Sweden Pulls the Plug on Pirate Bay

The website was known to enable illegal copying. The U.S. movie industry praises the action.

By Michelle Keller, Times Staff Writer
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Swedish authorities Wednesday shut down one of the world's most notorious websites for directing Internet users to pirated music, movies and software files as part of a large-scale raid.

U.S. media companies have complained repeatedly to the Swedish government that operators of ThePirateBay.org aided in illegal downloading.

The site, which offered links to more than 100,000 files and boasted 1 million visitors a day, is one of the largest "trackers" of BitTorrent, a software program frequently used to copy pirated files such as movies because it speeds the transfer of large files over the Internet.

The movie industry viewed the shutdown as a modest victory.

"I'm under no illusions that after the Pirate Bay goes down that there won't be other would-be pirate kings who want to take their place," said John G. Malcolm, executive vice president and director of worldwide anti-piracy operations for the Motion Picture Assn. of America, the trade group for the film industry. "But we'll keep going after them."

More than 50 law enforcement officials raided 10 offices across Sweden that were operated by Pirate Bay, confiscating the organization's servers and detaining three people.

Launched in 2003, Pirate Bay thrived in part because the Swedish government did not enforce copyright protection, industry officials said.

"Swedish copyrights have been slow to evolve, creating … rampant Internet piracy in Sweden," said Elizabeth Kaltman, director of communications for the MPAA.

The site also evaded law enforcement efforts by switching jurisdictions within Sweden, Malcolm said.

In recent years, Sweden has been tightening its copyright laws, giving law enforcement officials more authority to act against violators, said Mark D. Litvack, a partner at Mitchell Silberberg & Knupp, a Los Angeles-based law firm representing Activision Inc. and Vivendi Universal Games Inc., two of the companies that filed complaints with Swedish officials against Pirate Bay.

U.S. media companies are not alone in fighting Pirate Bay. The International Federation of the Phonographic Industry and the Swedish Anti-Piracy Bureau also have filed numerous complaints.

"The Pirate Bay has been facilitating illegal file-swapping of copyrighted material on a very large scale and with blatant disregard for both music creators and copyright laws," Lars Gustafsson, Sweden's director-general for the phonographic group, said in a statement.

Because Pirate Bay points users to files but does not provide copyrighted data itself,
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For the MPAA, the battle against Pirate Bay is part of an industrywide effort to combat digital piracy. The major movie studios alone lost $6.1 billion to all forms of piracy in 2005, according to the association's estimates.

MPAA announced in February that it had filed seven lawsuits against websites including TorrentSpy.com and Ed2k-It.com for allegedly facilitating illegal file sharing.

But the fight against piracy has been arduous for copyright holders. New sites bubble up almost as quickly as others are taken down.

Pirate Bay was famous for mocking media companies that accused the site of enabling piracy.

Companies that sent the Swedish organization cease-and-desist letters were ridiculed on the website.