

That's entertainment!

Broadband has opened up a whole new world for entertainment writes
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Just a few years ago, broadband seemed like a distant dream for Irish users. Still stuck in the mire of dial-up, it seemed that every other country was racing ahead of us in getting high-speed internet access.

Since its launch, broadband has become an essential part of Irish life for many users, who use it not only to communicate with relatives and friends overseas, but also to provide entertainment. The take-up here has been slow, but with a growing number of consumers realising exactly what broadband can do, that number is climbing steadily higher. According to ComReg's latest data, there has been a 109 per cent increase in subscribers in the past year.

In a bid to boost that further, Eircom has been running a campaign urging people to "broadband your summer", educating users about what they can do with the technology.

"We're trying to make broadband more relevant to people's lives," says Debbie Byrne of Eircom. Broadband opens up a range of exciting uses to internet browsers, from digital music download and online films to web TV and cheaper phone calls - everything you need to turn your PC into a home entertainment device.

All of these applications require a high-speed line to access: with dial-up, the videos and music files would take hours to download, while other applications would find it difficult to function over slower lines. And that's all before you get to the astronomical phone bills for all the dial-up charges.

While the majority of BT's customers use broadband for research and general surfing, a large number of users are also viewing it as a way to access entertainment. From these users, some 60 per cent are downloading music regularly, explains Eimear Kennedy of BT Ireland.

Digital music has been around



Get Lost: fans of eclectic US TV series *Lost* can download episodes from Channel Four's website for a small fee

The 'wireless in a box' solution

The issue of broadband availability in Ireland is a contentious one, with a large number of areas still unable to get the high-speed internet access.

There has been much talk about Local Loop Unbundling and enabling exchanges for different providers, and the situation is gradually improving. However, that still does not solve the access problem for a large number of households.

Setting up as an ISP can be an expensive venture. Group broadband schemes have helped ease the access problems somewhat.

Motorola has teamed with Azotel and Hosting 365 to offer a lower cost alternative to users who want to set themselves up as a broadband provider. Using wireless technology, the initiative offers a "wireless in a box" solution for those who want to set up as broadband

providers.

The new offering is essentially a franchise service. Motorola provides the wireless broadband technology with its Canopy solution, while Hosting 365 supplies support services and Azotel supplies the core network and back office functions for operators. To deal with financing, Bank of Ireland has been brought on board, while E-Net, which is involved in managing the Government's Metropolitan Area Network, has also come on board.

The set-up costs are significantly lower than other solutions - about €5,000 to opt for the Azotel platform alone - and could lead to more Group Broadband Schemes being set up throughout the country. It also has a quicker set-up time than more traditional solutions, and could help the country meet the 400,000 broadband subscriber targets by year end.

for some time, but it was undoubtedly the iPod that brought it into the main stream. Since then, there has been a number of legal music download sites that have sprung up for Irish users, including Apple's own iTunes store, Eircom Net's Music Club and My CokeMusic.

Another new service, open to Sky Digital subscribers, is the ability to download movies over broadband. Subscribers of Sky Movies 1 and 2 can now down-

load the movies to their desktop through an application installed on their PC.

The latest news is that Apple is in talks with movie studios with a view to offering its users films to download to their computers through its iTunes store, although further details have yet to be announced. Also growing in popularity is web TV, and web radio. Fans of shows such as *Lost* can download episodes from Channel Four's website for a

small fee, while *Big Brother* fans can download clips from the show. Broadband opens up users to global radio stations, with many stations, including RTE and Today FM, broadcasting live through their websites.

The internet has also made it possible for people to set up their own personal homepages, keeping in contact with friends and family around the globe. One aspect of this that is becoming increasingly widespread is the blogging phenomenon. According to Kennedy, the personalised pages are attracting about one in five of BT's customers on a regular basis.

One social networking site, Bebo, has grown so popular with schoolchildren and college students that it has led some educational institutions to ban the service from its network.

However, the success of the website proves that younger users are increasingly relying on the internet to communicate with their peers.

Cutting costs is another benefit of broadband. Aside from ditching the dial-up charges for a monthly fee, users can take advantage of the technology to cut their phone bills. Voice over IP (VOIP) has become increasingly popular in recent months thanks to applications such as Skype. The applications allow free or cheaper calls using your PC, using a programme such as Skype, or through a provider such as Blueface.

Calls to mobiles and traditional landlines attract a fee - but the call charges can in many cases be significantly cheaper than traditional telecoms companies. The common perception is that once you've got broadband, you never go back.