broadband news

File swappers taking ISPs' profits

The broadband bandwidth chickens are coming home to roost with NTL's decision to cap download data limits at 1GB per day for users of its 1Mbps service.

The imposed constraints drew an angry reaction from *PC Advisor* readers, over half of whom indicated in a recent poll that NTL should stick to its original pledge of providing an 'unlimited' service. According to the majority of respondents to the poll unlimited should mean unlimited; users should be allowed to download as much as they want, when they want.

But despite the somewhat clumsy, clandestine way in which NTL introduced its capping – sneaking it in via the back door on a cold weekend in early February – the company's decision has long been regarded as inevitable by industry experts.

The bandwidth demands placed on broadband networks by users of P2P (peer-to-peer) file-swapping services such as Kazaa and Morpheus are making it difficult for sellers and resellers of broadband to produce any kind of profit.

The illegal pursuit of copyrighted content, in the form of music, games and films, is causing ISPs to rethink how they prioritise their bandwidth provision. According to Jupiter Research, over three quarters of European broadband users engage in file-swapping over P2P networks at least once a month.

BT Broadband – the no-frills, ADSL service – was the first to get the ball rolling when it launched last summer, stating a daily download limit of 1GB. So far, though, it hasn't taken action against persistent excess offenders.

Back in November, ADSL reseller FairADSL announced plans to curb usage of peer-to-peer applications such as Kazaa, after discovering 60 percent of its traffic came from P2P usage. This is despite the fact that it's just a minority of its overall userbase who actually create that level of network activity.

Other ISPs, such as Andrews & Arnold, are showing the way forward by offering tiered services: £60 a month will get you totally unlimited access. UK ISP Sniff Out is taking a slightly different approach, pinpointing users who download for more than six hours a day and then moving them to a different part of their network.

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BT rolls out 80 Wi-Fi points

Telco BT is pushing forward with its plans to create a cable-free broadband Britain, announcing yesterday that it has installed 80 public wireless LAN (local area network) hotspots as an alternative to 3G (third-generation) networks.

Wi-Fi hotspots enable people to plug their laptops or mobile handsets into sockets which use radio waves to connect to broadband services.

The telco giant has set up deals with BAA (the British Airport Authority), Hilton hotels and Welcome Break service stations to install the public hotspots in four airports, including Gatwick and Heathrow, as well as 27 motorway services sites throughout the country.

BT plans to set up 400 hotspots by this summer and 4,000 by June 05. "Wi-Fi is going to develop dramatically this year. It is half the price of 3G and three times faster," says Pierre Danon, CEO of BT Retail. "It's only 10p a minute for broadband access at BT Openzone, which is an impressive figure when you look at the fact that 3G operators will be charging a lot more," he adds.

But Wi-Fi still isn't exactly cheap. A month's unlimited access costs £85 or you can pay £15 for 24 hours access. BT is, however, offering a 50 percent discount on the service until March 03.

"[The] announcement demonstrates that BT is delivering the widespread network of UK public wireless LAN access to points that we promised," says Danon.

BT has also set up an agreement with European TeliaSonera allowing those who travel further afield to take advantage of points in Sweden, France, Denmark and the US.
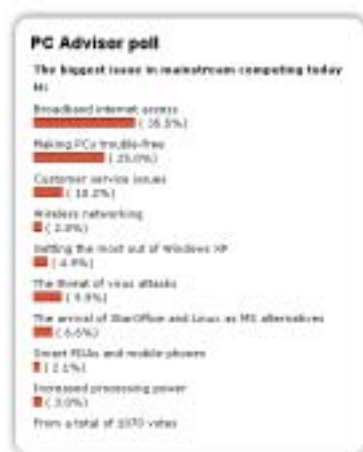
PCA readers see broadband as top IT issue

Broadband tops the list of biggest issues facing mainstream computing according to a recent poll on PCAdvisor.co.uk. Well over a third of respondents (35.5 percent) plumped for broadband, ahead of 'making PCs trouble-free' (25 percent), 'customer service issues' (10.2 percent) and 'the threat of virus attacks' (9.9 percent).

This sense of urgency for high-speed internet connections is backed by official figures. According to telco watchdog Oftel a massive 84 percent of internet users are now aware of the benefits offered by broadband, compared to just 50 percent in February last year.

"It is wonderful to see the joint work of government and industry in raising awareness of the benefits of broadband really paying off," says e-commerce minister Stephen Timms.

One in 10 UK homes – 1.4 million users – now has access to broadband services. This year, a further 1.3 million people are expected to get broadband, bringing the total to just under three million by the end of 2003.

But it is not only good marketing that's to thank for this boom. Since Christmas there have been a range of special offers from ISPs including Demon Internet, BT and Pipex to name but a few.

Cable provider Telewest has also jumped on the cut-price connection bandwagon, offering existing customers a DIY upgrade package to its Blueyonder service for just £12.50 a month.

The self-install package uses Telewest customers' television set-top boxes as its connection point, negating the need for a separate modem to be installed. Wires link the set-top box to the computer, which means the system needs to be within a reasonable distance of the TV.

Telewest's long-term plan is to provide wireless connection to make it even easier for customers to get its broadband services.

In one of the most innovative price-slashing stunts so far, service provider Tiscali last month cut the up-front-cost barriers to broadband still further by offering new customers a free ADSL modem worth £65.

If you sign up for its 512Kbps (kilobits per second) service you will be offered a free connection, which normally costs £50, plus the modem. Choose the cheaper 256Kbps deal and the connection fee drops to £35. The 512Kbps option costs £27 per month, while the slower alternative is £19.99 per month.

Tiscali's offer is open to customers who sign up by the end of March 03. For more information visit www.tiscali.co.uk.

PC Advisor poll

The biggest issue in mainstream computing today

Broadband internet access (35.5%)
Making PCs trouble-free (25.0%)
Customer service issues (10.2%)
Wireless networking (2.9%)
Getting the most out of Windows XP (4.4%)
The threat of virus attacks (9.9%)
The arrival of StarOffice and Linux as MS alternatives (6.6%)
Smart PDAs and mobile phones (2.1%)
Increased processing power (3.0%)

From a total of 1070 votes

BT lowers trigger levels

BT Wholesale has finally lowered the number of registrations required for broadband to as little as 200 in a bid to speed up the rollout of services.

Trigger levels for 388 telephone exchanges have been reduced due to "a review of the economics of providing ADSL", according to the telco.

Until now, BT has ignored criticism from campaigners at pressure group Broadband4Britain, among others, that its qualification requirements for upgrading exchanges for broadband – so-called trigger levels – were too high.

Initial targets were set by the telco at 300 to 500, but Broadband4Britain said figures should be closer to 50, a claim which BT shunned as "unrealistic and uneconomic".

"The registration scheme has helped us guide investment in broadband to match demand. Our growing experience of the actual work involved now allows us to be confident in lowering many of the

demand levels at which we will upgrade exchanges," says BT's chief executive, Paul Reynolds.

The maximum figure will now be higher, at 550, but BT has promised to lower the majority of trigger levels by as many as 350 registrants. Some areas will now require only 200 registration requests.

The scheme has so far led to the upgrade of 13 exchanges, with an additional 58 currently under way. More than 66 percent of households are now connected to the 1,132 BT ADSL-enabled exchanges.

Meanwhile in a separate announcement BT Wholesale said it is set to increase the number of exchanges supporting SDSL (symmetric DSL) services to around 180, bringing upstream speeds of 2Mbps (megabits per second) to Britain's major towns and cities.

The rollout represents a boon to businesses unable to afford the onerous costs of leased line connections.

COME ON BRITAIN, WE KNOW YOU WANT IT.

SDSL services will clearly cost more than the leased wholesale costs charged by BT Wholesale to its resellers (a fixed price of £200 per month, plus a connection fee of £450 per customer). But this is much less than the usual £6,000 to £15,000 a year charged by leased line providers.