

The Tech Beat

A Surprise Victory for the Broadcasters in the Anti-Piracy Olympics

Posted by: Peter Burrows on September 12

So maybe online video piracy isn't as inevitable on the Internet as broadcasters fear it is.

That's the claim coming from NBC Universal, given the success of its anti-piracy efforts during the Beijing Olympics. NBCU general counsel Rick Cotton says that less than 1% of all Olympic video viewed online in the US during the games was unauthorized. "It went exceedingly well. It was a great, great success," says Cotton. Don't believe him? Go search on "Olympics" in YouTube. You'll see "Sumo Olympics" and other [funny fare](#) from past games, but little in the way of raw Olympics footage. The system wasn't totally foolproof, but it took some [real doing](#) to see content NBC didn't want you to see.



No doubt, a main reason was the sheer amount of content NBC made available on its site, NBCOlympics.com, where some 53 million unique visitors watched 75 million streams, taking a combined ten million hours to do it. With so much available, folks had little reason to look elsewhere for hijacked clips.

But Cotton also credits so-called content recognition technology.

As we reported a few months back, NBC employed [a two-layer technology strategy](#) to protect its broadcast rights. First, it convinced all of the top video sites to quickly add digital fingerprints of its content into their content recognition systems—typically within a few minutes of the live event. This enabled the sites to spot pirated clips whenever someone tried to upload them. This was responsible for preventing 80% of the attempted piracy, NBCU believes.

Also, NBCU used a Web crawling technology from Vobile Inc. to scan for clips that did make it on the Web. It developed processes to automatically generate takedown notices, which were typically sent in less than an hour. NBCU sent out 25,000 takedown notices during the games, the vast majority during the first few days of the games. After that, most sites had learned that NBCU was in fact watching—so they gave up trying, says Cotton: "This is a demonstration that with the appropriate cooperation [with video sites], respect for copyrights can be woven into the fabric of the Internet."

Besides providing a test case for the underlying technology, NBCU's experience was a milestone in terms of how to operationalize that technology. In the past few years, studios have taken months to create digital fingerprints of their movies and TV shows, and video sites took more time to ingest them into their systems. The fact that NBCU and the sites were able to compress the process into minutes or hours—a requirement to protect a live event—is impressive.

By the way, Cotton says the most impressive automation occurred with YouTube. While the online video giant has had a reputation with many broadcasters for not doing enough to protect copyrighted content (not to mention a \$1 billion lawsuit from Viacom), Cotton says YouTube worked closely with NBCU. Also, he says YouTube's homegrown [content recognition system](#) worked effectively. This should come as a surprise to many of my sources, who were convinced that Google was doing [as little as possible](#) to perfect a technology whose reason for being is to keep content *off* its site. "The most extensive automation we had was with YouTube. Their system worked very well," says Cotton. It will be interesting to see how this will [impact the case with Viacom](#). If YouTube can protect NBCU's Olympics coverage, it should be able to protect Viacom-owned Daily Show and Colbert Report clips as well.

Vobile CEO Yangbin Wang says CCTV, the state-owned broadcaster that held the Olympic rights in China, also successfully batted down the hatches against the hordes of online pirates in that country. While piracy occurred, only 10% of the unauthorized clips were viewed in China itself. He says CCTV used Vobile's technology to track the top 200 video sites in China. When piracy was spotted, regulators at the National Copyright Administration of China were quickly notified. They then handed down not only take-down notices, but a \$5000 fine for each instance of non-authorized viewing.

Longer-term, Cotton says the most important lesson is that technology can in fact be used to change consumers' behavior, if deployed effectively. "For an entire generation, we've made illegal file sharing so easy that it seems like it can't be wrong. But as soon as people saw that their attempts to get [pirated] Olympic content were blocked or that the content was quickly taken down, they quickly internalized the rules of the road."

Of course, it's one thing to spend years planning an approach to protecting one event over a fairly short time-frame, like the Olympics. It will take a long time to weave anti-piracy technology into the fabric of the Web, as he says. But I'd bet that the Beijing Olympics will go down as a major milestone, in making broadcasters feel more confident about distributing their video over the Web.

ABOUT

BusinessWeek writers Peter Burrows, Cliff Edwards, Steve Hamm, Rob Hof, Olga Kharif, Steve Wildstrom, Catherine Holahan, and Spencer Ante dig behind the headlines to analyze what's really happening throughout the world of technology. One of the first mainstream media tech blogs, Tech Beat covers everything from tech bellwethers like Apple, Google, and Intel and emerging new leaders such as Facebook to new technologies, trends, and controversies.

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Rich Pearson

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This is indeed a milestone and should help convince rightsholders to distribute their quality content across the Web.

We are fast-approaching the next stage in which rightsholders can use content identification technology to place ads on appropriate copies while taking down others - essentially program the web to meet their objectives.