

Reuters TV Fans Tap Into Torrent of Shows Online

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LONDON (Reuters) - First music, then movies -- now Internet file traders have tuned in to television, going online to download their favorite shows.

Web sites like Suprnova.org (<http://www.suprnova.org/>) are doing for TV downloads what Napster did for digital music files. You can find last night's episode of "American Idol," the entire collection of "The Simpsons," and old favorites like "Battlestar Galactica."

Such downloads, which may be on shaky legal ground, are popular outside the United States. This is especially true in Europe, where fans sometimes have to wait years to see the latest episodes of U.S. shows like "The West Wing" and "Six Feet Under."

TV shows have long been available from online file trading networks like Kazaa, but can take many hours or even days to download, with the longest wait times for the most popular programs.

But a "file swarming" program called BitTorrent can speed up the process. When you click on a link, BitTorrent downloads the TV show to your computer in fragments, which are simultaneously transferred to other users seeking to download the same show.

In effect, the more popular the file, the faster the download. So the day after a new episode of "Survivor" airs, downloads are relatively speedy compared with peer-to-peer networks like Kazaa.

But even with a broadband connection, downloading a one-hour show usually takes least two hours, or even days for some of the rarer files. With a dial-up connection, forget about it. Get high-speed Internet, or watch TV the old-fashioned way.

Where do these TV files come from? Some are probably "ripped," or copied, from illegally decrypted DVDs. Others come from tech-savvy users who have turned their computers into personal video recorders like TiVo.

HOW IT WORKS

To start the process, download BitTorrent (<http://bitconjurer.org/BitTorrent/>). Then find a Web site with a link to the TV show you want -- which can be tricky.

Sometimes, a simple search on Google (<http://www.google.com>) is sufficient. Try using the name of the show and "BitTorrent" as keywords. There are also pages (<http://www.spesb.com/link2u/>) that consist solely of links to other BitTorrent sites.

Most of the television industry, which gets a significant slice of revenue from selling overseas TV rights and DVD collections of the most popular shows, is less than enthusiastic about the downloadings. (In Britain, however, the BBC plans to put its gargantuan archive online for free.)

Unlike their corporate cousins in the music business, television companies have yet to sue downloaders. But Web sites that host TV downloads have frequently closed down because of copyright complaints. Hackers has also taken down many sites.

To be fair, BitTorrent was never designed to be a lawsuit-defeating, hack-proof storehouse of pirated files. Its creator, programmer Bram Cohen, has said, "Distributing stuff that is clearly illegal with BitTorrent is a really dumb idea."

This is because users are not anonymous and downloads must be run from a vulnerable central Web site.

So Web sites that offer BitTorrent downloads don't tend to last long. Still, every time one is shut down, another pops up. Several sites with a broad range of content -- at least for now -- include:

-- TV Torrents (<http://www.tvtorrents.com/index.jsp>)

-- Torrents.reviewed.homelinux.org

(<http://torrents.reviewed.homelinux.org/>)

-- Download Paradise (<http://www.downloadparadise.tk/>)

Suprnova.org, which has a wealth of BitTorrent TV content and other media files, is mirrored on half a dozen sites around the world, so that if one goes down the others pick up the slack.

Some sites are devoted to a specific show. For example, every episode of the espionage drama "Alias" is on <http://knowbuddy.dyndns.org/torrent/>.

Once you find what you need, you can download the TV show to your computer to watch on your PC. Or if it's in a compatible format, burn the program onto a disc and watch it on your TV through your DVD player.

Simply tuning into a regularly scheduled program would be lot easier. But TV junkies who can't get the latest episode of "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" or "Spooks" the conventional way will go a long way to satisfy their craving.