CABLE TV

Comcast relents on Web video

The cable TV company was criticized for allegedly blocking BitTorrent software for watching video online.

By Jim Puzzanghera, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

March 28, 2008

WASHINGTON -- After criticism for allegedly blocking a popular software program for watching video online, Comcast Corp. pledged Thursday not to discriminate against specific technology as it tries to keep increasing amounts of data flowing through its cable networks.

But the move may not be enough to keep Comcast, the country's largest cable company, from being disciplined by federal regulators or to resolve a complicated debate about how Internet providers can manage their online traffic.

Comcast and BitTorrent Inc., a San Francisco company whose software is used by websites, movie studios and cable TV networks to distribute online video, announced Thursday that they were working to solve a dispute that arose last year. An Associated Press report in October said Comcast was blocking some customers from using BitTorrent's software, prompting public-interest groups to complain to the Federal Communications Commission.

The FCC is looking into whether Comcast violated federal rules that bar network providers from discriminating against specific software programs. Supporters of this so-called network neutrality said Comcast and some other Internet providers have an incentive to slow programs such as BitTorrent because online video competes with their TV programming.

Comcast has denied blocking BitTorrent traffic but has said it slowed the software's use by some customers. The move was necessary, Comcast said, to keep a few customers who upload large amounts of data from slowing down the network for others.

BitTorrent makes it easier to distribute large files by taking pieces of them from the computers of various users instead of downloading whole files from one location. Comcast promised Thursday that it would change the way it manages its network by the end of the year as it works to double the upload capacity of many customers.

In a joint statement with BitTorrent, Comcast said it would start a "collaborative effort" with the Internet community to address concerns about network congestion.

BitTorrent praised Comcast's moves, and both said it showed that technical Internet issues could be worked out without "government intervention." FCC Commissioner Robert M. McDowell said the announcement eliminated the need for "further government intrusion into this matter."

But the matter isn't over.

Speaking at a Hollywood technology conference Thursday, BitTorrent President Ashwin Navin said the federal agency should continue to look into the issue. "The FCC needs to do its job," he said.

Commissioner Michael J. Copps and public-interest groups said Comcast's response wouldn't have happened without the threat of FCC action and vowed to continue pushing for stricter rules barring discrimination specifically against Internet applications.

FCC Chairman Kevin J. Martin said he was concerned that Comcast wouldn't change its practices immediately.
While it may take time to implement its preferred new traffic management technique, it is not at all obvious why Comcast couldn't stop its current practice of arbitrarily blocking its broadband customers from using certain applications," Martin said. He added that the FCC would go ahead with a hearing next month on network management.

Vuze Inc. of Palo Alto, which uses BitTorrent software to distribute video, music and games over the Internet, said the FCC still must clarify its rules for Internet traffic.

"Comcast has been caught with their hand in the cookie jar, and right now it seems they're trying to close the book on the issue," said Chief Executive Gilles BianRosa. "What prevents Comcast or other network operators from trying something else later?"

jim.puzzanghera@latimes.com Times staff writer Joseph Menn contributed to this report.