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Swiss TV to pioneer live Olympic Internet broadcasts

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BY PETER CAPELLA, Agence France-Presse

GENEVA, Switzerland (AFP) - Swiss television will set up a special Web site with live broadcasts from the 2002 Olympics, marking the first time an international sporting federation has granted full broadcasting rights on the Internet, a TV official said Thursday.

The technology will offer the same picture quality as home video tape (VHS), as well as range of interactive features allowing a limited number of users to immediately consult background information, compare competitors, or watch several Olympic events on demand, Philippe Mottaz of Television Suisse Romande (TSR) told AFP.

But the venture in Salt Lake City is largely a pilot project and the Web site will only be available through advanced high-capacity digital lines, limited to subscribers of one service provider, Bluewin, in some Swiss cities, Basel, Geneva and Zurich.

Mottaz said current technology would in any case limit the number of simultaneous viewers to 2000, but he hoped it would pave the way for a new approach to televising major sporting events in the future.

"It's the first time - there are negotiations in other sports, baseball, FIFA with football discussing it, I think it's a sign of what's coming in the future, including the problems that it involves, because it's huge," he added.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) based in Lausanne said it granted television-type rights for live webcast largely because the experimental project will be limited to Switzerland, and to see how it works.

Sporting federations have been wary of allowing live broadcasts over the Internet because their global scope could upset the traditional regional or national approach to the multi-billion dollar marketing of rights to televise events.

"The IOC has always taken the position that if we can grant new media rights on a territorially-restricted basis, then we're willing to explore that with our rights holders," David Aikman of the IOC said.

Aikman said the IOC was prepared to study new ways of marketing television coverage.

"We are going to begin renegotiating our television agreements in the next year or two so we're already starting to think about what that new environment might look like," he added.

The IOC said it had to respect broadcasters' concerns and effectively ban live Internet coverage, but it had always wanted to ensure the largest possible audience.

"For us initially looking at the Internet, we embrace that as a means of reaching more people, the more that can get our message or see our event the better," Aikman said.

"But you've got to put that in a realistic financial business model and today the Olympic Games couldn't survive without the revenue that comes from the sale of broadcast rights."

January 24, 2002

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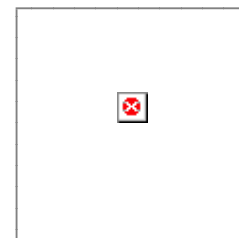
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TSR, part of Swiss public broadcasting, is not paying additional fees to the IOC for the Internet transmission because it is regarded as experimental.

Aikman said only a small proportion of the 1500 hours transmitted from the Winter Olympics ended up on viewers' television screens even with "saturation coverage".

"We're trying to get some real market intelligence on what people are interested in watching, how we complement the broadcast," he added.

The Swiss service will include the ability to watch several events at once, call up background information available to commentators while viewing and independently use special on-screen graphics to track and compare competitors.

"There will obviously be things that won't be shown on television," Mottaz said.

"The interest for us is that it sets the stage for a new way of viewing, in this case the Olympics, but more widely it could be other sports meetings or other events, because at the end of the day the idea is to offer the choice, interactivity, ability to personalize, and video on demand."

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