

the broadband battle

The European Parliament's stance on internet privacy falls way short of providing complete protection for electronic data, so how are governments and ISPs going to persuade us to go over to broadband? Perhaps by using it to give us something we actually want

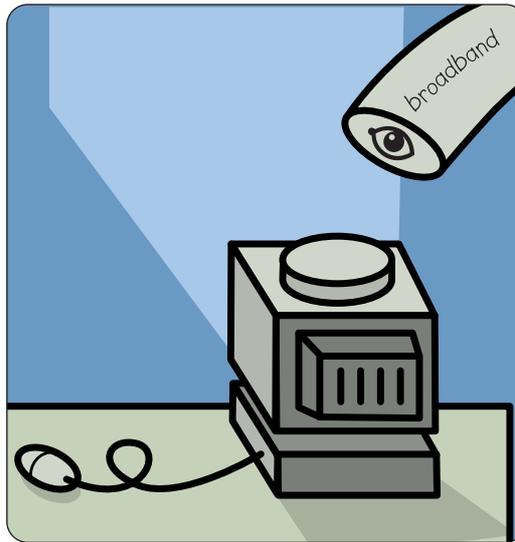
The furore caused by the European Parliament's recent rubber stamp on the Electronic Communications Data Protection Directive can hardly have escaped the notice of many. Civil liberties groups are up in arms over the bill, which forces businesses to retain electronic data for a longer period of time.

In fact, this directive is not the only blow to privacy on the web this month. We've also seen the Inland Revenue shut down its site after a flaw caused a confidential information leak. This despite the governments professed aim to have us all filing our taxes online by 2010.

War on privacy

But the IR's website problems have been rather overshadowed by the Electronic Communications Directive's provision for a mammoth archive of data that, the government says, it will use in the fight against organised crime – in particular terrorism.

On the face of it you could blame 11 September for the directive. The fate of the Twin Towers pushed it on a step but, if the rumours are to be believed, it's something the security services have been pushing the government to instigate for a while.



At least for now, that information will be held only by the sender and recipient.

Undeniably, the directive strips away some of our existing privacy although, as we'll see from an in-depth look at all these security concerns in next month's *PC Advisor*, spyware and the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act are already affecting our working lives.

But the government's big brother tactics are to some extent diverting attention from another important question concerning the legislation: who's going to pay for it?

embrace the idea of introducing the internet and email into more areas of their lives.

Of course, one of the key barriers to the wider adoption of broadband is cost, which operators really can't afford to push up to pay for extra data storage. In fact, 49 percent of you, according to our online poll, already think it is too expensive.

But cost is not enough to have kept the UK at the back of the queue when it comes to broadband; there is also the question of availability. Over 22 percent of those who responded to our online poll simply couldn't get ADSL (asymmetric digital subscriber line) in their area. BT, it seems, just isn't upgrading exchanges fast enough.

But pressure group Broadband4Britain is taking the company to task over its viability figures, claiming that it has set the minimum number of users needed to justify exchange upgrades too high, and that just 50 would make providing ADSL viable.

Get connected to what?

Even if BT does get its act together and make broadband a possibility wherever you live, the real driver that will get people online with fast internet is content. Just as the Queen's Coronation back in 1952 spurred the sale of televisions, if broadband can offer something people really want then we will really see it succeed.

Unfortunately, there is little on the web that is specifically designed for broadband and what there is often just adds to the cost – a no-no for an emerging technology wishing to win fans. For example, if you want to connect to live *Big Brother* broadcasts via your broadband connection, you'll be expected to pay £9.99 for the privilege – a price that will leave most of us sticking to the free coverage on Channel 4.

Broadband's future in Britain isn't clear and, until concerns over privacy, cost and content are resolved, we think the majority of the UK will continue to dial up. ■

Emma Northam

There is little on the web that is specifically designed for broadband and what there is often just adds to the cost – a no-no for an emerging technology wishing to win fans

The freshly-stamped Electronic Communications Data Protection Directive means internet firms, ISPs and phone companies will keep records of your web cache, email logon times and addresses you send messages to as well as the numbers of the internet service providers used.

At the moment, the act doesn't extend to include the contents of those emails.

Storing all this extra information is going to cost companies dear, and who do you think will ultimately end up footing the bill? We bet it will be their customers.

Bring on broadband

The bill also threatens the adoption of technologies like broadband. If users feel their data is compromised when they share it electronically, they are hardly likely to