Net piracy crackdown
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AN international effort to dismantle major internet piracy groups has identified more than 100 people in the US and abroad involved in the theft of more than $US50 million ($68 million) in music, movies, games and computer software, US authorities said.

Synchronized searches by the FBI in 27 states and by other authorities in 10 countries beginning Wednesday resulted in the seizure of more than 200 computers, including 30 servers used as storage and distribution hubs for the material, US Attorney General John Ashcroft said. One server contained over 65,000 titles.

"This is thievery," Mr Ashcroft said. "This is criminal."

The initiative, dubbed "Operation Fastlink", is the largest of its kind undertaken by the US Justice Department against piracy of intellectual property over the internet. The film, music and software industries have been pushing for greater criminal prosecution while in some cases pursuing their own civil cases.

Industry officials applauded the enforcement action.

"Today is a good day for creative artists," said John Malcolm, chief of antipiracy operations for the Motion Picture Association and a former senior Justice Department official. "Without copyright protection and enforcement, piracy will dramatically and deleteriously impact the future of the American film industry."

Although no arrests were announced, Mr Ashcroft said charges would be brought against some of the people. They could face copyright infringement and conspiracy charges, among others, punishable by up to five years in prison on each count.

The search warrants, which remained sealed under court order, targeted organisations known by such names as Fairlight, Kalisto, Echelon, Class, Project X and APC, officials said. These groups were described as the origination points of the pirated material, which first goes to a select clientele via secure computer servers and quickly becomes available worldwide on the internet.

The organisations obtain their material through a variety of means, including film industry insiders who leak copies of movies before they are released publicly, people who test new software for manufacturers and highly trained "crackers" who break encryption codes on products. In many cases, officials said, the goal is not so much making a profit as it is the thrill of subverting the system.

The Justice Department crackdown has not targeted the end-users of these pirated products, who in general can be prosecuted if they download 10 or more illegal copies of copyrighted material worth $US2,500 or more.

One FBI raid occurred early Wednesday at a school district near Phoenix. Mr Ashcroft would not discuss specifics but said it is not surprising to find that such activity occurs at schools and universities because of the abundance of high-powered computers.

The searches were also executed in Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Israel, the Netherlands, Singapore, Sweden, Great Britain and Northern Ireland.