

Is streaming video from sketchy websites illegal?

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In today's movie streaming landscape, consumers increasingly expect affordable content on-demand, which pushes many (knowingly or not) onto sketchy video entertainment platforms that may or may not be

legal.

Last week, two programmers plead guilty for contributing to a string of illegal streaming websites that offered more content than Netflix, Hulu and Amazon Prime. These illicit platforms were used by thousands of paid subscribers, officials said.

It's clear that [federal agencies](#) and big media companies are cracking down on those who run backdoor streaming rings. But can watching bootlegged or pirated [video](#) on the internet get viewers into trouble, too?

It's complicated.

Torrenting or downloading copyrighted material without permission is flat out illegal and a much more serious crime, according to the U.S. Copyright Office. There's some gray area with streaming illicit content, which is a misdemeanor—at best.

If you're caught illegally streaming videos online, you could face a fine of \$750 or more, according to criminal defense attorney Matt Huppertz in Waukesha, Wis.

And using a VPN doesn't protect you. Federal agencies can still use your IP address to track you down. "Your internet provider can tell what device was used for illegal streaming" and it would have to give up your location if it was subpoenaed, Huppertz said.

Streaming can constitute a copyright violation when users create a "public performance" of unauthorized work, or show the streamed content to a large number of people, according to the Copyright Office.

Platforms like Plex operate in a hazy zone, with legal software that bad actors can use to share a pirated video. In a similar manner, people have

"jailbroken" Amazon Fire sticks to watch illegal content via add-ons, though the streaming stick is legal.

Outside of "public performances," watching videos on the internet regardless of the website is largely legal. It's much more likely for agencies and the media industry to target those who download and redistribute content on a large scale, across multiple devices for public consumption.

For example, in August, the FBI charged eight men with a range of crimes including conspiracy to violate criminal law and copyright infringement by reproducing and distributing video illegally obtained through several torrent websites.

Two of the men have since pleaded guilty.

And two business partners in California were reportedly criminally prosecuted in November for selling illicit streaming devices. The distribution or the reproduction of licensed content is a felony, according to the Copyright Office.

If fines (or jail time) don't deter you from watching illegal, pirated content, perhaps viruses and malicious software will.

The Federal Trade Commission warns that illegal streaming apps are hotbeds for hackers looking to sell your info on the dark web, or steal the login credentials for your bank account and steal your money.

Global online piracy is a multi-billion dollar industry, according to the Global Innovation Policy Center, an affiliate of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. The U.S. Economy loses at least \$29.2 billion in revenue each year because of digital piracy, according to a study released in June.

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