Weinstein Co. cries malpractice over "Sicko" leaks

By Gregg Goldstein  
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NEW YORK (Hollywood Reporter) - YouTube has removed clips of Michael Moore's U.S. health-care expose "Sicko" that appeared on the site during the weekend, two weeks before the film's June 29 opening.

A 124-minute version of "Sicko" was available on the Google Inc.-owned Web site, posted by at least two users in 14 consecutive video chunks.

The postings came on the heels of a fairly high-quality pirated version of the film that became available last week via BitTorrent file-sharing software and peer-to-peer Web sites. By early Monday, the clips had been pulled from YouTube because of copyright complaints by Lionsgate, which is distributing the film domestically for the Weinstein Co.

One version uploaded to YouTube during the weekend received 500-600 views per segment, with one of the first segments garnering nearly 1,700 views. Another version uploaded Saturday had 200-300 views per segment, with the first 10 minutes receiving more than 1,200 views.

The entire film also recently was uploaded, and then removed, from a site found on the Google Video search engine.

The Weinstein Co. is distributing the $9 million documentary through Lionsgate but handling all marketing and other costs not related to theatrical distribution.

UPLOADERS SOUGHT

A Weinstein Co. source said that the company has hired several firms that specialize in dealing with piracy and is taking "a very aggressive approach to protecting the film."

"Every DVD screener that comes from the Weinstein Co. is watermarked and traceable," Weinstein Co. general counsel Peter Hurwitz said. "We are actively investigating who illegally uploaded 'Sicko' to the Internet, and we will take appropriate action against that..."
One source close to the situation said that anti-piracy firms were flooding the Internet with false versions of the film, much as the record industry has with songs.

"We are actively investigating those who illegally uploaded 'Sicko' to the Internet, and we will take the strongest possible legal action," Hurwitz said. The company declined comment about whether it will seek legal action against YouTube for allowing the uploads.

In March, Magnolia Pictures subpoenaed YouTube to obtain the identities of users who uploaded such films as "The Host" and "Jesus Camp." 20th Century Fox did the same thing after users uploaded episodes of "24" and "The Simpsons."

"We cooperate with copyright-holders to identify and promptly remove infringing content," a YouTube spokesperson said. "In this case, the copyright owners used our content-management tools to request removal of the unauthorized clips, and we quickly complied."

The spokesperson said that users still can watch previews of "Sicko" and interviews with Moore on the film's authorized YouTube channel, SickoTheMovie.

How the leak of a version apparently taken from a DVD copy will affect the film's theatrical box-office remains unclear. Moore's documentary "Fahrenheit 9/11" was widely bootlegged and available in a pirated version online around its June 2004 opening but went on to earn $119 million at the domestic box office.

Hurwitz said that "we at the Weinstein Co. are outraged by illegal piracy. Protecting our product and the creative artists involved is our highest priority."

Is Moore concerned? He reiterated his stance this weekend that he disapproves of copyright laws.

"I think the music industry's response to Napster was misguided ... and for me, it's about getting people to see the movie and that's what I want, so they will talk about it," Moore recently told Brandweek magazine. "I would never want to prosecute anybody who would download (his film)."