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Getting the Word on Intellectual Theft From the Top

Attorney General Warns Students Of Consequences

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Many of them had heard the lectures from authority figures before: Don't illegally download songs and games from the Internet because people make their livings selling those products, stealing is a crime, every crime has unseen consequences, and so on.

But this time, the person giving the lecture was U.S. Attorney General John D. Ashcroft, and he was painting an especially harrowing picture for about 100 area high school students.

"When you download stolen songs or movies or computer games posted on the Internet, you're stealing," he told them.

He talked of songwriters and film production workers who suddenly found themselves jobless because of revenue stolen from their companies by Internet pirates. He told of a young man who plugged his cell phone into a charger at night, then woke to find his desk and computer in flames -- the malfunctioning battery he used was a knockoff of a name brand, which Ashcroft described as another form of intellectual property theft. Then there was the tale of the Long Island boy who suffered grave medical reactions after he was mistakenly given a knockoff prescription medicine after a liver transplant.

"You may not think a theft online is as consequential as stealing something from a store, but even stealing a song is serious," Ashcroft told them. "I think you can see how stealing intellectual property puts at risk the very lives and well-beings of these people."

The students were at the Justice Department's Great Hall yesterday for a day-long student forum on intellectual property theft. Ashcroft's speech -- along with question-and-answer sessions with songwriters and convicted intellectual property

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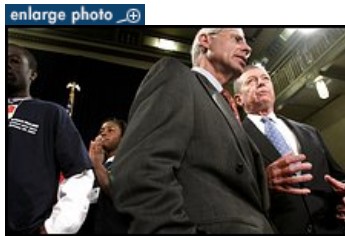
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Attorney General John D. Ashcroft, right, and Court TV chief Henry Schleif greet students from area high schools at the program on intellectual property theft. (Melina Mara -- The Washington Post)

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thieves -- resulted from a partnership between the government and Court TV. Students came from Howard D. Woodson Senior High School in Washington; Thomas Edison School of Technology in Silver Spring; Friendly High School in Fort Washington; and Hayfield Secondary School in Alexandria.

The event will be aired in about a month on Court TV as part of its public affairs program "Choices and Consequences," according to network officials. Tapes of the event also will be included in materials distributed to 4,000 to 5,000 schools as part of a nationwide education drive.

Gerrod Wilson, 17, was one of the students chosen to participate who had a special interest in the subject. He and the other students enrolled in Friendly High School's Applied Law class -- many of whom are interested in law enforcement careers, he said -- were among those taking part in the workshops and discussions.

Wilson said he has downloaded music from the Internet a few times -- but not anymore.

"I don't think kids are aware of how much of a crime they've committed," said Wilson, who hopes to become a defense lawyer.

Edward Kendrick, 18, of Gaithersburg said downloading music and games "is pretty much common practice" among high school students, but he said he's never done it.

"My father works with a tech support center, so he'll know if I download anything illegally," said the Thomas Edison senior. "I'd get in more trouble with him than anyone else."

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