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## Studios Begin Hunt Over Pirated Movies

By MERISSA MARR and SARAH MCBRIDE  
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Hollywood is grappling with a new wave of piracy hitting this summer's major movie releases before they arrive in theaters.

Walt Disney Co. swung into action this week after a pirated version of its big-budget release "Ratatouille" started changing hands online 10 days before release. The animated tale of a rat's ambitions to be a chef is one of three high-profile movies that have already appeared in bootleg versions online this month.

Weinstein Co. has sent private investigators out to hunt for the culprit who leaked its coming Michael Moore documentary "SiCKO," after it appeared online last week. And director Eli Roth recently blamed a weak opening of his horror sequel "Hostel: Part II" on the prerelease availability of pirated copies online.


While not unprecedented, the availability of these movies online may suggest that the studios are still losing some significant battles in their war on piracy. After a surge in piracy a few years ago, including leaks of movies like "Hulk" weeks before its theatrical release in 2003, the studios seemed to successfully crack down, setting up metal detectors at prerelease screenings, cutting back on screener DVDs, and instituting tough security procedures at production labs.

Now, as the studios desperately try to build buzz for their movies in one of the most crowded summers ever, they may have opened themselves up to a

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Walt Disney Co./Everett Collection

A pirated version of 'Ratatouille' was trading hands online before the film's release.

greater risk of prerelease piracy with tactics such as holding numerous prescreenings of their movies. Technology developments are also making it easier to share files and pirates are also craftier about working around efforts to block them,

piracy experts say.

Disney, for instance, held more than 800 "sneak preview" screenings of "Ratatouille" last weekend in an effort to build word-of-mouth momentum in the run-up to its release; security experts say the online bootleg was likely off the screen with a camcorder. The company said yesterday it was aware of the availability of the movie online but said it would open as planned on June 29.

A Disney spokeswoman declined to comment on what action it is taking, saying only: "We take reports of suspected infringement very seriously."

Randy Saaf, chief executive of online-security firm MediaDefender, says "Ratatouille" is the biggest movie to leak in a couple of years and shows how even the deepest-pocketed studios are still vulnerable. "The bigger the movie is, the more hungry people are to steal it," he says.

Weinstein Co. has also been rampantly screening "SiCKO," its documentary about the health care system, ahead of its June 29 nationwide release. The copies that turned up online were perfect versions of the movie, suggesting they weren't recorded with a camcorder during a screening and must have been copied from a master version.

Hiring online-security companies like Artist Direct Inc.'s MediaDefender and Macrovision has become standard. The security firms take steps like flooding the Internet with fake movies.

Pirates often toy with the security companies by creating online rumors that copies of a movie are available when they aren't. Such rumors caused a scare at Universal Pictures over the forthcoming movie "Evan Almighty." A similar scare happened over "Transformers," which was scheduled for release early in July. In that case, tracking firms couldn't find the movie online and instead focused on the date of the false alarm: April 1.

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