Internet groups warn BBC over iPlayer plans

ISPs fear that introduction of web broadcasts will overload their networks as users download 'catch-up' TV

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Some of the largest broadband providers in the UK are threatening to "pull the plug" from the BBC's new iPlayer unless the corporation contributes to the cost of streaming its videos over the internet.

The likes of Tiscali, BT and Carphone Warehouse are all growing concerned that the impact of hundreds of thousands of consumers watching BBC programmes on its iPlayer – which allows viewers to watch shows over the internet – will place an intolerable strain on their networks.

Some of the companies involved have told the BBC that they will consider limiting the bandwidth available to iPlayer – a process known as traffic shaping. The measure would limit the number of consumers who could access the iPlayer at any one time.

A spokeswoman for Tiscali said: "The potential for iPlayer to suck up capacity is a concern and we need a better dialogue with the BBC about that."

A senior insider at BT added: "It is certainly a live debate between ISPs [internet service providers] and the BBC. If the BBC gets the numbers it wants for iPlayer then network capacity could become an issue."

Company representatives have expressed their concerns to Ashley Highfield, the director of new media and technology at the BBC.

As more consumers access and post video content on the internet – using sites such as YouTube – the ability of ISPs to cope with the amount of data being sent across their networks is coming under increasing strain, even without TV broadcasters moving on to the web. Analysts believe that ISPs will be forced to place stringent caps on consumers' internet use and raise prices to curb usage.

Attempts have been made by players in the industry to form a united front against the BBC by asking the Internet Service Providers' Association to lead the campaign on the iPlayer issue. However, to date, no single voice for the industry has emerged.

The iPlayer will enable internet users to watch BBC programming on a seven-day catch-up basis, without charge. Once downloaded, programmes can be watched at any time for up to 30 days, with seven days to view them once started.

Channel 4 and ITV have both launched internet players that have the potential to further eat into the network capacity of ISPs. New internet-only broadcasters such as Joost are also hoping to carve a niche for themselves in the UK.
In a recent research note, Ian Maude, an analyst at Enders Analysis, the independent research house, said: "No broadcaster has rights clearance to distribute all its broadcast content over the internet. The BBC, for example, holds the rights for in-house produced programming, as well as catch-up TV and series stacking rights for independently produced programming from the UK, but few internet rights for acquired content, such as feature films and sports events."

He added: "At launch, around 60 per cent of the BBC's weekly TV schedule will be available via the iPlayer. However, we anticipate that the strong affiliation of viewers with the broadcaster brands will drive usage of their catch-up TV services, despite less than comprehensive availability of programming."

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