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# **COPYRIGHT INFRINGEMENT IN THE DIGITAL SPACE: EXAMINING THE ROLE OF CONTENT PLATFORMS AND LEGAL REMEDIES**

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## **Abstract**

The rise of digital platforms has transformed how content is created, shared, and consumed, bringing forth unprecedented challenges in the realm of copyright law. In the digital space, where millions of users can upload and disseminate content instantly, copyright infringement has surged, affecting industries such as music, film, literature, and art. Content platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram, which serve as hubs for user-generated content, often become battlegrounds for copyright violations. This paper critically examines the role of these platforms in both facilitating and curbing copyright infringement, addressing how legal frameworks like the **Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA)** and international treaties seek to regulate digital content use.

The **DMCA**, enacted in 1998, provides a structured mechanism for copyright owners to protect their work in the digital realm, but it has faced criticism for its application in today's vastly different technological landscape. This law creates a "notice and takedown" system, wherein content platforms are shielded from liability for infringing content uploaded by users if they act expeditiously to remove it once notified. However, the ease with which infringing content can be uploaded again, even after takedown, raises questions about the efficacy of the DMCA in an era of instantaneous sharing and reposting. Moreover, the article explores the legal tension between copyright protection and free speech, as overly aggressive enforcement can stifle creativity and legitimate uses like parody, criticism, and education under the **fair use doctrine**. This paper also analyses landmark copyright infringement cases involving digital platforms,

including **Viacom International, Inc. v. YouTube, Inc.**, which underscored the complexities of platform liability for user-uploaded content. The case demonstrated the difficulty of balancing the responsibilities of content platforms in policing copyright violations without imposing undue burdens that could stifle the growth of digital economies. Additionally, the paper delves into **Universal Music Group v. TikTok**, which highlights the tension between content owners and platforms over licensing agreements, revenue sharing, and the fair use of music in user-generated content.

Content platforms often rely on automated content recognition systems, such as YouTube's **Content ID**, to identify and remove infringing material. While these technologies have streamlined the process, they are not without flaws, often resulting in over blocking or under blocking content. Such errors further complicate the balance between protecting copyright owners and allowing users to create and share content freely. The paper also addresses **blockchain technology** as a potential future solution for protecting digital copyrights, as it offers a decentralized way to track ownership and usage rights more transparently.

Further, the study delves into the global perspective of digital copyright protection, comparing frameworks such as the **European Union's Copyright Directive**, which aims to hold platforms more accountable for the infringing content hosted on their sites. The **Article 17** of the directive, in particular, has sparked debate due to its requirement that platforms preemptively filter content to prevent violations, a measure that has drawn criticism from both content creators and free speech advocates. The examination of these international regulations shed light on how different jurisdictions are grappling with the growing threat of copyright infringement in the digital age.

Finally, the paper explores legal remedies for content creators facing infringement on digital platforms. These include filing DMCA takedown notices, seeking statutory damages, and, in severe cases, pursuing litigation. While these remedies exist, many creators, particularly small or independent artists, lack the resources to engage in lengthy legal battles, raising concerns about accessibility to justice in protecting digital content.

In conclusion, this paper argues for a balanced approach that enhances the accountability of digital platforms while ensuring that legitimate uses of copyrighted content are not unduly stifled. The study underscores the importance of reforming copyright laws to better address the

challenges posed by rapid technological advancements, while also protecting the creative freedoms and rights of individuals in the digital space.

**Keywords:** copyright infringement, digital content platforms, legal remedies for copyright, online copyright protection, DMCA compliance

### Research question

To what extent are content platforms liable for copyright infringement in the digital space, and what are the effective remedies available for right holders?

### Introduction

Copyright encompasses rights, which include the right to distribute, reproduce, adapt, and alter work. Such a right exists after the creation of work. Traditional copyright existed in writings, music, and movies. The rapid growth of digital platforms has changed the way this content used to be created. It is no longer limited to traditional forms of media. It has broadened to platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram, where users can generate any type of content digitally. It has opened up the scope of creative expression. This means the scope of intellectual property rights has also expanded. A significant number of challenges have also surged up. The amount of content that can be uploaded and shared in an instant on these platforms has increased the use of copyrighted material, raising concerns among copyright holders.

Content platforms currently mostly rely on safe harbour provisions that are provided under the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA)<sup>1</sup> in the United States, which shields them from liability as long as they comply with certain conditions, like promptly removing infringing content after receiving a notice. However, the use of only these provisions is not sufficient in the digital age, where infringement can happen rapidly and on a large scale.

A new arena of online copyright infringement has opened up through the introduction of over-the-top (OTT) platforms. It's easy access over the Internet over a fixed fee has made it particularly popular. There is a need to regulate such content from being pirated online. Other platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and TikTok have emerged due to the rise of user-generated

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<sup>1</sup> Bytescare, 'Social Media Copyright Infringement' available at <https://bytescare.com/blog/social-media-copyright-infringement> (last visited on 30 September 2024).

content. While they have allowed a space for creativity and innovation, the lines are blurred between fair use and unauthorized use of copyrighted material. Legislations directly protecting such platforms from copyright infringement are yet to be made.

This paper aims to examine the role of content platforms in copyright infringement within the current digital space and explore the legal remedies that are available to address such issues. It will focus on how current legislation, including safe harbour provisions, are applied to streaming and user-generated content platforms and assess the effectiveness of the existing remedies in curbing such infringement.

### **Understanding Copyright Infringement in the Digital Age**

Copyright infringement occurs when an individual or entity uses someone else's work without the authorization of the copyright holder, thereby violating the exclusive rights granted to the original creator.<sup>2</sup> The copyright holder's rights include the right to reproduce, distribute, perform, or display. Infringement can take several forms.<sup>3</sup> Unauthorized publishing of books, music, or movies; distributing or selling counterfeit copies of copyrighted material; publicly performing or displaying a work without authorization; or distributing derivative works, such as translations or adaptations.

Digital and online infringement includes downloading or sharing copyrighted content through streaming services without authorization. This has become quite prevalent with technological advancements. Even indirect actions, like providing tools or services that facilitate unauthorized access to copyrighted works, can constitute contributory or vicarious infringement. Each type of infringement undermines the rights of creators and can result in legal consequences, including civil and criminal penalties.<sup>4</sup>

Copyright infringement under cyber law is a serious offense, having a grave impact on creators.<sup>5</sup> It can happen in several forms, like downloading, distributing copies, reproducing

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<sup>2</sup> Clear Tax, 'Copyright Infringement' available at <https://cleartax.in/s/copyright-infringement> (last visited on 15 September 2024).

<sup>3</sup> Lexology, 'India: Copyright Law—2022 Update' available at <https://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=6526199f-85cd-4291-989d-155a7dc50272> (last visited on 15 September 2024).

<sup>4</sup> Vakil Search, 'Copyright Infringement India' available <https://vakilsearch.com/ipindia/copyright-infringement-india> (last visited on 15 September 2024).

<sup>5</sup> Legal Service India, 'Copyrights in Cyber Law' available at [https://www.legalserviceindia.com/legal/article-5082-copyrights-in-cyber-law.html#google\\_vignette](https://www.legalserviceindia.com/legal/article-5082-copyrights-in-cyber-law.html#google_vignette) (accessed 18 September 2024).

copyrighted content without permission, or making unauthorized copies of the content. Recently, the use of deepfakes has showcased how fabricated and fake content can look convincing enough to spread misinformation. Besides the unauthorized use of a person's likeness, they infringe on the rights of the original creator of audio or video. The use of digital rights management (DRM) technologies can help protect copyrighted material from unauthorized access. However, hackers evading such measures lead to further infringement issues. Hacking someone's personal information makes copyright infringement easier. Several other technologies, like technical protection measures (TPM), digital signature technology, cryptography, and electronic marking, are being considered for use. The penalties and remedies available remain the same as they are in the traditional context.

### **Role of content platforms in promoting infringement**

Content platforms provide a digital space for users to create, upload, and share various kinds of content, such as text, images, videos, or music. These platforms help businesses engage with the audiences either by generating content or interacting with existing media. For example, the OTT sector saw an upsurge during the COVID-19 pandemic when everyone was confined to their homes. Outdoor filming was in no way possible paving the way for streaming such content on OTTs. <sup>6</sup>Since then, the added advantage of viewing quality content from the comfort of one's home has become more and more prevalent. The number of such platforms has started ranging from international ones like Netflix and Amazon Prime to national ones like Jio Cinema, and now even regional ones like Hoichoi. They have become central to how media is consumed and distributed in the digital space. Other platforms like YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and others provide places for user-generated content (UGC), allowing people to upload videos, images, music, and other types of media. The significant change in content creation and distribution has led to an increase in promoting copyright infringement.

Content platforms rose to popularity solely because they allow users to upload their creative works without any barriers. However, this feature has also led to the distribution of copyrighted material. The ease of access and low level of scrutiny incentivize infringement, as users can share copyrighted material with a global audience in an instant. Platforms like YouTube and Facebook have tools to combat copyright infringement, such as YouTube's Content ID and

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<sup>6</sup> Priyanshu Yadav and Yuvraj Singh, "A Brief Study of Intellectual Property Law in Context of Ott Platform and Video Piracy in India" 5 *Indian Journal of Law and Legal Research*.

Facebook's Rights Manager.<sup>7</sup> However, these tools rely on automated detection mechanisms, where the system is allowed for scans when the content owners upload reference material. These technologies are not foolproof and exist with certain loopholes. They may fail to catch slightly altered copyrighted material, such as remixes or parodies. Thus, in these cases, the content can easily evade detection, leading to no consequences of it being shared. The immense volume at which content is uploaded also makes the system quite impractical. This leaves the content platforms to depend on algorithms, which are imperfect at best.

Content platforms also have a vested interest in user-generated content, which may include infringing material. Platforms generate a significant amount of revenue through advertising and user engagement, which is driven by the sharing of content that may be copyrighted. When infringing content garners millions of views, the platforms benefit from the increased traffic and ad revenue, even if they do not directly condone the infringement. This creates a conflict of interest, as the platforms might not be motivated to pursue infringers, especially when such content boosts profitability and engagement.

Another issue is that the line between fair use under platforms and infringement is too subjective. Fair use allows limited use of copyrighted material for criticism, parody, etc. This may lead to complications like over-censorship, where the rightful legitimate content is taken down but the infringing material is available. Content platforms generally do not belong to a particular country, which means there is a global reach provided by them. This, too, promotes infringement, as copyright laws vary from country to country; what is legal under one jurisdiction is permissible in the other.

### **Landmark cases in digital copyright infringement**

The most popular and high-profile case involving copyright in recent years was that of Taylor Swift. It involves Taylor having no ownership on songs she recorded herself due to a sale of the original master recordings of her first few albums. The same way, there are several landmark judgments that we can refer to in order to assess copyright infringement laws with respect to digital technology and content platforms. There are two specific cases which help us in understanding the intricacies and complexities of copyright infringement in an evolving world. In the case of *Viacom International, Inc. v. YouTube, Inc.* (2010), Viacom sued

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<sup>7</sup> Sandy Beeson, "YouTube Content ID Explained", Uppbeat Blog (June 12, 2024), available at <https://uppbeat.io/blog/youtube/youtube-content-id> (last visited Sept. 28, 2024).

YouTube for hosting videos from shows like South Park and The Daily Show, alleging infringement of Viacom's copyrights. However, the court ruled in favour of YouTube, citing the safe harbor provisions of the DMCA (Digital Millennium Copyright Act). YouTube had removed the infringing content as notified, so they were not liable for infringement. This case reinforces the importance of DMCA safe harbor provisions while also highlighting the challenge of monitoring user-generated content. The case of Universal Music Group v. TikTok (2024), emerged when UMG accused TikTok of using their artists' copyrighted music for a relatively small license fee and the ill-effects of AI on their artists. This violates the copyright laws. UMG temporarily withdrew its license from the platform. Eventually, they settled through a new licensing deal. This case highlights the need for digital platforms to ensure they have valid licensing agreements to avoid copyright infringement.

There are several other cases like that of Warner Bros. Entertainment v. RDR Books (2008) which highlights the limits of fair use on UGC platforms.<sup>8</sup> Warner Bros. and J.K. Rowling sued RDR Books to stop the publication of a book that used extensive material from the original work of the Harry Potter series. The court had ruled in favour of Warner Bros. as the defendant relied on copyrighted material without any alterations. In the case of Super Cassettes Industries Limited (SCIL) vs. YouTube and Google, YouTube and Google were sued by the plaintiff for infringing on the copyright of music videos by uploading and hosting them on YouTube without any prior authorization. The verdict was in favour of SCIL, and YouTube and Google were ordered to remove the infringing music videos and pay subsequent damages. All these cases showcase the evolving nature of digital copyright law and the growing importance of protecting digital content across platforms.

### **Challenges in monitoring copyright laws**

The current digital landscape is not all negative. It has allowed copyright holders to tap into new markets and explore various business models with the rise of streaming platforms or user-generated content on platforms like YouTube and Facebook. This has led to new opportunities for revenue generation. Despite such opportunities and monetization, it is overburdened by its negatives. The digital age poses a multitude of challenges in curtailing copyright infringement. The sheer volume of content produced and shared online every day makes it extremely difficult to monitor and enforce copyright laws. The Internet operates on a global basis, making such

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<sup>8</sup> Anthony Falzone, "Rowling v. RDR Books", Stanford Center for Internet and Society (September 8, 2008), available at <https://cyberlaw.stanford.edu/our-work/cases/rowling-v-rdr-books/> (last visited Sept. 28, 2024).

content being distributed without the permission of the creator. There are thousands of unauthorized copies of movies, books, music, etc. being shared across national borders. Sharing of copyrighted content not only affects the financial interest of the creators but also undermines the creativity behind their work.<sup>9</sup>

The development of AI also shows the rapid pace at which technological advancements are taking place. It has transformed how content is created, distributed, and consumed. The Information Technology Rules 2021 and the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 govern the processing of digital data in India. However, there is a lack of a dedicated regulation addressing and monitoring AI. These in turn also complicate the enforcement of copyright laws because technologies outpace legal frameworks. For example, AI-generated content raises questions about ownership and originality, while blockchain can obscure the identity of infringers. These evolving technologies require continuous updates to copyright law and enforcement strategies.

As content platforms promote sharing and remixing of content, it often blurs the line between fair use and infringement. Thus, maintaining the free flow of information and protecting the rights of copyright holders' is important. Digital rights management (DRM) uses encryption to restrict the use of unauthorized digital content, as the copyright holders themselves can set limits as to how their works are accessed or shared. It does not mean that such methods are foolproof. DRM is stated as too restrictive, limiting the rights of consumers. It is also essential to raise awareness about copyright infringement among the younger demographic to create an equitable environment for creators in the digital space.

Hence, it is significant to address the challenges while acknowledging the opportunities brought in by copyright in the current digital era. Stricter laws and innovative technologies are duly needed to curtail the mentioned challenges in protecting copyright.

### **The future of copyright protection**

Copyright law has to constantly evolve with emerging technologies to keep up with the changing interests of creators and consumers. The transition to digital technologies has

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<sup>9</sup> Biat Legal, 'Copyright in the Digital Era: Addressing the Challenges and Embracing the Opportunities of the Digital Age' available at <https://biatlegal.medium.com/copyright-in-the-digital-era-addressing-the-challenges-and-embracing-the-opportunities-of-the-599d0e96bdaf> (last visited on 30 September 2024).

influenced the future of copyright protection in relation to content platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. Automated notice and takedown regimes implemented by content platforms serve two purposes.<sup>10</sup> It exempts them from liabilities and allows the copyright holders to resolve copyright infringement online rather than filing lawsuits. The determination of copyright infringement from fair use, as mentioned, stays a challenging endeavour that needs to be addressed. Content platforms have also developed AI-driven tools like content recognition systems to monitor huge chunks of content and detect the unauthorized use of copyrighted material. The best way forward is to refine such tools to address their current restrictions, like false positives and inaccuracy in assessing fair use.

Taking into account the streaming services, platforms like Netflix have revamped the business models for right holders. Currently, the platforms get into agreements with production houses for the production of content.<sup>11</sup> This results in licensing and co-production deals, which help in the protection of copyright. Licensing agreements involve providing permission to another party to use a copyrighted work under specified conditions, while co-production deals are agreements between two or more parties to collaborate on the creation of a work. However, future regulations must impose stricter liability standards for such deals with the use of blockchain technology. This will help in enhancing transparency for creators on the platform. It will additionally provide creators with greater control over how their work is distributed across platforms.

As we navigate the complexities of digital technology and platforms, it is imperative to adopt a multi-faceted approach that includes the best interests of the copyright holders. The need to adapt copyright laws in order to avoid tension between intellectual property rights and content platforms remains constant. Laws directly referring to AI regulation will also help in shaping the future of copyright protection.

### **Remedies for Copyright Infringement**

A copyright holder can file a case against a person or entity involved in infringement of their copyrighted works. The case may be filed as a civil case or a criminal one. As such, there are

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<sup>10</sup> ProMarket, 'What's Next for Copyright in the Age of Artificial Intelligence' available at <https://www.promarket.org/2023/12/12/whats-next-for-copyright-in-the-age-of-artificial-intelligence/> (last visited on 30 September 2024).

<sup>11</sup> The Law Reporters, 'Intellectual Property Rights in OTT Platforms' available at <https://thelawreporters.com/intellectual-property-rights-in-ott-platforms/> (last visited on 29 September 2024).

civil and criminal remedies available to the copyright holder. The copyright owner is entitled to seek civil remedies such as injunctions, damages, and an account of profits. Injunction refers to a judicial process through which the defendant ceases to continue infringing acts. This may involve removing the infringing content from a website, halting the distribution of the infringing content, or preventing further unauthorized use. Injunctive relief is critical in cases where the infringing activity is ongoing or where monetary damages alone would not adequately address the harm caused. Damages refer to monetary compensation for any financial loss incurred by the plaintiff from the infringement. They may seek statutory damages, which are predetermined amounts set by law as per infringement. Factors such as loss of reputation, loss of profit to the copyright holder, decrease in the sale of the copyright holder's work, etc. determine the amount fixed for damages.

In some cases, statutory damages may be awarded, which are set by law and do not require proof of actual harm. Courts may also order the infringing party to destroy or surrender any copies of the copyrighted work that have been unlawfully reproduced. This helps ensure that the infringing content is not further distributed or exploited. In some cases, courts may also require the infringer to issue a public apology or retraction, especially in cases where the infringement has caused reputational harm to the copyright owner.

Copyright infringement can also be a criminal offense under the Copyright Act of 1957.<sup>12</sup> When a copyright owner files a criminal suit against the defendant, he can seek criminal remedies like fines and imprisonment. The minimum imprisonment is six months, which can extend up to three years. Likewise, the minimum fine is fifty thousand rupees, which can be extended up to two lakhs.

Lastly, negotiated settlements are also a common outcome in copyright disputes. Rather than going through lengthy and expensive court proceedings, parties may agree to resolve the dispute through a licensing arrangement, where the infringer pays a fee to the copyright owner in exchange for permission to use the material. This can be a more efficient and mutually beneficial resolution, particularly in cases involving complex or ongoing use of the copyrighted work.

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<sup>12</sup> Ipleaders, 'An Overview of the Copyright Act, 1957' available at [https://blog.ipleaders.in/an-overview-of-the-copyright-act-1957/#Historical\\_development\\_in\\_India](https://blog.ipleaders.in/an-overview-of-the-copyright-act-1957/#Historical_development_in_India) (last visited on 15 September 2024).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, copyright infringement in the digital age presents a complex challenge as content platforms expand and become the primary venues for sharing and consuming creative works. The advent of the internet has exacerbated the difficulty of regulating copyright due to the rapid dissemination and accessibility of digital media. Content platforms, such as YouTube, Facebook, and others, have become central figures in the debate over copyright enforcement, where questions about their responsibility to monitor and prevent infringements arise.

Current legal frameworks, while robust, often struggle to keep pace with technological advancements. Copyright laws were initially designed for physical works and are now being stretched to cover the complexities of digital media. Platform operators can face liabilities for user-generated content that violates copyright, but they are also shielded by safe harbour provisions, which absolve them from direct responsibility if they follow certain procedures like the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) notice-and-takedown system. However, these systems have their limitations and often fail to provide timely remedies for content creators whose works are infringed upon.

A major concern lies in the balance between protecting copyright holders and ensuring free expression. Over-enforcement could lead to the chilling of creativity and the suppression of legitimate uses, such as parodies or critiques, which are typically protected under fair use doctrines. On the other hand, lax enforcement can erode the value of creative works and disincentivize content creation, which can have broad economic and cultural implications.

The solution likely lies in a combination of stronger international legal cooperation, technological innovations such as automated content recognition systems, and continued refinement of laws to meet the realities of the digital space. Additionally, educating users and fostering an environment where intellectual property rights are respected while fair use is protected is crucial. Balancing the interests of all stakeholders—content creators, platforms, and users—is imperative to ensure that copyright laws continue to fulfil their original purpose in the digital age.

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