

BEREC preliminary findings on traffic management practices in Europe show that blocking of VoIP and P2P traffic is common, other practices vary widely

On March 6th, BEREC has submitted to the Commission its preliminary findings on reported Internet traffic management practices, following a Europe-wide data collection exercise launched jointly with the Commission in December 2011.

Over 400 operators responded, as well as some consumer organisations, industry associations and a handful of private individuals. The picture emerging shows a very diverse range of commercial and/or technical practices being used by European operators in the different national markets.

BEREC is now in the process of validating, consolidating and categorising the data, and intends to publish its findings during the second quarter of this year. This European overview will also feed into other BEREC work streams on the subject of net neutrality, one report on competition issues and one set of guidelines on minimum quality of service requirements, both of which BEREC intends to publish for public consultation this summer.

Preliminary findings

The most frequently reported traffic management practices are the blocking and/or throttling of peer-to-peer (P2P) traffic, on both fixed and mobile networks, and the blocking of Voice over IP (VoIP) traffic (mostly on mobile networks, usually based on specific contract terms). When blocking/throttling is implemented in the network, it is typically done through deep packet inspection (DPI).

Beyond this, BEREC has found a very wide range of practices across Europe, and an equally wide range of implementation methods and policy justifications for them. About one quarter of respondents provide justifications for certain traffic management practices based on what could be described as “security and integrity” concerns (e.g. controlling “spam” traffic) – though some of these traffic management measures are best described as congestion management techniques. For instance, in relation to congestion management, some operators use an “application-agnostic” approach (e.g. active buffering), while others use “application-specific” techniques (typically in order to throttle specific traffic, such as video streaming). About one third of the fixed operators manage their networks in order to offer specialised services (for the provision of facilities-based applications, e.g. telephony or TV) alongside a (public and best efforts) Internet access service.

BEREC also found a wide variety of data caps and “fair use” practices - these were not the main focus of its investigation, since (with some exceptions) in general they do not imply differentiated treatment of traffic.

This is the first time European regulators have sought to identify emerging trends in traffic management practices and evidence of negative experiences from users and content and application providers resulting from such practices. BEREC is very pleased with the high level of responses received from the approximately 250 fixed and 150 mobile operators. This is a fast-moving and rapidly evolving area, not only from the point of view of the technology, but also of the business models and the consumer experience. Within these constraints, BEREC will attempt to define appropriate categories within which to consolidate the data, enabling it to continue to monitor the landscape going forward.