



If this was 3pm on Saturday, the Premier League would be very cross. Good job it isn't

# "Beeeeeeeeer!"

...and football at 3pm on Saturday. Sounds perfect, but watching foreign broadcasts in pubs is illegal, says the Premier League

It's 3pm on a Saturday afternoon and a couple of hundred people are crammed into a darkened pub, shutters drawn, doors locked. Every so often there's a knock on the door, and a cautious doorman hurries another punter inside. It's like prohibition, but the commodity on offer isn't moonshine. It's live Premiership football – 3pm games transmitted by foreign broadcasters, picked up by oversized satellite dishes, and shown on big screens in pubs across the land.

Meanwhile, thousands of fans are watching the same match in the comfort of their own homes, their noses pressed against computer screens as the football is 'streamed' live over the internet. They are part of an online community swapping secret links and tips for the latest football streaming websites and software.

Three o'clock Saturday matches aren't shown on Sky, so watching them in pubs or via the internet seems like a fair proposition. But why the caution and secrecy?

"These broadcasts are in breach of copyright and are illegal," says the FA Premier League's Dan Johnson, adding that the only legal way to watch a 3pm Saturday game is to pay for a ticket. The Premier League claims football attendances fall when matches are shown on TV, hence the instigation of a "closed period" that prohibits the screening of Premiership matches in England and Scotland between 2.45pm and 5.15pm on Saturday afternoons.

"We're not trying to be bloody-minded or greedy," says Johnson. "The closed period is to protect attendances across the whole football pyramid. For example, if a Manchester United game is shown live on TV, that affects attendances at a club like Rochdale."

However, the closed period doesn't apply outside of the UK, where channels such as Egypt's ART Sport and Greece's Supersport broadcast up to five Premiership matches every Saturday. The problem for the Premier League is that these channels can be picked up in the UK using widely-available satellite systems. The Premier League says all foreign football broadcasts are illegal in the UK; the suppliers of these systems to pubs and homes claim they are doing nothing wrong.

"There is no law against it," says Joe Ibrahim of Digital Sales in Lancashire. Both Digital Sales and fellow supplier Pub Football offer information apparently supporting the legality of the broadcasts on their websites ([www.digitalsales.co.uk](http://www.digitalsales.co.uk) and [www.pubfootball.co.uk](http://www.pubfootball.co.uk)). But the Premier League accuses the satellite suppliers of misleading their customers. "There is no grey area," says Johnson. "They are trying to make it look like it's legal when it's not."

Just say no, kids. It's wrong, wrong, wrong!



Pub licensees, meanwhile, face uncertainty and possible legal action. The Premier League says there have been over 100 successful prosecutions where licensees have been fined heavily, but there have also been several high profile cases in which licensees have won court victories after the prosecution failed to prove dishonesty or breach of copyright. Pub-goers who watch these broadcasts, however, seem safe from legal action. "We're more concerned with the suppliers than the fans," says Johnson.

Another concern for the Premier League is the proliferation of foreign football broadcasts streamed over the internet that can be viewed

on any broadband-enabled PC. Scores of websites offer links to football streams for a subscription fee of a few pounds per season. Such sites claim they don't stream football, merely offer links to sites that do, but that seems to make little difference. In June the website [www.sportingstreams.com](http://www.sportingstreams.com) was shut down and the three people behind it were ordered to pay £176,000 in costs by the High Courts.

"Any site involved with unauthorised streams is acting illegally," says Christopher Stokes of NetResult, an agency that acts for the Premier League and UEFA in protecting against online rights thefts. In 2005, NetResult shut down one website that helped stream football to 10,000 subscribers. The site was owned by Craig Harris of Sunderland, who earned up to £50,000 a year from the venture.

Much harder to shut down is the streaming software that lets users download foreign football broadcasts direct to their PC. The software utilises the same 'peer-to-peer' technology that allows the sharing of music files – and it's just as contentious. Basically, the software turns users' PCs into mini-TVs capable of receiving various foreign channels. Users then check the web to see which channel is showing which match – global TV listings are available on the official Premier League website – and tune in to watch.

But the service provided by the software is limited. Even with a fast broadband connection the picture quality isn't great and the viewing window little bigger than a cigarette packet. Due to demand, most games are "buffered", which means the 'live' action can be delayed by around five minutes. So you're likely to suffer eyestrain and you'll be the last to know if your side scores.

Also, the streaming software isn't very easy to set up, particularly as the most popular stream player, PPLive, has a Chinese interface and needs to be trickily configured before use.

Although in principle such software is legal, using it to stream copyrighted material is not. Those broadcasting the streams could face prosecution, but what about those watching them? The Premier League seem to have no intention of prosecuting fans at present, though they'd be within their rights to do so. "Anyone watching illegal streams is leaving themselves open to prosecution," says NetResult's Christopher Stokes. You have been warned.