

## What Do People Think About Copyright?

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Lee Edwards, Bethany Klein, David Lee, Giles Moss & Fiona Philip, [Isn't it just a way to protect Walt Disney's rights?: Media user perspectives on copyright](#), 16 **New Media & Soc'y** (2013).

When it comes to the issue of copyright in the digital age, it is not uncommon to read claims and counter-claims regarding the public's perception of copyright enforcement and infringement through file-sharing mechanisms. Public policy in the field is often driven by assumptions that tend to be nothing more than guesswork as to their effectiveness and efficiency. While copyright policy has been the subject of several government-funded reviews in the UK in several years, these have usually failed to be conducted with the end-user of copyright works in mind, which seem to cement the idea that the subject is too complex for the public. It is therefore a very refreshing development when research is conducted to provide us with better empirical understanding of what the public really thinks with regards to copyright, going beyond mere conjecture and potential biases.

In *Isn't it just a way to protect Walt Disney's rights?*, the authors have set out to engage in an empirically sound exercise in order to ascertain the validity of various statements that are often part of copyright debates. They have put together a series of focus groups designed to get the opinion of "ordinary media users," as the authors claim that this is a sector that does not often get their opinion represented in the copyright debates. The study's methodology consisted in carrying out twelve focus groups based in Yorkshire, England, and each of these ranged from three to ten participants, who were recruited as pre-existing groups of media users, varying in age, background and experience with downloading media. The groups were asked to discuss topics relating to copyright, the creative industries, digital media, downloading and piracy for over one hour, and while the groups were directed, they were given a set of open-ended questions to explore the users' experience, attitudes, and behaviour with regards to copyright.

The results of the research are fascinating. One of the most striking elements is that users seem to be confused as to what constitutes copyright infringement, a confusion that has been corroborated by other surveys in the UK (an OFCOM study found that 44% of respondents cannot identify with certainty legal or illegal content).

Another intriguing result is that, while panel members agree with some of the justifications for copyright, such as the right of creators to derive monetary gain from their works, there was a large disconnect between the creator and the copyright industry. In other words, when faced with the opportunity to download pirated content, users would display a complex array of justifications that combined rationalization and even cynicism with regards to the copyright industry.

The study unearths the very complex relationship between users and content, one that does not respond easily to the simplistic view of lazy and greedy pirates who never pay a penny for copyright works. One of the participants made this clear when describing the way in which they interact with film releases:

A film comes out in the movies. And if it looks really good, I'll go watch it. And then, I dunno, a couple of weeks go by, and you can get a relatively good quality [copy] online and download it illegally. And, I'll do that so I can watch it at home. And then another few months go by and I can buy the DVD for a quid.

Participants seemed to be critical at some level of the "legal" alternatives offered by the industry. While older group members seemed more content with the purchasing choices that they are presented with, younger and more technology-oriented users seemed less impressed with options presented by platforms such as Spotify and iTunes.

Another interesting finding is that users tended to describe downloading and file-sharing as something transitory, for example, to be done while there are no legal alternatives, or to be performed while you do not have enough money to purchase content legally. Similarly, the delay between a TV show being distributed in the US and Europe was identified by participants as an important factor driving piracy levels up. Users also seemed to be more comfortable with sharing content with friends and family, than to widespread and indiscriminate file sharing online.

The study concludes that:

Focus group discussions demonstrated users as complex, rational and cynical in their approach to copyright, challenging stereotypes of infringers as knowingly criminal or naively ignorant, rescuing the collapse of the public into outdated notions of pirates, and broadening the one-dimensional portrayals that sometimes lurk in the background of less user-grounded frameworks and arguments. The historically embedded criminalization of users may be difficult to dislodge, but it is vulnerable to analysis that situates everyday behaviour and views within wider social, political and cultural contexts and which allows user voices to challenge and critique dominant justifications while contributing justifications of their own.

This is a very welcome addition to copyright literature, one that gives us a hint about the complex relationship between users and copyright.

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