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Stream Ripping: A Copyright Infringement Epidemic

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Stream Ripping: A Copyright Infringement Epidemic

By Darla Testino

Music infringement has been an increasingly prominent problem since the emergence of peer-to-peer file sharing in the early 2000's from Napster. Now people are infringing by stream-ripping, a process where an online file stream is converted into a download format such as an MP3 file that can be saved. It has become almost as widespread and casual as the use of Napster was. The continuation of the casualness of copyright infringement is because of the effect Napster had on society's perceived value of music. As a result, the music industry must adapt to the changing culture.

Along with the increasing popularity of streaming as the main method of music consumption has come the increase in new ways to get music illegally. Between 2014 and 2016, the use of stream-ripping services almost doubled according to a report by Incopro, a brand infringement and protection software company. In the report, it was found that the motivations and reasons for stream-ripping vary. Results from Kantar Media's study show that 31%, the majority of respondents, stream rip because they already own the music in a different format. The second most popular reason is because people want to listen to music offline. To meet this demand, many streaming services offer paid subscriptions that include this feature, as well as the removal of ads. However, studies of streaming services have suggested that the freemium versions meant to incentivize users to subscribe to the streaming service are ineffective, as why would people pay to listen offline if they can now stream-rip?

The perceived value of music is also a factor in stream-ripping and music infringement. This has been an issue in the industry since Napster came into the scene. Kantar Media's study found that young, middle class males are the most likely to use stream-ripping services. 41% of people in Kantar Media's study said they either could not afford the cost or felt that music was

overpriced. This devaluation of music is especially dangerous for rights owners in the industry. Although freemium ad revenue is significantly less than what is made from subscription services, it is the most widely used method of music consumption. This means that monetization of streaming is a priority for making sure rights owners can get their due compensation. As put by Hugh McIntyre in an article published by *Forbes*, “Individual streams aren't worth very much, but it's when someone listens over and over that all those fractions of cents can add up, and stream-ripping means nobody needs to hit replay...” Since stream-ripping is an alternative way to get music without ads, it is subscription services' biggest competitor and therefore potentially one of the biggest losses of potential income to rights owners and the music industry. The industry will have to adapt in a way that makes streaming the most profitable format and one that can retain listeners so that they will not be lost to illegal stream-ripping services.

The widespread use of ripping services is not due to by a lack of copyright infringement awareness. According to the Kantar Media study, 43% of stream-rippers acknowledge that these types of services are not legal. However, their desire to obtain offline music and perception that music is overpriced motivate them to obtain their music illegally anyways. Additionally, other entertainment content, such as films and TV shows, are becoming much more popular on these infringing sources. For music specific infringement, stream-ripping services are the most popular method at 68.2% according to Incopro's data. Their research also shows that YouTube is the primary source or library of content that is used for ripping. YouTube is an easily accessible site with almost everything uploaded in high quality on it, which is probably why it is used as the stream-ripping source so frequently. With source content so easily available, there is little barrier to stream-ripping an unlimited amount of content.

Interestingly, offering music for free legally is not likely to completely eradicate piracy. Radiohead's 2007 release of *In Rainbows* is an example of this. Although the music was available for free and legal download from their website, over two million copies were illegally obtained only one month after the release. An *NPR* article written by Eric Garland reported that the rate *In Rainbows* was illegally downloaded was at "10 times the rate of new releases from other top artists." Garland is author of a study on stream-ripping that examined Radiohead's release in detail. Not only is it fascinating that a free music release was still a victim of piracy, but that the piracy was actually elevated. Although affordability or perceiving music as overpriced was cited as a reason for stream-ripping in the Kantar study, the evidence cited by Garland suggests that price may not be an important factor in the motivators of infringement of music. Of course, since Radiohead is a popular band and they got even more attention from the release being free, the elevated piracy might be because of the tremendous popularity of the band.

Offering music for free would dramatically change the business model of the industry. A whole source of revenue is essentially lost and that money has to be made up for in other revenue streams to keep the industry profitable. In general, live music experiences are doing well. By increasing the promotion of tour dates or extending tours, the revenue generated in this area could offset what was previously made in downloads and streams. In the case of *In Rainbows*, the downloads were free but any physical format was priced. Because of the age of Radiohead's audience, still offering physicals was a successful strategy. But if the demographic of an artist is younger, physicals are pretty much obsolete in the culture of technology and would not be very profitable. Unfortunately, because the culture has devalued music, the industry must adapt to the consumers' demands. It will be very hard to change the culture back to valuing a high price point

for recorded music. It may even create a stigma that music and arts is only for the elite, which is something that is undesirable and unethical in a way. The music industry will have to continue to experiment with streaming services until they are able to keep consumers there and not on stream-ripping services, and the industry will have to change its business model so that profits no longer available from recorded music can still be made through other means.

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