

Internet: UK ISPs blame BBC for bandwidth woes

UK ISPs are complaining that just one company's output is threatening their business.

UK ISPs, like those in much of the world, compete on price - balancing the amount and speed of bandwidth available to users for a fixed price. Some services sell a fixed maximum download limit per month and charge an additional fee for more use, and others sell a higher priced, unlimited use service.

That was, ISPs say, fine until Christmas Day 2007. That was the day that the BBC updated its on-demand catch up service. The new service is appallingly named ("iPlayer") but it's simple to use, slick - and contains TV.

Some of iPlayer's content is streamed, and some downloaded by P2P.

And that's causing a huge load on the demands placed on broadband ISPs.

P2P shares files by putting fragments of them on users' PCs. That means that the BBC is not actually the "server" for most programmes.

But it's the fact that the BBC is so popular that is really causing the problem. Despite creeping - in BBC World blatant - Americanisation, the BBC remains a beacon of broadcasting around the world. And that means that ever more people look to watch its output.

But there is a puzzle: why download instead of simply recording from the usual broadcast?

Aside from the maddening complexity of recording onto DVD, it's all to do with immediacy : if a person is sitting in a coffee shop And wants to watch the latest episode of Robin Hood, he can.

Some ISPs are now suggesting that the BBC site may be "shaped" - that is restricted. The BBC said that if that happened, those that did so may find themselves named and shamed by the BBC. That's not difficult: if you mess with a news organisation, expect to become part of the news.

The problem lies with the ISPs business model: they buy fixed quantities of bandwidth but sell unlimited use. They thought that no one would ever reach high levels of use - but did not factor in the demand for video and downloads, although they did take account of expected streaming demands.