

In awards season, movie leakers are 'Enemy Within'

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In this Jan. 13, 2011 file photo, British actor Colin Firth, star of "The King's Speech," points back to the Pig 'N' Whistle Pub as he is interviewed during dedication ceremonies for his new star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in Los Angeles. Every year around now, tens of thousands of DVDs of movies still shown in theaters are sent by movie studios to Oscar, Golden Globe and other awards voters. Every year, some of these discs are copied, and the movies end up being shared online, where they can cut into movie-ticket and DVD sales.(AP Photo/Reed Saxon, file)

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Globe and other awards voters.

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This time, studios are taking a new approach to prevent this kind of piracy, and technology is playing a big part.

Ahead of Sunday's Screen Actors Guild awards, Fox Searchlight this month became the first studio to have nearly 100,000 SAG voters view new movies such as "Black Swan" through a free download from Apple Inc.'s iTunes store. Paramount Pictures, Focus Features and other studios did the same later with movies such as "The Fighter" and "The Kids Are All Right."

In all cases, downloads are set to expire 24 hours after being viewed and are not available to the public.

As an anti-piracy tool, virtual screenings are cheaper and simpler than past efforts. For one thing, they remove the risk of discs going missing or being stolen. In cases where discs get pirated, the actual uploading is typically done by someone several steps removed from the recipient, often without that person's knowledge, according to studio executives and [law enforcement officials](#).

But digital screeners won't necessarily be a savior either. People determined to break the law will find a way, even if it comes down to recording a digital movie by pointing a standard video camera at the computer screen.

"Copying a stream is even easier than duplicating a DVD," Ernesto Van Der Sar, the founder of piracy news site TorrentFreak, said in an e-mail interview. "Moving to streaming might get the leak rate down but I can

also see scenarios where it will lead to more leaks."

Nonetheless, studios believe they must try new approaches to combat piracy.

The [Motion Picture Association of America](#) estimates that \$25 billion globally is lost to it every year, and it is partly responsible for U.S. DVD sales falling from a peak in 2006 at \$20.2 billion to about \$14 billion in 2010.

Although the industry group says most of the damage comes from handheld video camera recordings in theaters around the world, awards screeners are still a problem.

In the past, studios went as far as sending voters specialized players equipped with stronger copy protections than regular DVDs, but that system was abandoned years ago as being too troublesome.

So most studios continue to send discs to voters by mail - as many as 20,000 per movie. And the risk of leaks remains.

Oscar screeners sent out in late 2008 were the source of online bootlegs of "Slumdog Millionaire," "Australia," and "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button." Investigators followed the trail of unique disc identifiers called watermarks and convicted two men of felony copyright infringement.

In October, a screener of Summit Entertainment's "Red" was copied and posted online a day before the movie hit theaters. Investigators traced the leak to a copy sent to the show "LIVE! With Regis & Kelly," the second time in four months the show was responsible for a leak of a movie that was in theaters.

The Walt Disney Co., which produces the "Regis" show, has since tightened procedures, and now only a few key employees can receive screeners under tight restrictions.

The penalty for uploading movies to websites can reach up to three years in prison and a fine for first-time offenders, but the penalties get stiffer for repeat offenders or those with a profit motive.

The Justice Department convicted 207 people for intellectual property theft crimes in fiscal 2010, which ended Sept. 30, down from 287 in 2007. Cases involving awards screeners amount to "a handful every year," according to Assistant U.S. Attorney Wesley Hsu in Los Angeles.

Kaye Cooper-Mead, an executive vice president at Summit Entertainment, aims to instill a sense of caution among recipients of awards screeners so they don't let the discs get pirated by others. They need to understand "how many millions of dollars that one DVD is worth," she said.

Studios are further along in weaning other reviewers off discs. Warner Bros. and Sony Pictures are having hoteliers, retailers and airline and cruise ship clients watch movies on secure websites before they make a decision to license the movies for guests or carry them in stores.

Sony Pictures' chief technology officer, Mitch Singer, said the studio would eliminate physical screeners for retail and hospitality clients within a year.

But it may be some time before all awards shows go digital. Prestige and profits are attached to an awards win, especially for movies still in theaters. Some studios would rather send out DVDs and risk a leak than annoy voters by making them watch on a computer or mobile device.

"I don't know how thrilled filmmakers would be to have their films seen on a laptop instead of a flat-screen TV," said David Kaplan, a senior vice president of anti-piracy at Warner Bros., whose movie "Inception" is up for an Oscar for best picture.

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