

Never mind the poetry, it's football that will fill the pipes

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England's Number 1: Only Online

There is not much at stake when [England's footballers play Ukraine next week](#), but for Digital Britain, it is a crunch match. Under the Italian Capello England are already qualified for the World Cup in South Africa, but is our broadband infrastructure world class?

The collapse of satellite TV sports company Setanta means that this will be the first England international only available to [view online](#) (and in some selected cinemas).

This will test how good our broadband pipes are at delivering digital content (the 'poetry' in [Stephen Carter's odd phrase](#)). It has also revived the [debate](#) about public access to major national sports events. Here are the pitfalls awaiting:

1. Price. People don't like paying online, although iTunes is thriving and I know people who pay for unofficial sports streams. So is the charge of at least £4.99 going to put people off? An informal [BBC Poll](#) suggests 97% of people would NOT. Read [here](#) how many fans are put off or will find ways around it.
2. Power. A lot of people may well find that their broadband is not powerful, or consistent enough to stream the entire match smoothly and clearly.
3. Practicalities. I know the fact that I could never programme our DVD player shows that I am a techno-klutz, but I am not alone. How easy will it be for people to log in, pay and stream?
4. Culture. In pubs or with friends in the sitting room is still the most enjoyable way to watch football – do you really want to spend 90 minutes in front of your PC – or are you all going to gather around the laptop? It is arguable that it could heighten the experience as we connect to other people online watching the game.
5. Audience. Sports that have gone to satellite tend to get smaller audiences. They pay a premium price so the carrier doesn't mind. But is it a good idea to keep your product niche? The producers of this event don't want more than one million subscribers because it will crash their servers.

Overall, I think it will work but I don't think it will herald an immediate shift from TV to Internet. This game is an oddity. But it will be closely watched, not just for the audience figures but what it tells us about the public appetite and aptitude for more online only sport.

As for the public service debate? Yes, it would be nice if all England games were on terrestrial TV for free. But I am not sure that a relatively meaningless game like this can really claim that kind of public service status.

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