Publishers aim for some control of search results

By Jeffrey Goldfarb
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LONDON (Reuters) - Global publishers, fearing that Web search engines such as Google Inc. are encroaching on their ability to generate revenue, plan to launch an automated system for granting permission on how to use their content.

Buoyed by a Belgian court ruling this week that Google (Nasdaq:GOOG - news) was infringing on the copyright of French and German language newspapers by reproducing article snippets in search results, the publishers said on Friday they plan to start testing the service before the end of the year.

"This industry-wide initiative positively answers the growing frustration of publishers, who continue to invest heavily in generating content for online dissemination and use," said Gavin O'Reilly, chairman of the World Association of Newspapers, which is spearheading the initiative.

"This system is intended to remove completely any rights conflicts between publishers and search engines," added O'Reilly, who is also the chief operating officer of Independent News & Media (INWS.I).

The cost of the project, known as the Automated Content Access Protocol, was not disclosed, though the publishers have budgeted 310,000 pounds ($583,700) to seek advice from third-party experts.

The pilot program stems from the huge popularity of search engines, which automatically return search results from newspapers, magazines and books, and usually link back to a publication's own Web site for users to read a whole item.

Many publishers feel, however, that the search engines are becoming publishers themselves by aggregating, sometimes caching and occasionally creating their own content.

"Since search engine operators rely on robotic 'spiders' to manage their automated
Since search engine operators rely on robotic "spiders" to manage their automated processes, publishers' Web sites need to start speaking a language which the operators can teach their robots to understand," according to a document seen by Reuters that outlines the publishers' plans.

"What is required is a standardized way of describing the permissions which apply to a Web site or Web page so that it can be decoded by a dumb machine without the help of an expensive lawyer."

COURT BATTLES

Courts have generally upheld the legality of the way search engines operate, but there are ongoing court battles challenging those models on copyright infringement grounds, and the Belgian ruling against Google marks an unprecedented crackdown. Google has appealed the decision.

Book publishers have sued Google in the United States for its program to digitize everything in print, and French news agency Agence France-Presse is also in court with the Web search leader for use of its articles and photographs.

Google maintains an opt-out policy for both its Google News and Google Print services, saying any publisher can withdraw its content simply by asking.

In one example of how ACAP would work, a newspaper publisher could grant search engines permission to index its site, but specify that only select ones display articles for a limited time after paying a royalty.

WAN is a Paris-based umbrella organization encompassing 72 national newspaper associations, individual newspaper executives from 100 nations and 13 news agencies.

Other groups involved with the ACAP program are the European Publishers Council, the International Publishers Association and the European Newspaper Publishers' Association.