

**iPlayer row means curtains for 'free' broadband, says NetServices**

Salford-based converged network provider, NetServices, is warning that the current row over BBC iPlayer traffic clogging up the UK's broadband network is the thin end of the wedge, and could mean the end for the unsustainable model of 'free' internet access spearheaded by the Carphone Warehouse.

NetServices predicted when it withdrew from the domestic broadband market in 2006 that 'free' services would lead to a huge rise in demand for bandwidth, while stripping service providers of the funds they need to maintain and improve their networks. This position has been worsened by the introduction of the iPlayer and 'on demand' internet television services, which use peer-to-peer distribution rather than direct download technology. This means the services take up bandwidth that belongs to the ISPs to enable viewers to watch programmes online.

Mark Vickers, NetServices chief executive, explains: "The peer-to-peer distribution strategy means that once a certain number of people have downloaded a programme from the iPlayer or 4oD website, further viewers do not access it directly from the site itself, but from other users, although the users are not aware of this. This makes using iPlayer almost identical to filesharing programs such as Bittorrent or Kazaa, though the content supplied is legitimate.

"As a method of getting content out online quickly it's a clever wheeze, but it's also great for the BBC and Channel 4's bills, as they share the ISPs' bandwidth among thousands of viewers, most of whom have 'unlimited' broadband accounts. The downside to this is that internet service providers are picking up the tab for millions of gigabytes of extra traffic while the broadcasters and consumers get off scot free."

Since 2006, NetServices has focused exclusively on business communications, though even here peer-to-peer traffic can impact on the speed and quality of services it can supply. Recent advances in technology, however, promise to shake up the market once again, moving it away from 'free' and back towards the 'you get what you pay for' model.

Mark adds: "With innovations such as Cisco's Service Control Engine now available, it is possible for ISPs to analyse the amount of peer-to-peer traffic on their network and by any customer and strip it out if they want to. They can then apply a model by which users who want to download content pay an appropriate amount for the capability. Here at NetServices, for example, we don't allow any peer-to-peer traffic on our network as standard."

Mark doesn't expect the iPlayer controversy to disappear either. He concludes: "Free broadband may have looked like great news for consumers at the time, but its chief side-effect seems to have been to give SKY, the BBC and a small coterie of heavy users carte blanche to use everyone else's bandwidth for nothing.

"Users should always remember nothing is free and you get what you pay for. As the pressure continues to mount on the capacity and wafer-thin profits of domestic ISPs, I wouldn't be very surprised to see free or very cheap deals disappearing from the market to be replaced by a smarter, stepped model with price reflecting levels of use more closely."

**Ends**

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