

Topic question: Is copyright law still beneficial for society?

Version 1: reasonably good

With the rise of peer-to-peer file-sharing, copyright laws have become quite a bit more controversial. In the past, large-scale copyright infringement was limited to for-profit commercial publishers; the average person had little opportunity to run afoul of copyright. Today, ordinary people encounter conflicts with copyright law all the time. Someone using a file-sharing site for personal use may end up facing extortionate legal demands. Someone downloading a popular song can get into a lot of trouble, even if the purpose was simply to better follow the lyrics. Uploading a personal video to YouTube can get someone banned, if there was music playing in the background. However, these and other abusive practices by content owners do not change the fundamental justification of copyright, which is to create an incentive for the creation of new content. Without that incentive, most content will simply not be produced. Even garage bands prefer to sell their music to giving it away. Few authors will write carefully crafted novels without the hope of recompense. Essentially nobody creates films without lining up investors and calculating the payback; even a simple film can cost close to a million dollars. Without copyright, we would soon be without books and music and movies; our lives would be poorer. There is no such thing as a "personal-use" exemption: all entertainment use is personal. We may need new ways of handling some specific copyright situations, such as Fair Use, but fundamentally all consumers of content must understand that if it doesn't get paid for, it won't get made.

Version 2: not as strong an argument

Copyright has become very controversial. People are being sued left and right for downloading the songs and movies they love. In many cases, the songs are part of our culture. Torrent users have been sued, and music downloaders have been sued. If you're sued, you don't even get a chance to defend yourself! You have to pay the settlement because going to court is too expensive. This is just not fair, and this is all just for personal use; it's hard to see how this can be harmful. On the other hand, copyright has been around for a long time, and people should be paid for what they create. If they worked hard at it, they deserve compensation. Consumers have an ethical duty not to steal content. Even if the lawsuits against downloaders are the wrong way to go about this. But one thing is certain: the way these file-sharing lawsuits are happening, where users don't have a chance to defend themselves, has to stop. Something needs to be done.