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INFO TECH

Pirate-Proofing Hollywood

Video fingerprinting could remove a lot of the guesswork for moviemakers

Right now, tinseltown is all agog over Johnny Depp's latest, *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End*. But a different piracy saga may have a more lasting impact on the industry. By the end of May, the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) will report to its member studios the results of tests of a dozen computerized video-fingerprinting systems. This technology is designed to identify pirated movies wherever they exist on the Internet, automating a job that is now done by staffers who look for infringing clips with their own eyes.

Fingerprinting systems could be a crucial link in the battle to control video content on the Net. Most studios and TV networks have come to terms with the idea that they need to make shows available on the Net. However, tensions over whether they get paid for clips recently led Viacom ([VIA](#)) to slap Google Inc.'s ([GOOG](#)) video site YouTube with a \$1 billion copyright-infringement lawsuit. The MPAA is expected to report that the technology, after years of testing, is now ready for prime time. Says MPAA Vice-President Dean Garfield: "This technology works."

But that doesn't guarantee video Web sites will agree to deploy it. Many of the Web giants, including MySpace.com (owned by media giant News Corp. [NWS](#)), Microsoft ([MSFT](#)), and Yahoo!, ([YHOO](#)) have said they plan to do so. But others--particularly YouTube--are moving more slowly, say sources in the industry. One reason is it's still not clear who will pay for video search. The systems must be deployed both by the studios, which create a database of film "fingerprints" or markers, and by the video sites, which run user-uploaded videos through software to find matches.

TIPS FOR CLIPS

The hunt for viable video-fingerprinting technology is akin to an episode of *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*. In recent years, many video sites have done deals with Audible Magic Corp. in hopes of using its music-search technology to spot pirated films and TV shows by analyzing sound tracks. But what if they've been dubbed into Chinese or Italian? Also, hackers have plenty of ways to disguise pirated video. To throw off studio screeners, they may change the name of a clip or start with a few seconds of a home movie. Many older fingerprinting technologies can be duped by tilting the image slightly so that the bits are harder to recognize.

But screening companies are making progress. Two-year-old Vobile Inc. in Santa Clara, Calif., did well in the MPAA tests, with technology that extracts what it calls "video DNA" from a movie. Executives won't say what that DNA is but say it lets them spot even a few seconds of a fingerprinted film. In a demonstration, CEO Yangbin Wang shows how the software identified a fuzzy scene of Walt Disney Co.'s ([DIS](#)) *The Jungle Book* shot at an angle with a camcorder.

Instead of just using the fingerprinting technology to prevent access to pirated material, the film studios say they want to strike deals that would squeeze dollars out of clips. They suggest someone who tries to download a pirated episode of a hot show like *Lost* could be asked to pay \$2.99. Or a site might let viewers watch the car-chase scene in *Bullitt* free of charge, so long as

they put up with a Chrysler ([DCX](#)) ad. Ad revenues would be shared by the site and the copyright- holding studio.

Google has said it is working on its own video-fingerprinting technology but hasn't announced a timetable for deployment. In the meantime, YouTube has limited technology to keep offending clips from popping back up once they've been identified. And its 10-minute limit on clips prevents the loading of whole shows. "We're always working on whatever we can think of to help copyright holders protect their rights," says Glenn Brown, a Google lawyer.

But studio executives and suppliers of fingerprinting systems complain that the search giant is singularly resistant to negotiations. Google has a partnership with Audible Magic, but industry insiders say that company's technology for fingerprinting music is not yet up to the task of identifying video.

Or, as some industry officials suggest, the hurdle may not be technological at all. Google may not have decided yet how much of the online box office it wants to share with Hollywood.

By Peter Burrows

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