

Measure your bandwidth use

March 5 2009, By Anne Krishnan

Q. With more Internet providers starting or threatening to start limiting and charging for bandwidth usage, it would be useful to have some idea of how much bandwidth I use per month. How can this be determined?

A. Several ISPs have threatened to place limits on monthly bandwidth, which measures the amount of data users transfer over the Internet. While Time Warner and AT&T are looking at pricing their services based on bandwidth used, Comcast's strategy is to slow down the connections of bandwidth hogs during peak hours.

This is mainly to curb the activity of people who download and upload lots of large files such as videos and music. If you mainly use the Internet to search the Web and check your e-mail, you don't have much cause for concern.

However, with more and more people watching TV shows online, videoconferencing with family and playing games with friends across the country or the world, using lots of bandwidth is getting easier every day.

As Cisco Systems put it in an Internet traffic forecast last June, "today's 'bandwidth hog' is tomorrow's average user."

Luckily, there are a number of tools available to help you monitor your bandwidth use. Two popular ones are BitMeter and SurplusMeter.

BitMeter II, a free application available for Windows only, keeps track of real-time usage and can be set to alert you when you've reached a

specified percentage of your bandwidth allotment.

SurplusMeter, a free program available for Mac OS X, keeps track of your bandwidth use and allows you to set a monthly limit (and pick the months to match your billing cycle). The program also calculates a daily bandwidth allowance that it reconfigures based on actual use as you go through the month.

Download them both at CNET's Download.com.

In my last column, I suggested a program that would help a Mac user capture still images from a DVD. Several readers wrote in with suggestions about how PC users could do the same.

"PC users do not need a program, as every Windows operating system since version 3.1 has had this capability," wrote Richard Miller of Cary, N.C. He instructs:

- Start by playing your DVD in full-screen mode.
- When you get to the image you want to copy, pause the DVD. On your keyboard, press the Alt and PrtSc (print screen) keys together. This puts the image on your screen onto your clipboard.
- Open the Paint program by going to the "Start" menu, "All Programs" and "Accessories." Hit Ctrl-V or select "Paste" from the "Edit" menu to create the image you selected.
- Next, save the image to your hard drive by selecting "File," then "Save As."

The default format is bitmap (.bmp), but you can select other formats, as well.

Once the file is saved, you can then open it in photo-editing software such as Photoshop or Picasa.

Depending on the software, you may be able to completely bypass the use of Paint and paste the image from the clipboard directly onto a new canvas, he said.

By the way, in Macs, you can create a screen shot by pressing command+shift+3, points out Gary Pearce of Cary. Control+command+shift+3 copies the image to your clipboard for pasting into a photo-editing program.

Finally, David A. Smith, a math professor emeritus at Duke University, suggests free software called Jing to capture images on a PC or a Mac.

After installing the software, just pause the DVD on the relevant picture, grab it with a click on the Jing icon and save it as a .png file.

The open source .png file type combines all the best features of .jpg and .gif files, Smith said. You can find Jing at jingproject.com.

(Think you can stump the geeks? Send your high-tech question to stumpthegeeks@newsobserver.com. Please include your name, address and daytime phone number. Individual replies are not given.)

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