

Inside beIN's fight to protect the FIFA World Cup from digital piracy

Cameron Andrews, legal director for Anti-Piracy at beIN MEDIA GROUP, explains how illegal IPTV, social platforms, cybercrime networks and AI are reshaping the battle to protect premium sports rights



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Image: Adobe Stock

Major sporting events have become some of the most intensively targeted content in the global piracy ecosystem, placing broadcasters and rights holders under growing pressure to protect live coverage across websites, IPTV services, social media and messaging platforms.

For beIN MEDIA GROUP, preparations to safeguard a tournament on the scale of the FIFA World Cup begin months before the first match. The broadcaster combines technology, intelligence gathering, legal enforcement and collaboration with governments, platforms, satellite operators and rights owners to disrupt illegal distribution in real time.

“Major sporting events, particularly the FIFA World Cup, are among the most targeted pieces of content in the world. We always see broadcast piracy spike during World Cups and the events often serve as a good marker of how piracy is developing,” says Cameron Andrews, legal director for Anti-Piracy at beIN MEDIA GROUP.

Andrews has more than 16 years of experience in anti-piracy and intellectual property enforcement across broadcasting, music, film and gaming. At beIN, he leads anti-piracy strategy, enforcement and operations across the group's live sports and entertainment pay-TV business.

Piracy becomes an organised digital ecosystem

Over the past decade, sports piracy has moved far beyond standalone websites offering unauthorised streams.

“The challenge is no longer limited to illegal streaming websites; it has developed into a sophisticated ecosystem involving illegal IPTV services, social media platforms, messaging applications, unauthorised streaming platforms and organised networks operating across multiple jurisdictions.”

Illegal IPTV remains one of the most significant threats. These services frequently imitate legitimate platforms while offering thousands of pirated television channels and large libraries of entertainment content at little or no cost.

“The piracy landscape continues to evolve rapidly. Illegal IPTV services remain one of the most significant challenges because they often presenting themselves as legitimate services while operating without rights.”

The scale of the problem has also expanded as piracy links, clips and access credentials can be distributed instantly through online communities, social platforms and encrypted messaging applications.

Piracy operators are increasingly relying on offshore hosting infrastructure designed to make enforcement more difficult, Andrews says, with some of those networks also supporting wider cybercrime activity.

AI raises the stakes

Artificial intelligence is expected to accelerate both content protection and illegal redistribution.

For broadcasters, AI can support large-scale monitoring, threat classification and faster enforcement. Piracy operators, however, may use the same technology to automate content duplication, promotion and distribution, or to identify and exploit security weaknesses.

“Artificial intelligence will further transform the landscape. While AI provides important opportunities for rights protection, it can also be misused to automate the duplication, redistribution and promotion of illegal content. We also anticipate that artificial intelligence will be used to try to exploit security vulnerabilities.”

For Andrews, this means anti-piracy operations must continually evolve rather than rely on static enforcement models.

“This means anti-piracy operations must continuously adapt and innovate to stay ahead of emerging threats.”

A 24-hour operation

A tournament-level anti-piracy operation is built around preparation, live monitoring and post-match enforcement.

Ahead of the event, beIN conducts risk assessments, expands monitoring capacity, develops enforcement workflows and coordinates with FIFA, internet service providers, digital platforms, hosting companies, satellite operators and public authorities.

“A successful anti-piracy operation for an event such as the FIFA World Cup begins long before the opening match.”

Before kick-off, the broadcaster identifies known piracy sources and ensures enforcement channels are ready to respond. During matches, teams monitor websites, IPTV networks, social media and other digital environments for unauthorised broadcasts.

“Our approach is based on a 360-degree protection model covering the full lifecycle of piracy.”

The objective is not only to detect an illegal stream but to disrupt it quickly enough to protect the value of live coverage.

“Our work does not stop when the final whistle is blown. We continue to address post-match piracy, including unauthorised recordings, highlights, clips and other forms of illegal distribution,” Andrews reveals.

The operation also covers trademark misuse, fraudulent services, illegal advertising and accounts or online communities that help consumers access pirated content.

Technology has become central to beIN’s content protection strategy.

The broadcaster is developing AI-powered systems, automated monitoring tools and intelligent crawlers that can scan different platforms, categorise suspicious content and prioritise enforcement.

“Technology is a fundamental part of modern content protection. At beIN, we continue to invest in developing advanced tools and platforms that allow us to detect, analyse and respond to piracy more effectively. beIN has been an industry leader and the first broadcaster to widely deploy cutting edge content protection technologies.”

These tools allow teams to process larger volumes of data and identify threats that would be difficult to manage manually. “Our teams are now building AI-powered capabilities, automated monitoring systems and intelligent crawlers that help identify, classify and prioritise illegal content across different platforms.”

belN also monitors technical activity within its digital distribution environment, including content delivery network activity and access patterns, to identify suspicious behaviour such as unauthorised extraction or exploitation of infrastructure vulnerabilities.

Watermarking, content identification and digital forensic technologies can then help trace the source of illegal distribution.

Andrews says: “Combined with digital forensic technologies, including watermarking and content identification solutions, these capabilities allow us to move beyond reactive takedowns and adopt a more intelligence-led approach focused on preventing, detecting and disrupting piracy.”

Collaboration across borders

Sports piracy frequently involves operators, infrastructure and audiences spread across several jurisdictions, making partnerships a critical part of enforcement.

“Partnerships are essential because piracy does not respect borders. No organisation can address this challenge alone.”

belN works with governments, regulators, law enforcement authorities, rights owners, internet service providers, technology companies and satellite operators.

For major tournaments, cooperation with rights owners such as FIFA allows organisations to coordinate strategies, share intelligence and pursue collective enforcement.

“Industry initiatives such as Operation Offside demonstrate the importance of collaboration between rights holders, broadcasters and enforcement partners in tackling organised piracy.” Satellite protection is particularly important in the Middle East and North Africa, where signal overspill can undermine territorial broadcasting agreements.

“We work closely with satellite operators to address challenges such as signal overspill and ensure that territorial rights are properly protected.” The financial impact of piracy extends beyond subscription losses for broadcasters.

Sports media rights help fund leagues, clubs, athletes, production teams and the wider infrastructure required to deliver live competitions. A reduction in the commercial value of those rights can affect investment across the ecosystem.

“Piracy impacts the entire sports ecosystem, not only broadcasters. Broadcasting rights support investment in leagues, clubs, athletes, production teams and the many professionals involved in delivering world-class sporting events.”

Andrews argues that protecting intellectual property is therefore closely linked to the long-term sustainability of professional sport.

“When piracy reduces the value of these rights, it affects the ability of stakeholders to continue investing in innovation, production quality and fan experiences.”



Cameron Andrews, legal director for Anti-Piracy at beIN MEDIA GROUP

Piracy is not victimless

One of the industry’s biggest challenges is changing the perception that viewing an illegal stream causes little or no harm.

“One of the biggest misconceptions is that piracy only affects large media companies. In reality, it affects everyone involved in creating and delivering sports content.”

Pirate services may also expose users to poor-quality streams, malware, fraud and the theft of financial or personal data. “Consumers also don’t understand how closely interlinked piracy is with other serious cybercrime threats online.”

Andrews says the offshore hosting providers used by piracy operators can also facilitate phishing, scams, malicious content and other cybercrime activity.

Some set-top boxes distributed for piracy have been found to contain hardware enabling third parties to use them in distributed denial-of-service attacks, while links between piracy applications and residential proxy networks are creating additional concerns.

He adds: “We often say there is no such thing as ‘free’ and this is especially true for piracy.”

As streaming technology and AI continue to develop, Andrews expects piracy to become faster, more scalable and increasingly difficult to trace.

“The next challenge will be the increasing speed, scale and sophistication of piracy. New technologies will continue to create opportunities for both legitimate innovation and illegal distribution.”

For broadcasters and rights owners, the response will require continued investment in AI, automation, digital forensics and coordinated enforcement. “At beIN MEDIA GROUP, we believe successful anti-piracy is built on preparation, collaboration and continuous improvement.”

Protecting the FIFA World Cup 2026 will require cooperation across the international sports, technology and enforcement ecosystem.

“Protecting the FIFA World Cup 2026 requires a global effort, and we remain committed to working with FIFA, our partners and stakeholders to safeguard the integrity and value of one of the world’s greatest sporting events while ensuring fans can enjoy the tournament through the best possible legitimate viewing experience,” Andrews concludes.