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More Than Just Free Content

Motivations of Peer-to-Peer File Sharers

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This study explores file sharers' reported motivations for downloading and uploading content on peer-to-peer networks, including ethical obligations guiding file sharing. Drawing on Lessig's classification of purposes of file sharing and Giesler's theoretical framework of gifting systems, 40 in-depth interviews were conducted with file sharers in Singapore using a standard protocol, then transcripts were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Downloading is perceived as an alternative through which users satisfy desires that existing markets do not meet. Respondents reported downloading to avoid long waits for content to arrive in Singapore; to access difficult-to-find and censored content; to sample content, including content outside their usual tastes; and because downloading is convenient and free. Respondents reported a norm of reciprocity and sense of community that motivated them to upload and an obligation to purchase content they liked. Implications for understanding and combating file sharing during the inevitable transition to other business models are discussed.

Keywords: *copyright; file sharing; peer to peer*

While debate about enforcing copyright in peer-to-peer (P2P) networks raged in the last decade, content industry representatives, such as the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) and Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), have attempted to counter piracy through legal action and campaigns demonizing file sharers as thieves and pirates (Denegri-Knott, 2004; MPAA, n.d.; RIAA, n.d.). Other nations have followed suit. For example, in Singapore, where this study was conducted, under the United States-Singapore Free Trade Agreement (FTA, 2003), Singapore committed itself to strengthening copyright protection and enforcement, and law enforcement and organizations representing rightsholders have since stepped up antipiracy campaigns. Yet, in Singapore and around the world, file sharing flourishes (Allen, 2007; Chua, 2007a; Madden & Rainie, 2005; Pfanner, 2008).

Drawing on Lessig's (2004) proposed typology of file sharing based on purpose of use and Giesler's (2006) conceptualization of file-sharing networks as gift systems, we explore file sharers' motivations and implications for combating sharing.

Without such understanding, law enforcement and public relations campaigns directed at file sharers are bound to continue to fall short. Do file sharers only wish to rob the content industries, or do they have other motivations, such as satisfying demands the market cannot or participation in a community, as some scholars suggest? It may even be, as some past research has suggested, that file sharers—so stigmatized for allegedly unethical and illegal activity—have their own informal file-sharing ethics, an ethics of the unethical, which our research also investigates.

Literature Review

Digital File Sharing and Legal Action Against It

Shortly after the development of digital file-sharing technologies, laws in America and elsewhere were amended to target it. For instance, under American law, before 1997, distributing copyright-infringing content for free would not have warranted criminal prosecution. The No Electronic Theft Act (1997) made file sharers using P2P networks liable in civil and criminal courts, including provisions for criminally prosecuting distribution of copyright-infringing material for noncommercial purposes. In 1999, the Napster P2P system gave rise to widespread online music file sharing. Less than 2 years after its launch, the record industry took legal action. Though Napster advanced fair use arguments, they were rejected and Napster was held liable for contributory and vicarious copyright infringement (*A&M Records Inc. v. Napster Inc.*, 2001). Other P2P systems have faced legal action (e.g., *MGM Studios, Inc. v. Grokster, Ltd.*, 2005), as have individual users. From the rise of Napster to the end of 2007, more than 20,000 copyright infringement actions were brought against file sharers internationally, according to one estimate (Fisher, 2007).

Since the United States-Singapore FTA (2003), Singapore's approach to copyright has been largely aligned with the U.S. approach: Singapore agreed to extend many existing copyright terms to match U.S. terms (art. 16.4, para. 4) and to impose criminal penalties for file sharing (art. 16.9, para. 21). Individual file sharers have been targeted. In 2006, two Singapore file sharers were jailed for 3 and 4 months for illegally distributing music files online (Chua, 2006). In May 2007, Odex, a Singapore distributor of Japanese *anime* (a colloquialism for Japanese animation), began demanding compensation from file sharers for copyright infringement. File sharers paid between SG\$ 3,000 (US\$ 2,026) and SGD 5,000 (USD 3,377) in prelawsuit settlements (Chua, 2007b).

Recent studies consistently have found declines in CD and DVD sales that are not offset by purchases of legal digital downloads (e.g., "CD sales falling," 2008). The role of illegal file sharing in such sales declines is disputed. A conservative think tank, the Institute for Policy Innovation, projected annual losses to the U.S. economy in the tens of billions of dollars as a result of piracy worldwide (Siwek, 2007). Other

empirical studies found no statistically significant effect of downloading on music sales (Oberholzer-Gee & Strumpf, 2007) and album survival (Bhattacharjee, Gopal, Lertwachara, Marsden, & Telang, 2005). In fact, scholars estimated that file sharing increased music purchasing among Canadian file sharers between 2006 and 2007 (Andersen & Frenz, n.d.). Lessig (2004), among others, suggested that the content industries may be gaining overall from file sharing, in part through the free publicity that shared files provide. Though the content industries are surely losing some sales to illegal downloads, Lessig (2004) argued that every download does not equal a lost sale: It appears that at least some file sharers are downloading content they would not have purchased.

Though legal action against file sharing has taken place in many parts of the world since Napster, few studies have empirically examined the motivations of the millions at the center of this controversy: file sharers. Through in-depth interviews, our study attempts to fill this gap in the literature.

File-Sharing Motivations

Lessig (2004) and Giesler (2006; see also Giesler and Pohlmann, 2003) have theorized that file sharers may be motivated to download and share content for a range of reasons beyond simply obtaining free entertainment content. Because motivations for downloading and uploading content may differ, we ask about each separately.

Downloading Motivations

Lessig (2004) proposed that though file sharers may download as a substitute for purchasing content, other motivations exist. Like Giesler and Pohlmann (2003), Lessig suggested file sharers may download to sample content during purchasing decisions or to access otherwise unavailable content or content they would not have purchased. Giesler and Pohlmann (2003) suggested another related motivation for downloading. Some file sharers may reject mass-marketed contemporary pop culture and turn to P2P networks to explore content that may be difficult to access commercially. While downloading as a substitute for purchasing can harm the content industries, downloading to sample could lead to eventual purchase, and accessing otherwise unavailable content is unlikely to harm artists, since the works would not otherwise have been purchased (Lessig, 2004).

Lessig (2004) observed that file sharers may use P2P systems to access a work after its retail commercial life ends; he called this the work's second life, when content can continue informing and entertaining even if it is no longer sold. Access to work in its second life "is extremely important to the spread and stability of culture," Lessig wrote (2004, p. 113). The law protects copyright owners so they can continue to profit from their creative works, but nothing requires owners to continue providing access to works during long copyright terms—currently 95 years for much

entertainment content (Copyright Term Extension Act, 1998). Thus, it may be difficult to access or use many earlier works that are still copyright protected but not commercially available. Much entertainment content, especially more ephemeral media like television, may have “no guarantee of a second life” (p. 113), and if it only has a commercial life but no second life, access to our culture will be limited to what the current market demands. “Beyond that, culture disappears” (Lessig, 2004, p. 113). People should be able to access content in its second life, perhaps at a nominal price, or free, Lessig suggested. File-sharing systems may be serving as informal, de facto, archives for downloaders to access such content, though services that sell a small number of copies of a huge number of titles may also profit (Anderson, 2006).

Drawing on the literature, which suggests a variety of motivations for downloading, we propose this research question:

Research Question 1: What motivations do users report for downloading?

Uploading Motivations

Though file sharers have been demonized as thieves bent on personal gain without regard for artists they steal from, Giesler and Pohlmann (2003) suggested that they may have socially desirable beliefs and practices, at least vis-a-vis other network members, when they circulate entertainment content files.

Downloaders outnumber uploaders in P2P systems, but survival of these systems depends on users' willingness to upload a variety of files (Becker & Clement, 2006; Ramasamy & Liu, 2003). Despite little obvious incentive to upload—in some downloading systems, it is not necessary for an individual user to upload in order to download files, and he or she even incurs additional legal risks—many do (Becker & Clement, 2006; Strahilevitz, 2003). Any single individual's uploading of copyrighted material can thus be seen as somewhat “irrational” behavior if he or she wants primarily to benefit from free access to content (Becker & Clement, 2006, p. 10).

What explains uploading? Grounded in anthropology and sociology (Gouldner, 1960; Mauss, 1925/1990), Giesler (2006) conceptualized a file-sharing network as a “gift system”: “a system of social solidarity based on a structured set of gift exchange and social relationships among consumers” (p. 283; see also Barbrook, 1998; Giesler & Pohlmann, 2003). Gifting systems were part of traditional cultures (Mauss, 1925/1990), and in parts of cyberspace, scholars have also described a “spirit of sharing” (McGee & Skågeby, 2005, Discussion, para. 5) or “sharing ethic” (Guadamuz, 2002, p. 129). With roots in open source software, in which source code is available free for use and modification—the Internet itself is sometimes described as a classic example of a gifting system, as are other participatory digital cultures, including wikis and noncommercial parts of the computer gaming culture (Coleman & Dyer-Witford, 2007; Postigo, 2003; Raessens, 2005).

Gifting systems tap into “internalized and nearly universal norms of reciprocity” (Strahilevitz, 2003, p. 549): “a set of rules and obligations that builds the complex pattern of give and take and helps establish moral standards of social solidarity” (Giesler, 2006, p. 284; see also Gouldner, 1960; Komter, 2007). Shang, Chen, and Chen (2008) found in the P2P environment that users were motivated by the norm of reciprocity to share files they had downloaded. The reward may not only be files received: “For gifters, the perceived reward is often tied to the impact of their contribution” (Ripeanu, Mowbray, Andrade, & Lima, 2006, Section II, para. 15).

A sense of community seems to underlie this norm of reciprocity—or, perhaps, arise from it—according to theorists of gifting. Receiving a gift creates an obligation to repay, and gift exchanges create community solidarity (Giesler, 2006; Mauss, 1925/1990), where the file sharer experiences an “impulse to belong and to integrate” (Giesler & Pohlmann, 2003, p. 276). Giesler (2006) emphasized that the repayment obligation may not be felt to the particular person from whom one received a file in contemporary file-sharing systems (after all, one may receive a single file from multiple others). Virtual communities are generally characterized by weak ties because of the ease of exit and entry, and of forming and breaking ties (Rheingold, 2000). In file-sharing networks, in contrast to other virtual networks where members often communicate more and build closer ties, the primary purpose is generally file exchange rather than interaction; therefore, it seems likely that the sense of community and the motivation for reciprocity may be even weaker. However, since a tiny number of uploaders can supply files for a huge number of downloaders, the relatively low level of reciprocity is strong enough to sustain the systems.

Given the literature suggesting norms of reciprocity and a sense of community among file sharers, we propose the following research question:

Research Question 2: What motivations do users report for uploading?

Method

To allow collection of rich data and for respondents (Rs) to articulate their own motivations for their actions, a qualitative interview approach was used.

Sampling

Invitation e-mails were sent to recruit potential respondents among students at a communication school in Singapore. Because we were interested in interviewing experienced file sharers familiar with the technologies, we invited file sharers to participate if they had used more than one P2P application and had “a working understanding of their usage, though they did not have to be experts.” We appealed in particular for respondents who “downloaded a variety of material such as movies,

music, and so on.” We required that potential respondents bought at least one original CD or DVD since they started downloading because we were interested in examining why people who downloaded content free would still purchase originals. Snowball sampling was also used, in which respondents who met selection criteria were invited to recommend others.

Procedure

A structured interview protocol was developed to ensure that the three researchers conducting the interviews asked questions in a standard manner. Two pretest interviews were conducted to ensure that questions were clear and comprehensible. Pretest participants were invited to give feedback about questions, which were modified accordingly. Forty face-to-face in-depth interviews were then conducted at public cafés in December 2007. Participants were 16 to 31 years old. About two thirds were college students; the rest were working adults. Participants were of five nationalities, including Singaporeans, Malaysians, Indonesians, Chinese, and Vietnamese, and all lived in Singapore. Each signed a consent form and was paid a nominal sum. Average interview duration was 61 minutes.

Interviews were digitally recorded, then transcribed verbatim. Inductive content analysis was used to examine the transcribed data. Topical issues were identified and a codebook was created, guided by our theoretical frameworks, research questions, and interesting trends that emerged in responses. Each transcript was systematically coded by one researcher and then examined by another in order to ensure that coding had been done comprehensively, consistently, and reliably. Where disputes arose, coding categories and definitions were discussed and refined, and data were recoded when necessary.

Findings

Downloading Motivations

Access to content that is difficult to find. About half our respondents reported downloading to access content that is difficult or impossible to access in stores or on radio or television in Singapore: works that were dated, had not reached mass market popularity, were recorded with independent labels, or were censored or banned in Singapore. Respondents also enjoyed value-added content such as *fansubs*, that is, subtitled content available online from fans who translated the material themselves. Fansubs often are better than commercially available content from licensed distributors, some claimed; inaccurate subtitling and “weird” audio-dubbing “just spoils the whole thing” (R7).

Seven respondents downloaded video censored or banned in Singapore, citing concerns over censors being “too conservative” and “fickle” (R9). Because bowdlerization

sometimes “spoils the movie” (R30), causes them to “miss out [on] some of the elements in the anime” (R7), or renders the material so inaccurate that “the meaning is usually lost” (R23), respondents turned to downloading. Respondents preferred downloading content such as the American series *Sex and the City* because they found the Singapore censors had “removed too much of the story to make it comprehensible” (R9).

Respondents also downloaded dated content, such as songs, movies, animes, and cartoons unavailable in Singapore stores. Five respondents alluded to P2P networks’ importance in perpetuating what Lessig (2004) called a *second life* for entertainment content, beyond its commercial shelf life. “Files that are hard to find, or maybe, impossible to find [commercially] can still be shared, so these files will not be lost” (R35). File sharing is establishing its own virtual archive where “people actually take on the effort to download [music] and publicize it to others [to keep] the music alive” (R7).

Time factors. Respondents downloaded content, especially video, to avoid long waiting times. Almost three quarters of them enjoyed accessing content while there was still widespread media and fan “hype” (R32) or “interest” (R34). They would “rather watch [while] everyone is watching it” (R23) than wait to see the version released in Singapore. Our respondents’ desires to access content when it is released elsewhere, but not yet in Singapore, suggest that they enjoy being part of a global fan community, as discussed further below.

Most respondents felt that waiting times for foreign music and movies to arrive in Singapore are reasonable, but not for anime and television serials. Seven of eight respondents who enjoyed anime said they had to wait too long, and all seven respondents interested in American television serials said they took unreasonably long to arrive in Singapore, if they came at all. Fans complained that the American drama series *Heroes* was televised in Singapore one season behind the United States, while Hong Kong and Korean dramas aired up to 3 years later. Some fans said they would download first, then purchase recordings if they arrive in Singapore.

Sampling entertainment content. About three quarters of respondents used file sharing to sample entertainment content when deciding what to buy, such as works of artists new to them, particular songs, or even entire albums. “When I come across a new band or a new singer, I don’t really want to buy the whole album if I’m not sure I’ll like the rest of the songs. So I’ll just download a few songs and see if I like it. If I like it, I will buy the whole album” (R20 & R26). People “like to preview stuff before buying it” (R19), “to know what kind of songs are on an album—if [they] really like it—before [spending] 20 bucks on the album” (R20). Downloading “allows [people] to *choose* what they want to watch, rather than buying something and [end up] disliking it” (R3).

Some respondents said they downloaded to purposefully expose themselves to content outside of their usual tastes. When purchasing, people usually “would not

want to try things that they are not familiar with" (R33), but because downloads are free, people were more willing to move out of their "comfort zone . . . [to] get to know more things" (R39). File sharing allowed them to be "introduced to different artists, different genres which [they] probably would never [have] noticed" (R9). "Let's say I don't listen to jazz. There's no incentive for me to go and buy a jazz CD to try it out. But if it's free for me to download . . . [I can] try to start listening to it. If it's good, maybe I would have exposed myself to a new genre of music" (R10). With the variety of content available from around the world, respondents could access "different countries' media and different sorts of programs" (R29), with "a different culture for you to understand [and] one more new thing for you to learn" (R24).

The variety of entertainment content available on file-sharing networks allowed respondents to explore alternatives to contemporary popular culture. More than a third of respondents were motivated to download content they deemed nonmainstream, at least in Singapore. For example, those who sought Japanese serials felt they differed from other popular entertainment: "The storyline for me is very original. It's very different [from] the Hollywood shows and the Singapore shows" (R24). With free music available online, R19 said she "found out that there is more, [and] better music out there" that may not necessarily be popular with mainstream audiences. Exposure to diverse entertainment was described as having a rippling effect: "Let's say I go to YouTube and I listen to . . . songs [uploaded by others]. What happens is that, the more links you click, the more [you go] 'Hey, this song is nice, that song is nice'" (R25).

Convenience and cost considerations. Almost all respondents cited the convenience of quickly downloading music, without going shopping, as a motivation for downloading. Ten respondents especially liked using downloaded digital music files rather than originals because it made transferring files between multiple devices easier, without the hassle of ripping content from their CDs.

Cost was another reason that about two thirds of respondents chose to download at least some entertainment content. Respondents were about evenly split on whether current prices are generally acceptable. Some said it depended on the type of CD: while currently popular music in Singapore was affordable due to discounting, music recorded with independent labels, often sold in specialty stores, were too costly. Many objected to paying for whole albums. Thirty-eight of 40 respondents said they would download rather than purchase when they knew they were only interested in selected album tracks (often from sampling, discussed above). Some respondents objected to the potential costs of purchasing as much content as they wished to sample: "You can't expect me to buy every single CD of every single genre if I just want to know about them. . . . I think you must be very rich to do that" (R20). About half of respondents suggested downloading may be one of few sources of entertainment content for people who may have hardly any entertainment budget at all.

Motivations to purchase after downloading. When asking about downloading motivations, we found that most respondents believed downloading without subsequently purchasing was inappropriate in some circumstances. The vast majority of respondents (33 out of 40) said file sharers should purchase original content if they liked the work, as an acknowledgement of “the hard work [artists] have put into their music” (R35). Six respondents said people should purchase original content if it is commercially available: “As a rule of thumb, if there’s a way that you can get [content] legitimately from the production house, then by all means go for it” (R9). We found a range of purchasing behavior, from those who would purchase as long as material was available in the market to those who downloaded most entertainment content and purchased only a small fraction of it.

Uploading Motivations

When we inquired into motivations to upload, some mentioned a norm of reciprocity and a sense of virtual community.

About a third of respondents spoke of obligations among their file-sharing motivations. They deemed it important to give back to the community of file sharers by uploading. Because they received others’ entertainment content free, respondents felt that “if I download, it would be nice to return the favor and let people download from me” (R39). Reciprocity is “the crux of P2P file sharing,” (R20), and respondents adhere to the “unwritten rule that if you’re part of the network, you have to share. The idea of P2P is to share” (R13). Following this “basic rule” is “a way of repaying other people” (R7) for sharing files. Reciprocity also included practices such as adhering to certain sharing ratios (i.e., amount of content downloaded in relation to the amount uploaded for others) and leaving recent seeds¹ on torrents so others can download (R23). Respondents also sometimes exchanged other information, whether about content (e.g., recommendations) or technical information about downloading.

Reciprocity created, or perhaps was the result of, a sense of virtual community based on sharing and common tastes. Respondents reported a sense of bonding among network users who “share the same interests” (R40), so that “friendships could be forged” (R6) with people “all over the world” (R36). File sharing “sort of bonds people. It gives me a feeling like you’re willing to share with me, like friends—If you’re willing to do that for me, I’m willing to do that for you” (R13). Respondents felt motivated to share content they liked with others in this virtual community: “I want people to know about the songs, the things [I] like, and hopefully they will get to know about it . . . [and they will] like it also” (R20). Fourteen respondents saw P2P networks as a means of fulfilling what they regarded as the purpose of entertainment content: a cultural good that “is *meant* to be shared” (R20). An amateur musician said,

You come up with music [because] you want to share your music with the rest of the world, . . . and people enjoy it [through file sharing] and spread it all around. . . . [A]s a [musician], that's what you're expecting. (R26)

The “objective for their work” should be its spread, and downloading fulfills this purpose of “spread[ing] it as far as possible” (R39).

Many respondents reported that they restricted themselves to noncommercial usage of shared files and expected others to do so. Profiting from downloaded files was deemed unethical and even considered stealing (R7).

When people did not share, it was sometimes because of fear that uploading increased legal risks, rather than a lack of desire to share. Like a quarter of respondents, R29 said that before “all these lawsuits, I was quite open to sharing. But now . . . , I am not sharing. I just get what I want and then go.”

Discussion

Analysis of Findings

The content industries have largely portrayed file sharers one-dimensionally, accusing them of stealing simply to obtain free content. Our respondents reported varied motivations guiding their downloading, including sampling a variety of content, avoiding long waiting times, and accessing content that is difficult to find in Singapore or is censored or banned. The range of free content available allowed some to step outside their comfort zones to explore material they would not otherwise access. File sharers also experience a sense of community in P2P networks, with norms of reciprocity that motivate some to upload. To regard file sharers as homogeneously unethical and criminal is oversimplified. The findings suggest P2P downloading is being used in arguably positive ways to fulfill file sharers' needs that the content industries have not met. For example, exploring more content than one could afford to purchase, from different eras and from around the world, can hardly be seen as a one-dimensionally negative motivation. One can, for example, easily imagine a musician or filmmaker undertaking such an exploration or someone who just wants to refine their taste in music or movies. Similarly, avoiding content that is badly translated or badly censored is a motivation based on enjoying a better aesthetic experience, not a desire to steal.

Ultimately, our findings are good news for the content industries. Our file-sharing respondents did not appear to be simply thieves without respect for copyright but instead seemed to fundamentally respect intellectual property, as evidenced most clearly by the majority's reported desire to, and practice of, paying for work they like. The problem seems to be aligning the content industries with consumer demands. Paid downloads may be the answer. Progression from hard copies to digital distribution

could address many of our respondents' motivations for downloading by shortening waiting times, lowering costs, providing convenient access to a wider variety of material, and providing the ability to communicate about content in a virtual community. The answer of paid downloads raises many questions, however, about how exactly such a model would operate. Paid download systems, such as Apple's iTunes, RealNetworks' Rhapsody, and Amazon's download service, were not available in Singapore when this study was conducted. Though such models could help reduce piracy, illegal downloading continues where these services are offered. Though it is beyond this study's scope to explore the economics of paid legal downloading systems, we use our findings as a launching point for discussing how such systems could address file sharers' motivations.

In some markets, incentives to download may be greater than others. Asia has come under intense scrutiny in U.S. antipiracy efforts "for failing to sufficiently protect American producers of music, movies and other copyrighted material from widespread piracy" (Crutsinger, 2007). The problem may be less rooted in any lack of cultural support in Asia for copyright and more in practical considerations. Timely access to content, while there is still worldwide excitement about it, was central for most of our respondents, and some were concerned with access to censored content. Paid digital distribution may provide such access.

Distributors of music and mainstream movies are likely to generate intense demand, and hit television programs like *American Idol* have recognized that a way to generate huge international audiences and circumvent piracy is to release content simultaneously, or nearly simultaneously, worldwide—even in small markets like Singapore (Wang, 2003). Near-simultaneous release seems required in a global media marketplace because even if content is not legally available in a particular market, fans know about it through online media, and many will download it illegally rather than waiting. Bollywood distributors already offer legal downloads of content released in India, targeted primarily at foreign audiences (Frater, 2007), an example other content providers, such as distributors of anime and television serials, might follow to combat piracy. Singapore's anime community is an example of a group of fans of nonmainstream content who are particularly ill-served by their current legal local market. Respondents who enjoyed anime said that it took too long for titles to reach Singapore, and the selection eventually offered was extremely limited compared to what was produced in Japan and badly translated. If the content industries could promptly and cost-effectively meet worldwide consumer demand through high-quality legal downloads at reasonable prices, the industries could gain from it.

Respondents observed that P2P networks provide access to content in what Lessig calls its second life, much of which is still copyright protected but not commercially available and often in danger of disappearing from our culture (Lessig, 2004). Shorter copyright terms may help allow access to dated works that are no longer commercially circulated, which are nonetheless important to "the spread and

stability of culture” (Lessig, 2004, p. 113). However, even in the absence of shorter copyright terms, digital distribution may allow the content industries to combat piracy if they can make digital downloads conveniently accessible at the right price. Perhaps, paid download services could serve as such archives, but their success would depend on providing access at an acceptable price, which is unlikely to be the same for content in its commercial and second lives.

Respondents reported that receiving and spreading content they enjoyed created a sense of virtual community, often with people around the world, with a spirit of sharing and ethical obligations of reciprocity (cf. Giesler, 2006; Guadamuz, 2002). This motivated some to upload, even though free riding by not uploading (called *leeching*) is common (Becker & Clement, 2006). As has long been observed in virtual groups, even weak ties can be accompanied by reciprocity and feelings of community among at least some participants (Rheingold, 2000), enough to sustain the communities.

Perhaps most notably, respondents discussed the importance of purchasing content they enjoyed, indicating respect for intellectual property. While users are violating copyright law, they are also deliberately following certain shared ethics—the ethics of the unethical within the file-sharing community—insisting on a balance between downloading, sharing, and purchasing content. Why do people abide by, and even insist on, ethical beliefs and practices while engaging in illegal file-sharing behavior? A possible explanation is suggested by R9: People understand and respect copyright’s central aims, though they may not necessarily agree with the ways copyrights are being enforced or feel adequately served by the ways content is distributed. Even as file sharers concede the necessity of intellectual property protection, deviance is acceptable to them in some circumstances.

As Lessig (2004) pointed out, the file-sharing problem may be temporary. Virtually all content will surely be digitized, given the ease of digitization, and because digital playback devices are already the norm. Consumers may be virtually always connected, through a range of devices, to all the content they wish to access. Accessing streamed content of one’s choice on a subscription basis may become so convenient and affordable that it replaces downloading. Until that time arrives, worldwide, results of this study may be relevant to those attempting to understand and counter piracy. Like us, and many commentators, over half our respondents saw that file sharing is changing the content industries, and they must revolutionize their business models to compete. Some suggested that CDs and DVDs are already outdated: “In the digital age, very few people want to buy hardcopy anymore” (R9). With file sharing, “people [now] know that there *are* other options” (R38), and the industries must “be more creative in coming up with ways to stop people from downloading” (R29) and provide access to content.

The content industries are being dragged into the future, kicking and screaming, as they are forced to reject business models that were enormously profitable for decades. However enormous their participation, the gifting communities of the turn

of the millennium may be fleeting phenomena if the content industries find ways to combat most piracy by effectively marketing their work across multiple platforms at acceptable prices. Paid digital download services may even provide the bonds of virtual community, without the need for reciprocity in the form of uploading illegal content. Community bonds may be based on, and reciprocity may be expressed through, users' content recommendations and reviews, for example. If the content industries fail to adapt, we can expect piracy to continue, probably among file-sharing communities that are constantly morphing to stay ahead of the law.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Results from this study are exploratory, providing anecdotal evidence for file sharers' motivations. As with other qualitative studies, our findings cannot be generalized to the population of file sharers due to the nonrepresentative sample of respondents, who were recruited through snowball sampling. Future quantitative research can be used to supplement our findings, and perhaps motivations of different types of file sharers can be identified and explored. Another limitation of snowball sampling was the relatively homogeneous sample that resulted: More than half of our respondents were undergraduates living in Singapore aged between 20 and 22. Since we relied on self-reports of motivations and actions, rather than actual observed practices, our respondents may have answered questions in ways they saw as socially desirable, though the interviewers' impressions were that they seemed candid. By requiring that our respondents had purchased at least one CD or DVD since beginning downloading, we may have excluded potential respondents with different views. Future research can explore further how motivations differ among file-sharing communities, such as those on services that make a user's ratio of files uploaded to those downloaded accessible to other users, and those that do not.

Conducting this study in Singapore introduced limitations and strengths. Because of censorship, the lag for some content to reach Singapore's small market, and the unavailability of paid downloading services, incentives to download illegally may be particularly high, which may limit applicability of some of our results to markets like the United States and Europe. However, many other countries share Singapore's circumstances.

Conclusion

Our findings suggest some file sharers turn to downloading to satisfy desires that current commercial markets inadequately meet. Respondents are motivated by factors such as timely, convenient access to a wide variety of content when downloading entertainment content. Thus, perhaps piracy may be reduced if content industries

can address consumer and align themselves with market demands by providing convenient access at the right price through digital distribution.

After sitting down for an hour with 40 file sharers, the picture that emerges is not of greedy thieves with no regard for intellectual property, nor of idealists who believe all entertainment media should be free in an upcoming utopia, but of entertainment enthusiasts eager to explore a variety of content and even to support their favorite artists. Though we cannot assess how representative our respondents are of file sharers generally, our results are at least indicative of the views of some. Surely, the content industries can better accommodate them.

Note

1. Torrents are a type of decentralized, peer-to-peer (P2P) file that people can share. Each torrent file contains a metadata file that downloads from many peers and seeders—other people using the network—when it is loaded onto a P2P application. Once the download is complete for a file, it becomes a seed. Leaving files to seed means that other people can download the file from this user.

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