

Peering around the corner of digital media distribution

Peer-to-peer delivery was a major theme at a London conference on digital distribution for film and television. While technology can provide low-cost global distribution, issues of rights, licensing and regulation remain as complex as ever.

Kevin Baughan, head of technology strategy at UK cable operator NTL:Telewest described an experiment to accelerate downloads using a peer-to-peer delivery system augmented with a server from CacheLogic.

Anecdotal evidence suggested that this provided greatly improved download times, but the trial involved only 200 users with a single server, so it was hardly representative of a real-world scenario.

The main objective was to provide more predictable delivery times for peer-to-peer downloads, which can be very variable. Kevin suggested one possible commercial model for quality of service based on a pizza delivery model: "If you don't get it within 20 minutes it's free".

Tom Carroux of BitTorrent, now a venture capital backed company based in San Francisco, said that the NTL trial using BitTorrent was significant in that it accepts P2P as a legitimate distribution medium.

He described various innovations that are being applied to a commercial software client, including provision for progressive downloads and drag-and-drop self-publishing tools.

BitTorrent has also licensed its software for use in a number of home storage devices that will offer audio-visual outputs, creating a new category of consumer media storage networking device.

Tom acknowledged that the BitTorrent brand, which has been associated with illicit distribution of copyright material, was "a double-edged sword," but with 70 million downloads, it gave them access to studio executives to discuss its use for legitimate distribution.

Robert Mayer of PeerApp was also very optimistic about peer-to-peer, arguing that existing content distribution networks, such as Akamai and Limelight are too expensive and simply cannot scale to meet rising demand.

Peer-to-peer is also capable of being used for live streaming, particularly in China where it is used for the illicit distribution of services. In Europe, Octoshape was a company that was mentioned several times, notably for streaming the *Eurovision Song Contest*.

David Wood, head of new media at the European Broadcasting Union, seemed impressed, saying that its promise had been demonstrated in their tests.