

Peer to Peer Networks: Politics, RIAA, and the 'Net's Future

By Aaron Turpen

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Peer to Peer Networks: Politics, RIAA, and the 'Net's Future
by Aaron Turpen of Aaronz WebWorkz

Politics are a sticky business. Technology is like a two year old. Put the two together and your VCR, dog, and laptop computer will never be the same. Hide the cell phone!

Currently, the latest political debates center around unsolicited email and illegal file trading. Both are hot issues and worthy of debate, but in my opinion, the issue of file trading will have more impact on the future of the Internet as a whole.

Why? Because the changes could be far-reaching and affect everything in technology from software to music to computer systems. It could even effect how your Internet Service Provider (ISP) allows you to connect to the Web! Everything could change according to the outcome of this debate.

There are valid arguments on both sides of the issue. One side says that ownership is ownership and if these record labels (represented as the Recording Industry Association of America, or RIAA) own the music, others shouldn't be stealing it or giving it away without compensation to the owner. I agree with this, since the majority of my livelihood comes from intellectual property.

However, the other side of the argument is for freedom of expression and open exchange – also called the “hacker ethic.” I also agree with this philosophy, since most of my education in technology has been because of the openness shared by many of the techno-geeks of the world when talking about technology.

So how do we resolve this issue without creating a paradox? Well, first of all, the near-fascists on the RIAA side need to settle down with their scare tactics and over-reaching attempts at enforcement. On the other side, the near-socialists of the “free everything” techno-world need to tighten up their definition of “free” and work with the for-profit industries who provide all this stuff they want to have for free.

The good news is that recent polls are showing that a mutually-beneficial agreement can be made.

Ad to that the recent moves by some members of RIAA towards a little compromise, and you have the makings of a good handshake for all concerned.

Recent polls show that, while CD music sales have suffered a 26% decline since 1999, most of the blame probably doesn't rest on file-sharing. In fact, 80% of those polled recently buy as much or more music than they did before file sharing became popular, despite being users of peer-to-peer networks for downloading. For many, Napster and similar sharing services actually rejuvenated interest in recorded music.

The reasons why can be varied and many theories exist. I tend to believe that music listeners just don't really buy as much music or can't find as much music that interests them anymore. On top of that, artists tend to release albums only once every three years on average. Ad to that the fact that most music downloaded for free is of lower quality than music purchased from a store (on CD) and you can get an easy conclusion: buyers are more selective about the music they buy and many are probably using file sharing as a "try before you buy" feature, since music on CD sounds better on the car stereo.

More good news comes from the fact that the world's second-largest record label, Universal Music Group, has cut its CD prices by 1/3 and many other record labels are expected to follow suit.

I think that the recording industry has a great opportunity here. Smart companies will start releasing free, lower-than-CD-quality tracks from new releases onto the Internet (full songs, not these ten-second "clips" they use now) with free distribution rights to anyone who wants to spread them around. These will get spread (with embedded artist, album, and titles for easy identification) freely and will lead to more sales of the actual album. It's a form of network marketing, something that has been used on the 'Net for years!

Labels could expand on this by allowing high-speed users to download the music tracks directly and burn their own CD-Rs – paying for each CD as they download it. They could even include album art (to be printed onto CD-R labels). These would vastly lower the cost to the label for producing their own hard CDs and could be sold to the consumer cheaper as compensation for the extra effort on their part. Win-win!!

If record labels insist on continuing their current draconian enforcement of ownership and if they do not change their business models to keep up with the changes in technology, ultimately they will fail. The lawsuits alone will probably cost them billions and, try as they might, they'll never be able to rid the Internet of file sharing programs: they're just too handy and prolific.

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Aaron Turpen is the proprietor of Aaronz WebWorkz, an online service provider to small and home businesses on the Internet. Subscribe to our FREE weekly newsletter!

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