as to think it will immediately be competing with Samsung and Apple and their respective operating systems.

While Mozilla should be commended for its foresight and the backing it has already received from 18 operators and at least 4 OEMs, I'm guessing Mozilla is hoping Firefox OS just manages to stay afloat and attract some attention from more OEMs and developers. Heck, I'll bet Mozilla wouldn't even own up to vying for a top-four spot but would just be happy to edge out Tizen and Ubuntu.

The point is that the phones based on Mozilla's web-based platform will be shipped to emerging markets and sold, perhaps even sans subsidy, for at or below $100. These are not phones that will attract a U.S. audience. They are low- to mid-range phones, with lightweight processors made for people who otherwise have never had a smartphone experience.

In short, carriers in the U.S. are not looking at Firefox OS as a possible third platform option. For now, they're crossing their fingers that Windows Phone and BlackBerry 10 might fill the void there.

I recently spoke to Johnathan Nightingale, vice president of Firefox engineering for Mozilla, and he made a very definite distinction between the aims and opportunities of a platform like Firefox OS, and those of iOS and Android.

"This is a technology that can run on cheaper hardware and still provide a first class experience. So, carriers that want to target that market have a way to do it. You're never going to see that with iOS, but even with Android, the Android layer adds a fair bit of technical load that just requires beefier hardware and that's going to drive the cost," Nightingale said, adding that the Web can scale depending on the capabilities of any given device but that Firefox OS will certainly enable movement further down the price range.

Just look at the markets where this first wave of devices are headed: Brazil, Colombia, Hungary, Mexico, Montenegro, Poland. These are not major markets.

All of this said, I don't think Mozilla wants its baby to wallow in obscurity forever. Rather, I think the company is guilty of being truly innovative and prophetic. Mozilla could be in on the ground floor of what's to come. Faster networks paired with more cloud-based services and applications, as well as improvements in browser technologies, really could drive a future where we see the return of the Web as a truly mature, ubiquitous, and unfragmented mobile platform.

When I think of this world, I can't help but hear John Lennon singing, "Imagine there's no platforms and all the devices and apps interoperable as one." Something like that.

Nightingale said that Mozilla's unique non-profit structure, as well as its roots in Web-based browser technologies, allowed it to put Firefox OS out there as a work in progress. He said the company realized it had an opportunity to open the platform up and allow it to evolve the way the open Web has done over the years.

"We know it's a better world for all of us if that's how these platforms evolve, if there is that openness and interoperability and portability, if we put users at the middle of it," Nightingale said.

In the end, we can say that Firefox OS is really great idea that has the necessary foundation to become a really great product, perhaps even a revolutionary one. But in the near-term, let's at least be realistic.

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