LOS ANGELES - In a break with other Internet service providers, AT&T Inc. will work with Hollywood studios and recording labels to devise technology that identifies offshore content pirates who use its network to upload illegal copies of movies and music.

Although details remain sketchy, the effort worries privacy advocates, who fear the San Antonio-based company could become a beat cop, monitoring which Web sites customers visit and what computer files they share.

Technology officers from several entertainment companies met June 5 in San Antonio to discuss the effort, which could take months and quite possibly fail to produce a solution that would be technologically feasible and protect customer privacy.

"It's daunting," said James W. Cicconi, AT&T's senior executive vice president of external and legislative affairs.

"What we're trying to do here is see if we can devise a technology that can address the problem," he said. "Then we'll have to address the legal issues that flow out of using such a technology."

Legal questions include the privacy interests of customers and legitimate distributions for educational uses or works in the public domain.

Cicconi said such issues will not be ignored.

"We're not trying to be an enforcement agent against our customers," he said. "The intent is to devise a network-based approach to dealing with this problem."

In confirming the effort Thursday, Cicconi acknowledged that AT&T's interests have become more aligned with content providers.

Like its telecommunications rival, Verizon Communications Inc., AT&T has launched its own television service to compete with cable and satellite. The service has increased...
companies' dependence on studios, which have been pressing Internet service providers to more aggressively stem piracy.

"We've been considering these issues of piracy, and we do feel the interests of our shareholders are aligned with the interests of the content community," Cicconi said.

"We very much have a stake, as they do, in trying to stem illegal appropriation of that content," he said.

Cicconi said the effort is primarily aimed at pirates who set up operations in other countries and upload massive amounts of illegal files using AT&T's network. He said the technology being developed would not target those who download those files.

AT&T's effort is being watched closely by Verizon, which has vigorously fought demands by recording labels to reveal the names of customers who may have downloaded illegal copies of songs.

Verizon executives have also had discussions with studios and other content providers about piracy as it ramps up its own consumer TV effort.

"As we do more content deals ourselves, this comes up in those discussions," said Eric Rabe, Verizon senior vice president of media relations.

"But we continue to believe we don't want to be the policemen on this, while at the same time recognizing copyright is a serious issue and needs to be protected," he said.

Consumer advocates have raised concerns, fueled in part by the lack of specifics from AT&T about the technology being developed.

They are also concerned that large media conglomerates are increasingly dictating how new technology can be used.

"Frankly, the best hope for the consumer here is that we get more competition in content, and I think that's coming thanks to things like YouTube and Joost," said Fred von Lohmann, an attorney with the civil-liberties group Electronic Frontier Foundation.

"The question is how many people can be strong-armed before that arrives," he said.