

Research finds copyright confusion has 'chilling effects' in online creative publishing

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Online content creation has become easier than ever and is quickly reaching parity with content consumption. From writing a blog or social media post to letting an app turn your photos into a video montage, anyone with an Internet connection can publish these creations with the click of a button.

But in the age of Web publishing, it has become increasingly confusing for content creators to figure out how to protect their original works or to use other content legally—such as for remixes or parodies—on major websites for user-generated content, including YouTube and DeviantArt. These findings are from a new Georgia Tech study that found that copyright is a frequent topic of conversation—and confusion—in eight of the most popular creative [online communities](#) worldwide, which collectively have some 20 million publicly available forum posts on their sites.

The study notes that [copyright law](#) is navigated on a daily basis by Internet users, and that for amateur creative types publishing on the Web's largest creative venues, they often don't trust the websites to safeguard their art. The findings include user concerns about whether the websites can prevent others from copying their work without permission or outright pirating or plagiarizing. On the other end of the spectrum are those who want to legally reuse and remix content online but have no clear path on how to pursue this option. When seeking advice on when they are allowed to appropriate or remix content, users are sometimes discouraged from doing so, either by website policies or by other users

interpreting the law too strictly. Researchers say this acts as a chilling effect, when users choose not to do something that is legally permitted for fear of getting into trouble.

"The dataset showed specific instances of chilling effects within these communities," says Casey Fiesler, a Ph.D. candidate in Human-Centered Computing and the primary investigator. "These include decisions by users not to upload their work onto YouTube due to improper takedown notices or creators being told that their work would definitely be infringing if they didn't get permission from the copyright holder."

For those seeking to publish original work online, several had concerns over whether the websites could enforce their own policies and protect the uploaded content. Fiesler says this acts as another type of chilling effect that has the same outcome of fewer amateur artists publishing on digital platforms.

With an initial dataset of 100,000 public forum posts from websites dedicated to user-generated video, writing, art and music, Georgia Tech researchers found that copyright had a prominent place in discussion threads. For example, at any given point an estimated 13 percent of the posts in YouTube help forums are about copyright. The posts were primarily Q&A threads under general topics since none of the sites offered dedicated copyright forums.

The researchers determined a list of 16 keywords (e.g. attorney, illegal, permission, license, copying) to filter the posts for the study, which resulted in a clear theme that permeated the user discussions:

"Over and over again, the prevalence of problems related to copyright was expressed by creators in the conversations," says Fiesler. "Most of the posts in our dataset could be labeled as expressing some sort of problem."

The five major problem or challenge areas identified were:

For creators seeking to appropriate or reuse content -

- (1) avoiding trouble
- (2) dealing with consequences

For creators seeking to protect their work -

- (3) fear of infringement
- (4) dealing with infringement

For both groups -

- (5) "Incomplete information" preventing them from making informed decisions on copyright.

- See more at: [www.cc.gatech.edu/news/georgia ...sthash.LZ0EYBOX.dpuf](http://www.cc.gatech.edu/news/georgia...sthash.LZ0EYBOX.dpuf)

To address these issues, the study gives potential solutions for online community designers such as recommending "plain English" copyright policies and having website owners monitor user conversations or answer copyright-related questions. Fiesler notes that some social norms adopted by the user base on each website could help inform how to shape policies for sharing and limiting reuse of [content](#) on the sites. She says in some cases, website policies that include user feedback go beyond the requirements of the law as it relates to copyright. Also, designing websites that prompt users to acknowledge whether work is their own or they found it elsewhere online serves as a simple copyright reminder at the time of upload.

The researchers conclude that copyright policy is deeply intertwined with any kind of creative activity online, especially in the context of sharing or collaboration. "This study reveals that [copyright](#) policy is an important aspect of interactions between creators in these online communities, and therefore should be an important part of the user model in design decisions," says Fiesler.

More information: The Georgia Tech study, "Understanding Copyright Law in Online Creative Communities," will be presented at the 18th ACM Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing (CSCW 2015) taking place March 14-18, 2015. [cfiesler.files.wordpress.com/2 ... fiesler_csw2015.pdf](#)

Provided by Georgia Institute of Technology

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