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How to stop the Web's live sports pirates

By Mark Milian, CNN

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Some tech-savvy folks have found ways to broadcast a cable TV feed onto the Web. Sports leagues aim to stop them.

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Unauthorized video streams of sports content have posed a problem for leagues

Some of the major streaming sites are empowering the leagues with tools

Streaming sites are careful not to overstep their legal boundaries, however

(CNN) -- Log onto popular video streaming websites on a Sunday during football season and you can usually find several channels showing decent-quality live feeds of the games.

This has kicked off a frenzied game of Whack-A-Mole for sports leagues bent on eliminating the pirated video feeds.

These rogue video streams could ramp up considerably in the next week during the World Series -- especially since New York area customers of Cablevision Systems don't have a way to watch those games at home because of an ongoing quarrel between that company and News Corp's Fox.

Fox alleged that Cablevision support representatives were referring customers to websites that were illegally broadcasting baseball games, according to a report in the [New York Daily News](#). Cablevision has since offered its subscribers free access to the legal [MLB.com](#). A spokesman for Major League Baseball didn't return requests for comment.

A number of websites within the internet's sort-of black market are dedicated to sports piracy. Not surprisingly, they aren't playing ball with the leagues.

But the more visible video streaming services are providing sports and Hollywood producers with the weapons they need.

Vobile's Content Identification Platform is a popular copyright-protection service in use by many popular video sites, including Ustream and Justin.tv.

It uses a proprietary technology called VideoDNA, which "fingerprints"



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frames in a stream in order to identify whether someone has uploaded copyrighted materials.

YouTube developed something similar called Content ID. When the system finds a match from a user-submitted clip, it alerts the copyright owners and gives them the option of removing or selling ads on it. In the acidic Viacom-Google lawsuit, the entertainment company applauded YouTube's eventual filtering efforts, it said in a statement.

Unlike Content ID, Vobile's system is being employed to process and identify video on the fly. Illegal streams can get pulled down after just a couple of minutes, said Ustream President Brad Hunstable. Ustream is helping to develop software that could minimize that time to 30 seconds or less, he said.

During the last football season, the National Football League removed more than 2,800 unauthorized streams, NFL spokesman Dan Masonson wrote in an e-mail to CNN.

In addition to staffing folks to utilize the tools provided by the video sites, the NFL has held meetings demanding Web companies develop new tools to deal with copyright infringement, Masonson said.

"The NFL has committed significant resources to combat the proliferation of unauthorized live streams of NFL games," he wrote. "The scope and breadth of piracy of live sports events dictates that the NFL, like other sports organizations, coordinates a multidimensional attack on online piracy."

With the proliferation of live online video last year, Ustream saw an alarming uptick in piracy in 2009, Hunstable said. That's when more tech-savvy people found a way to connect their cable television to a computer in order to pipe quality live video onto the Web.

"We're being incredibly aggressive here," he said of fighting piracy. "We ingest more bits and bytes per second than any website in the world."

Ustream has relationships with the MLB, NFL, Ultimate Fighting Championship and other leagues, Hunstable.

Justin.tv also has "relationships with most of them," said Joseph Wecker, who heads up the money-making efforts for the company. The site processes 36 hours of video per minute, Wecker said. During some major sporting events, Justin.tv finds itself whacking hundreds of streams, he said.

"There were some jokers trying to stream the World Cup," Wecker said. "Some" is an understatement, because that monthlong event was among the busiest times for anti-piracy efforts.

Another phenomenon around the popularity of pirated sports streams involves people who create what's called "spam channels."

These draw viewers with a static image of, say, the Titans game on Sunday. These images trick people with promises of an actual live feed if they click a link. It's usually a way to bait people into clicking ads or promoting a website.

Justin.tv is putting efforts into stopping these. Meanwhile, some leagues have actually adopted this strategy into their anti-piracy efforts, essentially polluting the pool of videos.

Wecker said his company is careful about how cavalier it gets with shutting down streams it presumes are hosting illegal content. The Digital Millennium Copyright Act protects websites that host user-generated content, declaring those companies not liable for infringements.

"Under the DMCA, we're in safe harbor," Wecker said. "The moment we start trying to decide what's OK and what's not, then we lose safe harbor."

But not doing enough to thwart pirated streams can also hurt a video provider, Ustream's Hunstable said. So it's about striking a balance.

"If you don't take copyright seriously, a lot of these companies won't work with you," he said.

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Maekju80



• Magicland is right. Streaming

a free broadcast with the ads is NOT piracy. I'd think the sports leagues would be thrilled about this as their product (with the paid advertising) reaches a wider audience. I'm in the military stationed in Korea and without the streaming, I'd never see any NFL, MLB, NB... [more](#)

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• Guest

People pirate to get what they can't obtain due to restrictions or cost. Remove or lessen those restrictions and/or costs and people pirate less. Adding more restrictions and costs will just cause more people to pirate. The consumer likes "free" or "cheap" and "easy" and will "always" go to the prod... [more](#)

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• Fendergat

The rules and regulations for TV broadcasts are old and outdated. The major companies have seen what happens to revenue, ala the music industry, and their scared. The problem is that what they do is wrong and the consumer has other options that they didn't figure. My cable provider charges an astron... [more](#)

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• magicland

How is it piracy to stream content which is broadcast for free? They're not removing the ads, the ads pay for the content, everybody's happy, except for these anal idiots who insist on controlling distribution.

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• GoofyGopher

Besides what Alloro stated....if you already are getting the originating broadcast, why would you go to a streaming one? Well, you wouldn't so its circumvented by pirates who profit from your inability. There may be some true altruists out there but not likely.

HG

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• alloro

They still own the content and as I'm sure everyone has heard at one time or another, there is always an announcement in the game about needing permission to rebroadcast the content because it's copyrighted. As far as the commercials go, different commercials get shown in different market areas. An ... [more](#)

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• *Skwisgaar*

If you are a Bronco fan living in Wisconsin, what the hell are you supposed to do? Not support the team anymore because you can't watch their games? Is that what the NFL wants us to do? I certainly am not going to sign up for Direct TV and pay an additional \$300 bucks a year for the Sunday Ticket... [more](#)

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• *noladude*

Maybe i would get cable if I didn't have to pay 100 dollars a month for the 4 cable channels I actually want to watch. I'd be happy to give ESPN, AMC, F/X, and HBO some cash to watch their stuff.

I don't need 250 channels.

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• *boredin602*

So someone lives in Los Angeles and wants to watch the Cubs play on Saturday. They can't log in and watch MLB.TV because FOX is airing the game in the Chicago area and they issue a NATIONWIDE blackout and THAT is why people stream.

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• *MonicaPell*

Here's a good one for watching sport and other tv, LiveTVworldwide [dot com]

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• *crazyvic*

I like to watch Justin Tv and somehow I watched the Giants-Texas game yesterday 'without any trouble.' See, business man forgot that the Internet was created to 'watch free' events and things happening 'right now' around the world. Even the 'Internet charges' are outrageous, having to paid fees for... [more](#)

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• *KrazyKaza*

I don't have a problem admitting that I watch illegal streams every weekend. I'm from Seattle and currently going to school in Colorado and there is no other way to watch my Seahawks play every week. Unlike every other sport, the NFL doesn't offer any way of playing to watch the games online. Thats ... [more](#)

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• *rcj22001*

Living in Metro Detroit allow me to say this; It's the worst economy we're likely to see in our lifetimes. Michigan got hit very hard by this depression, and for the past decade have had the worst team in football. Turn down the billion dollar machine a notch and let us watch some football, or black... [more](#)

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• *ofacekillah*

Why would I want to stop sports pirates? How else am I going to stay a fan and watch the Raiders play? I live in the Northwest and they do not play the games unless I pay the extra cash for the sports package. Silver and Black till I die!

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• *BrianOuellet*

Keep the feeds going - They can't stop all of them.

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• *Robert88*

You know a lot of people forget that live streaming has commercials on it just like regular TV. All that live streaming does is increase viewership which is good really. The more people who watch your game the more you can charge companies to show commercials in that time. The NFL should be doing... [more](#)

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• *slozomby*

they charge \$70 for you to LISTEN to 1 seasons worth of games. look at your cable/dish providers nfl gameday package. hundreds of dollars per season.

thats what they are trying to protect. the ability to overcharge.

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BrianOuellet

many streams block out the commercials and replace them with something worth watching during the break.
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jaredhp

i am currently being black out here from NFL and MLB thanks to newscorp cablevision dispute. But let me tell you, i've been able to keep up on whats going on thanks to these illegal feeds. Who ever is doing these feeds, your doing a good service. As long as I have these feeds I don't need fox on tv
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Phoobaria

You just gave the reason why this stupid black-out rule is still being allowed to be enforced by the networks. They are realizing that they are being irrelevant to the process of providing programming. Even funnier...they start these pissing contests on wanting more money and more people figures it ... [more](#)
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jaredhp

blacked i ment
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Veovis

I don't get what's so bad about streaming cable onto the internet. The viewers still have to watch the commercials. And it's not like you're bypassing fees - CBS and Fox are basic cable.
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jimvsmij

If the NFL wants to stop piracy they need to either stop the very unpopular black outs or lower the price of football tickets by a lot. If you keep games from the fans who cannot afford pricey game tickets you are forcing them into piracy because not watching the game is not an option. Sooner or la... [more](#)
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paddyk00

All it does turn people off to their home teams all together.. Is there even any data to support that blacking out the games makes more people go? I live in SD and I love the Chargers but I can't afford to pay \$100 per ticket plus \$30 to park and \$8 a beer every Sunday just to see them play, especia... [more](#)
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Guest

What about international viewers? Work out deals with international TV networks, and we'll stop trying to stream games. It's not like we were going to contribute to any sort of revenue anyway.
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