

ComputerWeekly – A Streaming Headache for IT Bosses

By Clive Longbottom, Service Director, Quocirca Ltd

The long summer of sport draws to a close, and corporate networks draw a breath of relief as multiple streams of video cease to take 90% of available bandwidth from the business. How was it for you? Did the voices from on high make the big statement – “stop all streaming media – now”? And what was your response?

The problem is that the use of streaming media is only going to increase as an issue. At the moment, for the majority of organisations, it's just a basic problem – if it's streaming, it needs to be stopped, as there's no corporate case for streaming media. Increasingly, corporates will find valid uses for streaming media – and that will be where the problems start, as we find that basic tools can be used for both “real” and non-allowed functions. So, what can you do to stop unwarranted usage of media streams on your network?

Well, surely it's easy – just block the ports at the firewall. What do you mean, the users use peer-to-peer clients with floating ports? OK – still no problem, there's a Plan B. Let's identify the video streams by packet inspection and kill those. Ah – now the company's new IP-based video conferencing system has stopped working. Being full of cunning plans, let's move to Plan C. Let's label the corporate video using multi-protocol labelling service (MPLS) at source, and then kill anything that doesn't have the correct label. What do you mean that the network doesn't support it - it's only your wide area network provider who can manage that? On to Plan D – let's just kill off the firewall until it's all over and concentrate on the CV for that other job....

It's even worse when rank gets in on the act as well - was the word from above more like “stop all this streaming media – but make sure I can still get it”? Even better –now we have to let the content through the firewall and then try and deal with it. If only there was something that can be done at an individual basis.

How about white-listing applications at users' desktops? Now we're getting somewhere. We're all used to black lists – stopping know things

from occurring. However, white lists only let known things occur – a slightly different approach. SecureWave's Sanctuary product allows you to lock individual's desktops down so that only registered, allowable applications can be run – that will stop anything like MediaPlayer from running, and will certainly kill anything that is a dodgy downloaded peer-to-peer application. The powers that be can still watch their summer of sport, as they can be registered as having the need for the requisite application. Everyone else finds that they haven't got the application, and even if they try to install it, it won't run. Trouble is when people need MediaPlayer for some corporate stuff like watching the CEO's latest guff on how downsizing is right for the company, while he/she/it takes another 50% bonus rise.

Overall, it looks like this is the old onion approach – you will need to look at the various layers of a system to ensure that you can stop the bad and allow the good.

However, one final plan – Plan E. How about a different approach – why not allow people to stream the media? Won't this kill the network? Not necessarily – using proxy servers and real-time caching can make it that instead of multiple streams of the same content clogging up the WAN and the main corporate backbone, single streams can be used to populate proxy caches closer to main points of usage. It still hits the network, but at least it's controllable.

If nothing else works, next time, just bung a TV in the corner, give the remote control to the senior person in the department and watch the arguments. In any case – if you're in the UK, make sure you have a licence.

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Quocirca is one of Europe's leading independent industry analyst firms. One of its biggest assets is the core team of highly experienced analysts drawn from both the corporate and the vendor communities. This team prides itself on maintaining a bigger picture view of what's going on in the IT and communications marketplaces. This allows all of Quocirca's activities to be carried out in the context of the real world and avoids distractions with fads, fashions and the nuts and bolts of specific technologies. Quocirca's focus has always been the point of intersection at which IT meets "the business".

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Quocirca's primary research involves the surveying of many thousands of technical and business end users each quarter, analyzing their perceptions of the possible impact of emerging, evolving and maturing technologies on their businesses.