

UK says illegal downloaders may lose Web access

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(AP) -- People who repeatedly download copyrighted films and music could have their Internet connection cut off under proposed laws to tackle illegal file-sharing unveiled by the British government on Tuesday.

The proposal to ban repeat offenders from the Internet, which drew criticism from both civil rights groups and internet service providers, toughens up the measures being considered in Britain to crack down on online piracy.

Treasury Minister Stephen Timms said that previous plans, which would only have restricted users' broadband speed, did not go far enough.

That potential punishment remains under the new plans, but is accompanied by the possibility of blocking offenders' access to download sites as well as banning them from the Internet altogether.

If the measures are passed when they come to Parliament in November, Britain would join France in defying a European Parliament ruling in May that prohibited European Union governments from cutting off a user's [Internet connection](#) without first going to a court of law. That ruling still needs a final stamp after negotiations with the European Council.

France, which passed its bill to cut off internet access for offenders in May, has already created what may be the first government agency to

track and punish online pirates. The earliest a British ban could be put into place is 2011.

The British proposals put the onus on internet service providers, which host file-swapping sites, to catch and take action against offenders.

The music industry has been criticized in the past for targeting individual Internet users in its legal war against piracy instead of the internet service providers. The internet providers have been harder to pursue legally because they have been able claim they have no knowledge of any piracy occurring on their networks.

The new government proposals are an attempt to change that, requiring providers to issue written warnings to subscribers whose IP address - the unique number assigned to every computer that connects to the Internet - has been spotted on an illegal download site.

Copyright holders would then be able to use a court order to access details of any warnings issued by the ISPs and could then begin a civil lawsuit against any suspected offender.

Internet provider TalkTalk said it would "strongly resist" government attempts to oblige internet service providers to act as Internet police. TalkTalk said disconnecting alleged offenders "will be futile given that it is relatively easy for determined filesharers to mask their identity or their activity to avoid detection."

The Open Rights Group, which protects civil liberties in the area of digital technology, said any suspension would "restrict people's fundamental right to freedom of expression."

But the British Phonographic Industry, which represents the recorded [music industry](#), said the move was "a step forward that should help the

legal digital market to grow for consumers."

The International Federation of the Phonographic Industry's last annual report in January showed that legitimate music sales did not come close to offsetting the billions of dollars being lost to music [piracy](#). An estimated 95 percent of music downloads are unauthorized.

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