Internet service providers not keeping up with user trends

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There's a revolution happening on the Internet -- though broadband providers have not seemed to notice.

Thanks to new gadgets, programs and Web services, consumers are sending, sharing and swapping more data than ever over the global network. Yet many are stuck with Internet connections that give them upload speeds much slower than download speeds.

What that means is that it takes a lot longer to send a movie or picture out to the Internet than it takes to download the same file. Uploading a video, a roll of pictures or a backup of key files on your hard drive can take hours, or even days.

I ran into this issue earlier this month when I sent some pictures to Kodak to get them printed for my dad for Father's Day. I uploaded 170 pictures, which was about 800 megabytes of data.

Admittedly, I have a relatively poky connection: EarthLink says my maximum download speed is 3 megabits per second, but I rarely get more than 2.2 megabits per second. Even at that rate, it would have taken me less than an hour to download that much data. But because I was uploading -- at a mere 384 kilobits per second maximum throughput -- it took me more than three hours.

I'm not the only one affected. Internet users as a whole are sending increasing amounts of data out on to the Net.

They are blogging, posting messages on Twitter, using Loopt to tell others where they are hanging out, or writing messages on friend's profile pages on Facebook. They're sharing videos and pictures on sites such as Flickr, YouTube or Facebook. And they're playing multiplayer games over the Internet such as "World of Warcraft" or via services such as Xbox Live.

Those on the cutting edge are doing even more. They're swapping videos or software -- sometimes illicitly -- through services such as BitTorrent. They're using gadgets such as the SlingPlayer, programs such as Simplify Media or services such as Apple's Mobile Me to remotely access videos, music or files from their home PCs or other devices. And they're backing up their home PCs to online storage sites.

And their ranks are growing. YouTube users upload 20 hours of video to the site every minute. That's up from six hours of video every minute just two years ago.

Meanwhile, Facebook users upload 850 million photos and 10 million videos to its site every month.

But broadband companies seem oblivious to this trend. If you look at the plans offered by the Bay Area's two main providers, Comcast and AT&T, it's all but impossible to find one in which the upload speed comes anywhere close to the download speed. To get an upload speed that's faster than a slow DSL download rate, you have to subscribe to one of the pricier plans, like Comcast's Extreme 50, which gives you a 10 megabit per second upload connect _ at a cost of $100 a month.

Comcast and AT&T officials say they are watching consumer Internet usage trends. They note that as their companies have ramped up download speeds, they've tended to increase upload speeds as well and will continue to do so. The download and upload speeds they offer are

simply a response to market demand, they say, claiming that the vast majority of their customers still download far more data than they upload.

"We're designing our products based on how we see consumers using them," John Britton, an AT&T spokesman, told me.

Over the course of a month, a week or even a day, it's undoubtedly true that consumers tend to download more data than they upload. But for a growing number of Internet users, there are times when they want to upload data.

When I was uploading my pictures, I was sending far more data than I was receiving. During that time, I couldn't have cared less how fast my download speed was. Indeed, I would have loved to have been able to allocate my download bandwidth to upload my pictures.

But there's no way for me to do that. In terms of Internet access providers, the Bay Area essentially has a duopoly. There are numerous small players such as EarthLink, but Comcast and AT&T dominate _ and duopolies tend to not have a good read on real market demand. People often buy one of their products because they don't have any other choices -- not because they meet their needs.

In other words, if the market were more competitive, a company might be able to build a successful business by catering to people who want faster upload speeds.

Just because consumers use their connections to download more data than they upload isn't proof that they don't want to upload more. The slow speeds could well discourage folks from doing more uploading. And they may well find a use for faster upload speeds -- if they had them.

I'd love to be able to back up the videos, songs and documents on my computer to a server on the Internet. But with my slow upload connection, that's not really an option because it would take days of uninterrupted uploading to back up any significant portion of my hard drive.

Here's hoping broadband providers join the revolution and make faster upload speeds an option soon.

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