

Is music downloading the new prohibition? What students reveal through an ethical dilemma

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Published online: 17 January 2009
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Abstract Although downloading music through unapproved channels is illegal, statistics indicate that it is widespread. The following study examines the attitudes and perceptions of college students that are potentially engaged in music downloading. The methodology includes a content analysis of the recommendations written to answer an ethical vignette. The vignette presented the case of a subject who faces the dilemma of whether or not to download music illegally. Analyses of the final reports indicate that there is a vast and inconsistent array of actions and underlying feelings toward digital music downloading. The findings reveal inconsistencies between participants' recommendations (what the subject should do) and their attitudes and opinions on the matter (what they would do in a similar situation). These inconsistencies support the notion that as technology evolves, it creates discrepancies between the way things are and the way the law expects them to be, leaving society in a muddle, trying to reconcile the two. What remains to be seen is whether the discrepancy in the case of music downloading becomes extreme enough that the law changes to accommodate an increasingly prevalent behavior, or whether new business models will emerge to bridge the gap between legality and reality.

Keywords Music piracy · Ethical dilemma · Content analysis · Case study

Introduction

Downloading music through unapproved channels is illegal, yet it is increasingly rampant, particularly among younger Internet users (Walker 2003; Zernike 2003). In fact, according to the latest Pew Internet and American Life survey, the percentage of Internet users who admit downloading music has increased from 18% in 2004 to 22% in 2005 (Pew Internet 2005). From a socially optimistic perspective we would expect that our laws reflect the moral perceptions of society and in turn are obeyed by the majority of morally inclined citizens. However, current events indicate a disconnect somewhere along this path of logical expectation in the case of digital music downloading. As has happened in the past (e.g., widespread disobedience of the prohibition of alcohol in America of the 1920s) society seems to be repelling its own behavioral guidelines. A fierce struggle ensues between society and its conscience. The following study is an investigation into what is occurring in society's collective mind as it continues to download digital music.

Ethics, simply defined (American Heritage Dictionary 1982), are principles of right or good conduct. The study of ethics has been practiced since ancient times and has been applicable in every generation since. Any decision that involves possibilities that by social standards are not exclusively right or wrong is a situation in need of the application of ethical principles (Kallman and Grillo 1996). In our times, new technological developments bring about new situations in which individual decision makers must call upon their ethical principles to aid them in making

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their choice of conduct. In particular, the confluence of high quality digital music formats, broadband Internet connections, and newer digital distribution systems represents technological innovations that challenge traditional views of property and theft.

Distinct from the ethicality of an action is the legal status of that action. Kallman and Grillo (1996) provide a framework with which to classify various actions. The framework combines the ethical dimension with the legal dimension in a matrix offering four possibilities: ethical-legal, ethical-not legal, not ethical-legal and not ethical-not legal. While unethical actions are often illegal, and ethical ones are typically legal, particular acts that could potentially be ethical but not legal or legal but not ethical pose interesting dilemmas. The potential disconnect between law and ethics is often due to the fast pace of changes in technology and their vast impacts on society (Laudon and Laudon 2006). Technology is a stone that creates ripples in the social and political institutions that in turn must scurry to keep up with new realities.

Digital music downloading is a technological development that seems to exemplify this phenomenon. Music piracy has existed as an illegal form of music production since the adoption of the cassette recorder in the 1970s. Even with the evolution of duplication technology through the 1980s and 1990s society continued to pirate. By the 2000s, however, technology was not only providing an illegal means to *produce* music, Internet file sharing had given the general public a means for music *distribution* as well (Bishop 2004). Combining peer-to-peer technology with the proliferation of broadband technology, the devaluation of digital storage, and the improved compression of digital information has created a world where sharing large amounts of digital music has become instantaneous, effortless, and inexpensive without impacting the quality of the music. Technology advances coupled with the willingness of many people to offer their copyrighted music files to others despite the risks, explains this phenomenon from the supply perspective (Becker and Clement 2006). Furthermore, the impersonal nature of the transaction of piracy executed over the Internet reinforces the anonymity of the act and fuels the popularity of illegal downloading (Lysonski and Durvasula 2008). Therefore, it follows that the advent of peer-to-peer music distribution increases “the piracy rate over and above that found when pirates produced optical discs” (Hill 2007). In fact, while pre-Internet piracy was significant, digital music piracy is increasing exponentially in recent years as it is increasingly carried out over the Internet (Gopal et al. 2004; Lysonski and Durvasula 2008; Wu and Sukoco 2007).

The new fast and easy means of distributing music has forced society into a muddle of uncertainty with how to incorporate it into existing social and legal structures. As a

result, much debate has arisen as people comprehend and adapt to the changes from different viewpoints. The following investigation is designed to elicit the perceptions of music downloading that underlie the decision to refrain from or partake in the growing trend. We seek signs of a possible perceived discrepancy between law and ethics and some indications of a resolution of such a conflict.

Background

Recent academic literature is devoting attention to the issue of music downloads from many perspectives. While some studies conduct surveys to determine the attitudes and perceptions about the issue, others employ more sophisticated methods to uncover the predictors of the tendency to download music. Siegfried (2004) conducted a survey on student attitudes regarding computer ethics at two colleges in the New York area. The results show that more than 80% of the students do not see any problem with downloading music from the Internet without paying for it. It seems that anything accessible through the Internet free of charge is legitimately available for downloading, regardless of the copyright protections of the material.

The notion that material available on the Internet is just another resource that can be used is succinctly captured in a New York Times article about downloading music and plagiarizing materials from the Internet at college campuses (Zernike 2003). In fact, a study by Pew Internet and American Life project in 2002 found that 56% of college students download music, and students are more likely than downloaders in general to admit that they do not care if the music is copyrighted when they download it. Although recent efforts by the recording industry—such as lawsuits against individuals who shared copyrighted music over the Internet, the shut-down of Napster and a widespread advertising campaign against downloading—have brought attention to the issue, the prevalence of music downloads is still captured in more recent Pew Internet surveys.

Clearly, not every college student downloads music from the Internet through unapproved channels. In a study about attitudes and perceptions on music downloads using college students as subjects, Levin et al. (2004) found that only 63% of respondents download music. Those who download music have lesser ethical concerns and greater willingness to endorse ethically questionable acts, than those who do not download. In addition, downloaders are more likely to admit that downloading files is not harmful for the artists or the record companies. The authors of this study conclude that “there is a common theme among students who download music in that they believe it is a harmless act” (Levin et al. 2004, p. 56).

There are two types of music piracy behavior, unauthorized download from the Internet and purchase of pirated music. According to Chiou et al. (2005), who developed a model and conducted a survey among teenagers in Taiwan, these two types of music piracy behaviors share, for the most part, the same antecedents. Their results showed that satisfaction with current copyrighted music products in terms of price and quality tends to curtail unauthorized music download or the purchasing of pirated music products. In contrast, lower perceptions of prosecution risk and magnitude of consequences, and social consensus increase the intention to engage in both types of music piracy behavior.

Some supporters of the concept of music sharing argue that downloads give users the opportunity to sample music before purchasing it. Recent empirical research supports this argument. Using a model of music sharing that combines economic and technological incentives to sample and purchase, Gopal et al. (2006) find that promoting digital sampling via downloads actually encourages purchases of music. In contrast, Huang (2005) argues that consumer behaviors cannot be analyzed exclusively from an economic perspective and that moral reasoning matters in the area of digital-content consumption. Moreover, this type of consumption is influenced by the consumers' need for social networking and their expertise and capabilities to engage in music sharing.

In a recent study about downloading intentions, LaRose and Kim (2007) found that the most important determinants of intentions were the expected outcomes of downloading as well as the deficient self-regulation mechanisms of those who download music. While the music industry seeks to curb illegal file sharing through selective prosecutions and educational campaigns, the deficient self-regulation of downloaders counteracts these efforts by maintaining file sharing as a persistent practice.

Most of the empirical literature on music downloading consists of surveying subjects about their intentions to download and the antecedents of this type of behavior. Very few studies, to the best of our knowledge, attempt to examine the topic from the perspective of a third party, where participants are asked for advice with regards to downloading music. It is possible that when asked for their opinions in an ethical dilemma, subjects will recommend the ethically correct choice, regardless of their personal preferences. Alternatively, people may use this advice-giving opportunity to disclose their actual feelings on the issue.

Research methods

Case studies have been noted to be an ideal way to analyze ethical dilemmas because they get discussants involved in a

specific ethical scenario (Benbunan-Fich 1998). Similarly, by removing the discussant from the dilemma, this model is also effective in uncovering the truths of his/her feelings about an otherwise sensitive topic. Therefore a short case scenario was developed for this study. The case is a story of a college student who is strapped for cash and is faced with the ethical dilemma of whether or not to download music through unapproved channels as a party gift for his friend. The complete text of the case follows.

John is a sophomore in college and he is paying for his own education and living expenses in New York. Daily, he commutes by train from his part time job to attend evening classes at the college. To help him unwind and shift modes, he enjoys listening to music on his hand-me-down MP3 player during his commute. Strapped for cash, John is unable to invest money in CD's to enhance his limited music collection. He feels he must conserve as much money as he possibly can to help pay for the textbooks and software that he needs for his classes. John feels that his best option is to download free but copyrighted MP3 files using one of the popular peer-to-peer sites that allow users to share music among themselves, even though he is aware that they are not approved by the authorities that represent the recording industry.

This semester John has been invited to a classmate's party. He welcomes the break from his everyday routine and the opportunity to hang out with his friends but he feels uncomfortable showing up without a gift. Having used the last of his spending money on his regular expenses, John burns a dozen of his friend's favorite selections from his own downloaded MP3 collection onto a CD and brings it with him to the party. The CD turns out to be a big hit among the party guests.

We follow the guidelines of Benbunan-Fich (1998) who evaluates the merits of conducting case discussions in teams to aid in vetting out the issues as the team strives for consensus. In addition, it is noted that electronic communication assures equal opportunity for all team members to participate regardless of physical or social characteristics. For this study, participants were randomly assigned to groups of three and given a synchronous computer-mediated communication (chat) system through which to discuss the case. Their assignment was to produce, as a group, a written recommendation for the character in the case. Participants were asked to answer specific questions in their reports as follows:

Based on your knowledge and personal experience, please answer the following questions:

1. Is John right or wrong in his decision to download music? Why?

2. If John came to you for advice, what would you recommend him to do (to download or not to download) for himself? For his friend? For the party guests? Justify your recommendation.
3. Was John's friend right or wrong in his decision to play the music at the party? If you were him, how would you have dealt with the situation?
4. What do you think should be done with the CD after the party is over? Why?

Participants were drawn from a college student population, a subset of the most active music downloading population. A preliminary review of the reports produced verifies, as expected, a wide range of combinations of responses to the case including many different arguments for and against downloading music. In spite of (or perhaps because of) the ad hoc nature of the teams and the anonymity of the participants, admissions of having participated in music downloading are also detected in the reports.

Analysis and results

We successfully recruited 87 groups of participants (251 individuals) to discuss the case electronically and write recommendations. Of the 87 reports, two were lost during the collection process, leaving 85 analyzable reports. The reports were coded according to an a priori scheme to classify the answers to the explicit questions presented by the case, and for the presence of personal admissions regarding digital music downloading. During coding, it was found that two groups did not complete the assignment as expected and their reports could not be coded. Therefore, 83 reports were coded by each of the two coders.

Inter-coder reliability using intra-class correlation (ICC) was found to be at an acceptable level ($>.7$) for the answers to the four questions and to the admission of downloading activity. See Table 1.

The discrepancies between raters for these five items were reconciled by a third coder. Often the differences were found to be due to nuances in the responses that were understood differently by the different coders. For example, some groups reported that it is acceptable to download

for personal use but not to bring to the party, or that it is illegal to download but that it is fine for John to do it. A summary of the response codes derived from the reports is shown in Table 2.

In Table 2, we note that almost half (48%) of the sample of reports show agreement with the notion that it is not right to download music. However, the majority (67%) of reports reveal that in this case they would advise John to download music. Using a binomial analysis, we find that the advice distribution (33% do not download vs. 67% download) is significantly different from a 50–50 distribution (Z -value = 3.66, $p < .01$). In contrast, the downloading position distribution (48% believe downloading is fine vs. 52% believe downloading is not acceptable) is not significantly different from a 50–50 distribution.

The coding of the reports further suggests that the majority (83%) believes it is appropriate to play the CD at the party and about 46% thinks that the host should keep the CD as a gift. Two major reasons underlie the groups' recommendations to John: (1) Financial reasons: As a college student, struggling to make ends meet, John is justified in downloading music; (2) Ease of downloading music. About 41% of the reports contained an acknowledgment of the prevalence of illegal music downloads (29%) or an admission of personally engaging in music download (12%).

To further investigate the relationship between the advice given and the underlying attitude toward downloading, we divide the sample into clusters based upon the combination of their answers to the first two questions. We want to learn how many groups fall into each of the following clusters:

1. Feel that downloading is wrong and advise John not to do it.
2. Feel that downloading is wrong but advise John to do it anyway.
3. Feel that downloading is fine but advise John not to do it in this case.
4. Feel that downloading is fine and advise John to go ahead with it.

Examining Table 3, which reports the frequencies for each cluster, we see that the groups are significantly unevenly distributed among the clusters ($\chi^2 = 21.9$; $p < .0001$). Clusters 1 and 4 combined have the most groups (75%) and provide reports where the advice is consistent with their feelings. Specifically, only 28% of the reports seem to agree with the law and would act accordingly (cluster 1), while the 39 groups in cluster 4 (47%) condone actions contrary to law and do so guiltlessly. The remaining 25% of the reports (clusters 2 and 3) advised actions that were not consistent with their underlying

Table 1 Inter-coder reliability

Variable	ICC
OK to download?	.865
Advice to John	.912
Play CD at party?	.912
Keep CD	.757
Admission	.915

Table 2 Summary of responses to the case

Variable	Responses (%)			
OK to download?	No: 48	Yes: 52		
Advice to John	Don't download: 33	Download: 67		
Play CD at party?	No: 17	Yes: 83		
Keep CD	John: 5	Host: 46	Nobody: 18	Unclear: 31
Admission	None: 59	Personal: 12	Universal: 29	

Table 3 Cluster frequencies

Cluster	Type of answer	Count	Percent
1	Downloading is wrong—do not do it	23	28
2	Downloading is wrong—but do it	17	20
3	Downloading is fine—but not in this case	4	5
4	Downloading is fine—go ahead	39	47

feelings about the issue, a clear sign of the moral uncertainty and the struggle that people encounter between what they fundamentally feel is right and what they feel comfortable doing.

Although not significantly different from a 50–50 distribution, the sample of reports is split slightly in favor of considering music downloading being right (52%) versus wrong (48%). Some quotes from the reports establish these overall positions with respect to music downloading in general and apply it to John's situation.

Group 445: It is not wrong to download music, people make a big deal about stealing music is wrong.

Group 414: ...downloading music and burning it on to a CD. Is this ethical or not? One would say that it is socially acceptable, according to the general consensus. However John is still ethically incorrect.

Group 416: It is unethical and immoral to share copyrighted material such as music. However, in a society where people are pressured to make choices illegal music sharing is very common. In John's case, we believe he is morally wrong downloading music and presenting it as a gift.

While some groups refused to justify downloading under any circumstances, others offered many excuses such as technological developments promoting the ease of downloading, as the following quotes illustrate:

Group 402: While the act of downloading copyrighted materials is fairly popular nowadays, any excuse to justify it is morally wrong.

Group 455: ...it's too easy to find their favor[ite] music over the internet and download it. So, the problem is not the people, who download music from internet, it's the people who set up those websites. Thus, if there is penalty for download music from

internet, the penalty should be on website creators. It's not the downloaders.

Other groups used financial arguments to justify their positions and condone downloading in cases where people had financial constraints or when there was no intention to obtain profit from downloading music.

Group 413: There are many college students who download and burn music because they do not have enough cash or resources to pay for it. Downloading and burning music is easier than ever, so it does not seem to be a big deal for someone to download songs.

Group 460: He was downloading the music anyway, which is what everyone does in college. Also, he was not making a profit off of the CD he made.

Some groups showed total disregard for the consequences of the people involved at the two ends of the downloading stream—consumers and artists.

Group 410: If every person were to be arrested for downloading music on their computers or MP3 players, somewhere around 80% of the student population would be behind bars. And it was not as though John was downloading with the intention making a profit.

Group 403: We don't think downloading music is wrong. Almost everyone does it, especially in college. Although it doesn't make it fair for the authors or the artists, we don't care.

Further analyses of the impacts of downloading on the music industry were also present in the reports. While some were sympathetic to striving artists, others had no tolerance. Some went so far as to suggest that downloading is in fact beneficial to the artists:

Group 414: The artists from which he downloaded music don't get compensated for their music. He steals their profits and even if he is in a financial jam, he is still stealing from a hard-working innocent.

Group 485: We must consider all of the musicians that are suffering because of the revenue being lost each day because of these free music sites.

Group 449: ...people like John, who might not even be able to afford a credit card to buy music online,

should have access to music even if they can't afford to pay exorbitant prices... the music industry should be structured in a way that allows artists to receive reasonable compensation for their time (which is not currently the case) while keeping music executives from being overgenerously compensated.

Group 476: John is actually, helping in promoting the music by playing it at the party.

Remarkably, most of the groups agreed that playing downloaded music at the party was not a problem.

Group 452: When it comes to questioning the idea of playing the music, we agree that John should "blast" the music as if he bought it.

Group 431: We thought that it wasn't a big deal since most of music played at most parties is downloaded anyways.

Still, many reports discussed the tendency to follow the majority's actions, some condoning and some criticizing it:

Group 472: John is right to download the music ... the majority of the public does it, so it does not matter if John does it or some other people does it.

Group 414: People are too hung up on the consensus and what 95% of people do as opposed to questioning what it is the 95% are doing.

Some reports show empathy with John, as group members identified with this fictional fellow college student facing financial difficulties.

Group 437: If we were him, we would have done the same thing.

Group 427: we would ask him to burn us a copy too, that is, if the songs were good!

It is perhaps due to the empathy felt for John that some reports contain very personal admissions of music downloads.

Group 429: [We] have downloaded thousands of songs illegally to bring to a party, or to give to a friend for his or her car.

Group 426: we all know downloading is illegal, but we all do it anyways.

Group 430: It's stealing [sic]. However, all three of us do it. The fact that we do it does not make it right.

To summarize, "the case of John the poor college student who downloaded music and then made a copy on a CD for a friend's party," as concisely captured in one of the reports, was used as a data collection instrument in this research. By analyzing the group reports, we were able to obtain quantitative and qualitative data to understand and illustrate where the students stand in the music

downloading debate. These reports also provided a window to understand how students reason through ethical dilemmas.

Discussion

An integration of our quantitative and qualitative findings suggests that the reports are spread in a continuum of positions from "Downloading is wrong—Do not do it" to "Downloading is fine—Do it." Notably, while the downloading position distribution is not different from 50–50, the advice distribution is skewed in favor of recommending download (67% advise to download). Seemingly, there is a portion of the sample that, although they agree that downloading is wrong, would condone doing it (and perhaps do it themselves) nonetheless.

The quantitative and qualitative results serve to highlight the lack of clarity that is so obviously surrounding the ability to very easily and inexpensively gain access to the same music that would otherwise be very costly. Only about half of the reports show agreement with the notion that there is a problem with downloading music at all. Still, many of those reports also indicate agreement with the significant majority of the reports that advocate downloading. Clearly, there is something lost in the translation between what is legally correct and what is practically convenient. The law dictates society to refrain, but society overwhelmingly chooses otherwise.

These results resonate with some other quantitative studies that have probed attitudes towards music downloading. For example, it has been shown based on a survey of students that there is a disconnect between one's ethical nature and his/her ethical beliefs about downloading. The very same people who consider themselves to have a strong ethical ideal and would not steal a music CD from a store seem to be ambivalent about downloading music (Lysonski and Durvasula 2008). This indifference toward the ethical consequences of downloading music is further informed by quantitative studies that indicate that a majority of students believe that it is acceptable to download music from the Internet and commit other forms of piracy (Siegfried 2004) and actually do engage in downloading (Levin et al. 2004).

The unique methodology and analysis employed by the current study, however, serves to further fine-tune the lessons learned previously from the quantitative analyses of student questionnaires. Firstly, we find that in contrast to Siegfried (2004) who found a vast majority (82%) of college students agreeing that it is acceptable to download music, only about half of our sample indicated the same approval. Since the data for this study was collected from the results of a group discussion, students were forced to vet the issue and examine its various angles. After hearing

and thinking about others' perspectives and engaging in sometimes heated debates, more student groups came to the conclusion that it is not acceptable to download music through unapproved channels. As it seems, when confronted by the downloading dilemma individually, students tend not to analyze the issues involved and assume that it is okay, perhaps because it is an activity that is so familiar to them. An implication of this finding is that getting students involved in discussions about music downloading could help raise their awareness of the issues involved and influence their attitudes toward it.

At the same time, although some students are consciously realizing that downloading is not necessarily acceptable, a great majority of them still report that they would recommend doing so. Apparently, just as previous studies have found, the legal and ethical implications are not necessarily strong enough to inhibit the majority of the students from taking advantage of music online. Further, by dividing the sample into clusters, the current study reveals combinations of students' feelings towards downloading and their recommendations to download. This unique analysis serves to uncover the overall uncertainty regarding what to think and how to act in response to the changing means of music distribution. Even after group discussions, ambivalent positions remain, as some recognize that downloading is not acceptable but still recommend it.

Thus, the ripple effect seems to have been set in motion. Technology is rapidly advancing and society is absorbing the consequences of those changes. The outcome, brought to light by this study, is a vast and inconsistent array of actions and underlying feelings toward digital music downloading. While some commiserate with artists whose work should be compensated, others resent the financial burden placed on the music consumers to enrich the already rich and famous. Some only want to do what is mandated by the law. Still others do not seem to even be evaluating the situation before they do "what everybody else does" because it is easy, convenient, available, and low-risk.

Yet whatever the justification, it is clear based upon the results of this study, that music downloading has become part and parcel of the social fabric of our society despite its illegal status. History has seen this phenomenon before. In the 1920s prohibition of alcohol was such a vastly unpopular law among American citizens that it ultimately had to be repealed. The continued path of the ripples in the case of music downloading, though, remains to be seen. How will ethical and legal standards respond to the new realities? Do we continue to condemn and punish? Or is it possible to transfer some of technology's innovative energy into the social and legal structures to create an environment where music patrons can listen and music creators can get fairly compensated?

Researchers have begun to explore some of the options to fill just that gap (Bockstedt et al. 2005; Dubosson-Torbay et al. 2004; Premkumar 2003). Some new business models have recently developed as well. iTunes and others are a first attempt at providing the ease, flexibility, and affordability that downloaders are looking for without violating copyright law. And still, it is questionable whether artists are being satisfactorily rewarded. The music group RadioHead, which recently announced that its music will be available on its Web site for consumers to download and pay as much as they want (Hannon 2008), represents a similar attempt at social reform in reaction to the downloading dilemma. Perhaps the artists following the recent trend to focus on concerts rather than recording music at all until there is a better solution to the music morass are onto something (Rayner 2008).

Conclusion

The confluence of several factors explains why digital music piracy has grown exponentially in recent years. On the technology front, the proliferation of peer-to-peer technologies and broadband Internet access has connected millions of people directly with each other. Along with this increased connectivity, there is a "sharing" environment where people are willing to offer music files to unknown others (supply side) and to download music from others (demand side). In addition to higher levels of supply and demand, the digital format allows for infinite distribution without sacrificing the quality of the music. In this environment of technology-enabled "sharing" of copyrighted music files, the temptation to download is greater than the existing legal mechanisms to restrain it.

As this study has shown through content analysis of group reports recommending a course of action to a downloading dilemma, though half of the groups recognize that downloading is not acceptable, the majority still recommends doing it. It seems to be a case of "Everybody does it, so you should do it too." Perhaps the discrepancy between expectation of ethically correct behavior and reality will ultimately shift and a happy medium will somehow be attained. Either by adapting the legal frameworks (as in the case of the alcohol prohibition) and/or by developing new business models, it will be possible to bridge the gap between legality and reality.

Acknowledgments This research was funded in part by a PSC-CUNY grant #67792-00-36 and a Doctoral Student Research Grant from the CUNY Graduate Center. The authors gratefully acknowledge the capable research assistance of Robert Palermo of Iona College.

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