U.K. pop charts set for radical overhaul

By Michael Holden
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LONDON (Reuters) - The British pop chart will undergo one of the biggest shake-ups since its inception 54 years ago on Sunday when any song downloaded from the Internet will be able to compete for the number one single spot.

Up to now, only songs which were physically available for purchase in shops counted toward the weekly chart.

Downloads could be included, but only a week before an actual CD single went on sale and for two weeks after it stopped appearing in stores.

However, with downloads now far outstripping over-the-counter sales, the Official UK Charts Company (OCC) has changed the rules meaning this Sunday's number one could be any track whether it has been sold in stores or online.

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It said the "dramatic development" would be more reflective of what music Britons were buying, and could mean that old tunes, tracks by unknown artists or unreleased songs on albums hitting the top of the charts.

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Downloads from Internet Web sites were included in the national charts for the first time in April 2005 in a bid to make them more relevant as traditional single sales fell to record low levels, partly because of illegal downloading.

A year later when download sales could be included before a single's physical release, Gnarls Barkley's "Crazy" made history when it became the first song to reach number
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"For a long time we've wanted the chart to reflect what the consumers are actually buying," said a spokesman for the BPI, the British record industry's trade body. He said time would tell whether the change would benefit unknown acts or the established stars.

"It means any track when it's available digitally it can chart. To that degree, there's a real level playing field there," he said.

The OCC said the singles market, which commentators had written off a few years ago, had boomed since downloads were brought in.

In October 2004, Swedish DJ Eric Prydz topped the charts after weekly sales of just over 23,000 copies, the lowest ever for a number one single.

However overall singles sales have rocketed from 32 million in 2004 to more than 65 million last year, thanks mainly to almost 52 million download purchases.

The first British singles chart was published on November 14, 1952 when Al Martino became the first ever number one act with "Here In My Heart."
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