

'Robin Hoods of the digital age'

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Many illegal file sharers believe they are the 'Robin Hoods of the digital age' and are motivated by altruism and a desire for notoriety, according to new research which analyses why people illegally download digital media.

The research by Joe Cox, from the University of Portsmouth Business School, is the first study to distinguish between the characteristics, motivations and behaviors of different types of file sharers. It is published in the academic journal, *Information Economics and Policy*.

Mr. Cox used Finnish national survey data, which captured [file sharing](#) habits, socio-economic status and [attitudes](#) towards legal and illegal file sharing of 6103 respondents from across a range of income brackets. Ninety-five per cent of the respondents were male and the average age was 28.

File sharing, the transfer of files from one computer to another over a network, allows a number of people to make exact copies of the same file.

It is hoped that this research into people's actions related to illegal file sharing activity, will inform future policy-making.

“Although it is difficult to measure the true extent of how illegal file sharing has affected the creative industries, I do believe it is a significant threat in terms of loss of employment and revenues,” said Mr. Cox.

“Some file sharers see themselves as masked philanthropists – the Robin Hoods of the digital age. They believe their activities shouldn’t be considered illegal, which means finding the most appropriate form of deterrence and punishment is extremely difficult.”

The government’s current plan to tackle illegal file sharing and internet piracy is the Digital Economy Act, which aims to see persistent illegal file sharers disconnected from the web by their Internet Service Providers (ISPs).

The Act was due to come into force in January 2011 but is now under judicial review after TalkTalk and BT successfully appealed against it.

Mr. Cox separates file sharers into two groups – ‘leechers’ and ‘seeders’. Leechers are those who download digital media illegally from other parties, but who are not explicitly making content available in return. Seeders are those who have acquired the material in the first instance and are making it available to leechers.

He said: “It’s a fascinating area to research because the seeders who are sharing the material appear to have little obvious gain and are certainly not doing it for any financial reward.

“My research shows they are motivated by feelings of [altruism](#), community spirit and are seeking recognition among other members of the [file sharing](#) community. I think it’s likely some benefit is also derived from a feeling of ‘getting one over on the system’ too.

“Seeders seem to consider the expected cost of punishment to be minimal, which is largely due to the low perceived likelihood of detection. It’s as if they believe the peer esteem they’ll generate from their infamy will outweigh any of the costs associated with their activities.”

Provided by University of Portsmouth

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