

The Digital Economy Bill I wrote about recently has now become the Digital Economy Act and has the force of law – and yes, it could affect you.

It is a current hot topic in the IT world because of the power it puts into the hands of Ministers to interfere with the operation of the Internet and control of the Web contents.

To get it into law at the end of this Parliament it was rushed through

In the live debate there were 15 members in the chamber, mostly speaking against the Bill. Several admitted to a limited understanding of the contents. Yet miraculously hundreds of votes were cast at the division and the Bill was passed. It did not look like democracy in action and there have been many protests from IT users since.

Part of the Act is directed against the theft of copyright material. There is no doubt that a lot of music and software is being illegally downloaded and that the writers, singers and musicians are losing money as a result.

The law was designed not to catch an individual downloading the odd music file (illegal though that would be if was in copyright), but to tackle the commercial exploitation via the web over the Internet.

There are people who believe that if anything exists, they are entitled to have it for nothing. If they prevail then there will be no financial incentive to create and we will all be the poorer. The law is intended (among other things) to protect copyright theft. Fair enough, except that it will be difficult if not impossible to stop it.

The problem is that the offending service could be offering wares from a web site on the other side of the globe. Closing it down would simply cause it to set up instantly somewhere else. The cost of monitoring unimaginable amounts of internet traffic and policing the system will be far greater than the offenders' costs of a simple relocation.

A desperate search is on to find a market model that will reward creativity in the modern technological age. Certainly there are enough savvy people out there to get around any measures devised by legislators who are less than expert in the technology they are trying to combat.

In the meantime there are serious concerns about the way in which powers could be used by Ministers without further resort to Parliament. If your internet access point was misused by anyone, you could lose it. A service could be blocked if it was thought that it might be misused in the future.

The law of unintended consequences is unlikely to take a holiday in this case. We might all agree with the intent, but the way it is happening does nothing to inspire confidence.

To get the flavour of the argument you could read a few blogs such as http://technology.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/tech_and_web/article7093203.ece and <http://ipkitten.blogspot.com/2010/04/digital-economy-act-2010.html> that provided a picture of a more certain device for digital protection – a thimble!



I apologise for confusing the meeting topics. It is the next meeting, on Tuesday 11th May that will be a forum on organising and backing up files. Visitors and new members always welcome. For more information ring Howard on 029 20708439.
