



How relevant is copyright to online artists?

A qualitative study of understandings, coping strategies, and possible solutions

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Abstract

Online copyright law is a major issue for many in the creative industries. Independent artists often rely on sharing their work across social media and content-sharing sites, leaving them open to having their work stolen or misused. This paper discusses a series of 11 semi-structured interviews that examined attitudes towards copyright and attribution amongst webcomic artists, in relation to current copyright laws across the EU and internationally. Whilst artists are generally aware of the cover provided by copyright, they feel that it is not necessarily relevant or effective within the creative space they work in. There is very little support and there are few resources available to help them to fight for control of their work, and whilst artists do get angry about actual theft and removal of attribution, they accept that they have to put up with certain violations if they wish to continue to publish comics for free on the Internet. The paper ends by discussing potential solutions to the problems raised.

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Introduction

Webcomics are comics that are freely distributed on the Internet by an independent creator. They come in all shapes and sizes, some resembling the traditional newspaper funny pages [1] and others ranging from hand drawn single panels [2], to stick characters making complex science jokes [3], to commentaries on geek culture [4], to long form stories with beautiful illustrations [5]. Some are posted every day whilst others update as little as once or twice a year. Generally focussing on a particular theme or genre, creators aim at niche audiences, working with limited money and resources. Despite the seemingly ephemeral nature of webcomics, they can attract large audiences and for some creators they are a full-time job. As a group within the creative industries, webcomic artists have received relatively little attention from academics. As small, independent, creators, who encourage sharing of their work in order to create and maintain their audience, they are among the most vulnerable groups when it comes to copyright violation, and form an interesting case for investigating the current state of copyright law online. They have adopted a certain set of understandings and coping strategies across their communities.

For many in the creative industries, not least webcomics, creators rely on sharing content to stay in business; they must drive traffic to their Web sites and build strong communities, in order to sell advertising space and merchandise, and to seek donations through crowdfunding and tip jars (Dowthwaite, 2014). This business model means they make heavy use of social media and other online tools, but using these free Web sites and posting free content means that they leave themselves open to their work being stolen or misused. These sites also each have their own policies on re-using posted content, causing additional problems.

Current copyright law, whilst on the surface providing all the cover that is essential to these independent artists, is usually not enforced or monitored online, leaving it up to the creator to

maintain control of every piece of work they post; in real terms, it is extremely hard for an artist to protect their rights. The nature of the Internet, with instant transfer of information and this increased culture of sharing, means we now have a “generation of users who freely disregard copyrights” [6], and are often unaware that they are doing so. A recent estimate puts just under 30 percent of Internet users as copyright infringers, producing 23.8 percent of all traffic in North America, Europe and Asia (Suzor, 2014). Webcomics are often re-posted without attribution, attributed to the wrong person, or copied, which leads to loss of publicity and revenue for the artists as well as violating copyright.

In order to continue to benefit from posting work online, many creators overlook certain types of common violation. Many creators encourage fan art from their readers as a way of spreading awareness of their characters and stories, despite the fact that this would most likely be a copyright violation (Templeton, 2008). However, other rights are very important to creators, particularly the right to attribution, and they have no real way to maintain these rights. Current copyright law does not adequately serve the needs of people working on the Internet, and several authors have called for new systems that can better protect them (Chandler, 2013; Suzor, 2014; van Gompel, 2013).



Motivating examples

Late in 2013 Rachel Dukes posted a blog about one of her comics that had gone viral. She actively encourages people to share her work, as long as the work is credited and unaltered. Unfortunately, this particular comic spread without attribution, which meant that someone had to actively edit the image and crop off the URL and copyright notice. She tracked the comic and found that of the (estimated) 669,905 views, only 81,595 (12 percent) were of the original, credited version. She calls these huge viewing figures “heartbreaking” (Dukes, 2013) because she will see no benefit from them, where other sites are actively profiting in both money and popularity.

Unfortunately, this is by no means an isolated incident, either within webcomics or the creative industries as a whole. In 2011, Matthew Inman was forced to fight a legal battle with image-sharing site FunnyJunk [7] over reposting his comics without attribution (Garritty, 2013; Inman, 2012a, 2012b, 2011a, 2011b); in 2013 a comic by Kate Beaton was appropriated for the popular meme Grumpy Cat without her permission (Grumpy Cat is reportedly a US\$1 million company) (Read, 2013). Dukes says “something needs to be done by the community as a whole: by the readers as well as the creators. We need to start crediting our content/sources and reporting those who don’t” (Dukes, 2013).



Interviews with webcomic artists

The remainder of this paper discusses a series of semi-structured interviews that examine attitudes towards copyright and attribution amongst webcomic artists. The interviews were carried out at Thought Bubble 2013, with six full-time and five part-time creators (seven males and four females), at the exhibiting table of each artist. They lasted for between 10 and 50 minutes, in an open-ended, conversational format. Interviews were transcribed and iteratively coded for recurring themes. Once a preliminary list of topics was established, four major overarching themes were identified: ‘Web site policies’, ‘copyright and Creative Commons’, ‘attribution’, and ‘solutions’. Interviews were re-coded under each of these four headings, in order to determine the issues in each area.



Web site policies

Most webcomic creators rely on posting to social media to find and maintain a thriving audience. By displaying their work on such platforms, they are agreeing to a series of Terms of Use (TOU) policies that relate to both what a user may post, and what the Web site may do with it once they have. This can have the effect of transferring some creators rights to the social media companies (Alm, 2014). For example, whilst Facebook states that the creator of content retains their rights, they also require agreement to a “non-exclusive, transferable, sub-licensable, royalty-free, worldwide license to use any [Intellectual Property (IP)] content that you post on or in connection with Facebook” (Facebook, 2015). It is not within the scope of this paper to discuss each TOU in depth, but it should be noted that their broad nature across social media makes them difficult to interpret in terms of user rights and to identify violations. As Alm says, this could have “major implications for artists or authors who post their works on their social media profiles. According to the TOU [of Facebook], there is nothing stopping social media companies from selling copies of a user-photographer’s photos, for example, or placing them in advertisements” [8]. This has clear implications for webcomic creators.

Perhaps surprisingly considering the nature of their business, most of those we spoke to were not entirely aware of their rights, and for some it was not even something they spent time considering: “It’s one of those probably in the small print sort of things, and I don’t know now whether Facebook have any rights to owning the images I post through there” (P8). Those who tried to stay up-to-date

with site policies were worried: "I am concerned with things like, say, Facebook, because I know that they can try and take ownership of pretty much anything that you do. [...] I try and stay away from sites that do try and claim everything you post on it, because it's just not right, you know. It's not fair" (P1). This particular creator tackled the issue by only posting links, and where he had to use images he kept them low quality to discourage use. P3 however, whilst being aware of policies, was not concerned because "I don't feel that I'm gonna lose any cash value from these sites"; it should be noted that this creator did not make a living from his work, whilst P1 did. Creators also tended to rely on each other to point out any issues: "I think my feeling is always like well everyone else seems to be using it so I'm sure it's fine" (P10); "watchdogs keep me informed. Artist communities are good at trading this kind of information and flagging up any incidents that other artists need to watch out for" (P11).



Copyright and Creative Commons licenses

Minimum copyright protection standards are set out in a number of international agreements such as the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works and the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) Internet Treaties (Copyright Treaty and the Performances and Phonotypes Treaty). However, not all countries are signatories to these treaties, and where they are, failure to respect the standards is a matter of dispute between nation states, not individuals. The applicable copyright law is a matter for each individual state to establish, ensuring that minimum rights are transposed into national law. This is the case even with regional blocs such as the EU where the various copyright directives have to be transformed into individual state law. Not all rights, exceptions and limitations are harmonised within the EU, leading to a patchwork of copyright laws across its 28 Member States. This situation is exacerbated when dealing with the wider international scene, and can cause major problems for work that appears online (van Gompel, 2013), where geographical boundaries are destroyed in every other sense.

Imagine an English artist, posting on an American site with data centres in Canada, who finds that their work is being misused by a German living in Australia. How is the artist to know in simple terms which jurisdiction and what laws apply to enable the artist to take legal action for the breach? This is assuming that the creator has the resources available to them to fight a violation; single creators, often making less than minimum wage from their work, are unlikely to be able to engage in costly legal battles even if they are likely to win (Rohac, 2010).

The majority of those interviewed chose to display an explicit copyright notice at the bottom of their Web pages, rather than "plaster copyright on every single page" (P4), with only two creators posting Creative Commons notices and one not posting anything. Of course, creators are still covered by copyright whether there is an explicit notice or not — for example, Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (United Kingdom, 1988). Those we spoke to were aware of this. Most creators seemed to have a good understanding of copyright, but the general feeling was that if someone is going to misuse work, the law was not going to stop them. "To be honest there is an issue, there is a real issue, and I've heard it from a lot of other artists, but you know, it's nearly impossible to control" (P8). Every creator had some story to tell about violations that they or their colleagues had experienced. Anecdotes included pages from books being used to make cloth for suits in China (P9), characters being used on billboards in America (P4) or used in apps (P8), and many occurrences of t-shirt designs being used by online companies and shops.

Creative Commons licenses have been suggested as a way to tackle the problems inherent in online copyright (Fitzgerald and Hooper, 2013). These licenses allow copyright owners to select the rights they wish to retain when placing their work online and thus inform the user of the ways in which the work can subsequently be used. Using copyright as a basis, and neither changing nor reinterpreting those laws, the licenses aim to provide "a way to more clearly delineate and customize those laws away from a default 'one-size-fits-all' copyright that can and has 'gotten in the way' of remixing, sharing, and innovating" [9]. There are seven variations to choose from, starting with simple attribution (CC-BY), which allows copying, distribution, display and performance as long as the author of the work is credited. The licenses become steadily stricter, using various combinations of BY (Attribution), ND (No Derivatives), NC (NonCommercial), and SA (ShareAlike, which means new work must be released under the same license). The most restrictive is CC BY-NC-ND; at the other end there is also a license declaring that the creator releases the work to the public domain and retains no rights (CC0) (Creative Commons, 2016). These codes cover all the main rights granted by copyright that the copyright owner may wish to protect. However, the licenses are private contracts between the user and the creator, and if the user ignores or abuses the license, the creator is in no stronger position than with traditional copyright law. It is more a case of the creator disclosing what they are happy for others to do with their work rather than the creator enforcing their rights. The Creative Commons organisation also does not monitor, enforce, nor help with enforcement of individual licenses. It is entirely up to each copyright owner to do so.

Most of those interviewed rely on traditional copyright rather than Creative Commons licenses. P7 felt, like others, that copyright was "already automatically implied" and there was little that Creative Commons could add; P8 and P10 voiced the common opinion that they weren't sure that they understood how the licenses worked: "It seems complicated. It seems like if someone wanted to take it and use it and stuff then they maybe wouldn't even be thinking about that anyway, they'd just be doing whatever they wanted" (P10). P2 did not see Creative Commons as relevant to the type for work he did, feeling that it "makes more sense with work that's there to be adapted, but

with a comic it's a more self-contained thing [...] If I did a series that was designed to be messed with then I might look at Creative Commons more seriously"; P11 felt much the same: "I have no interest in giving people inherent permission to use my work for anything".

By contrast, P3 did choose to use Creative Commons, having worked with the organisation before, because "I don't want somebody who's doing something which would have no commercial impact on me to be restricted in doing something fun with my comics." He went on to explain that he thought that "a lot of people don't really know or care what copyright is" but he used Creative Commons to make it clear what he was happy for others to do with his work; using his comic for a book included agreeing a fee, whilst he was happy for a charity Web site to do so for free. The only other creator using Creative Commons said that it had led to her receiving coloured or modified versions of her work, and "it's nice, it's cute, it barely affects the comic at all [...] maybe a couple of times a year someone actually takes advantage of it, but I think it gives people a nice feeling to see that it's there" (P5). She also mentioned the novelty of using such licenses as a way of driving traffic to her comic: "Creative Commons was just like, there's a small number of people doing this right now, but maybe if I'm part of that people are going to happen on it in a way that they might not have" (P5). Interestingly, both creators make use of the CC-BY-NC-SA license, one of the most restrictive of the Creative Commons terms.



Lack of attribution

Most creators are happy for their readers to take their comics and share them with family and friends through any means they wish, as long as they are attributed. It is not just webcomics, but many others in the creative industries and beyond who benefit from freely distributing their work, and who recognise the "importance of attribution as an incentive for creation and as a moral obligation" [10]. Attribution has long been recognised as a moral right within the copyright framework through the Berne Convention, and even the most permissive of Creative Commons licenses insists on the right to attribution. Even as a moral right however, attribution is not easy to protect. As illustrated by the Rachel Dukes story [11], just one share over the Internet without the necessary credit can spiral into many thousands of views and re-shares, and the original culprit may be highly problematic to identify, particularly if many other sites and users have rapidly followed suit. This means that any action to rectify the situation, be it an e-mail message to ask the user to change their post, a plea to other readers, or formal legal action, either cannot be taken or may turn out to be futile.

Most of those we spoke to believe there is very little they can do to stop mis- or non-attribution. They feel that once their work is up on the Internet, it is inevitably going to be misused in some way: "once it's on the Internet it belongs to everyone. And I think young people feel very empowered by saying that, but they don't really understand the intricacies of that or what it means to make a living from creative work" (P5). Those who rely on sharing must strike a balance between helping the work to spread and fighting against violations: "being too restrictive on the legal worry side of things, stops you from pushing your work out [...] whenever I thought about the legal type stuff, I could never see how I was gonna get that to work along with me wanting as many people to see the comic as I could" (P8). There was also the feeling that no one was safe: "You hear it so often, you hear these bigger names talking about how their work just gets taken and posted as someone else's" (P1); "if you want to promote something, that's just one of the things you have to deal with really." (P10).

Several creators felt that unattributed sharing on sites such as Tumblr was mostly harmless, because the people doing the sharing were not in it for any gain to themselves, and were generally young people who did not realise that attribution was important. P9 summed up these feelings with a story about a print he had turned into a t-shirt:

"I've seen it on Tumblr unattributed. When I put it up it only got 400 likes, unattributed it's got like 40,000 likes and there's not even a link to where you can buy it as a print, it's completely useless. You just think, 'I have no control over this at all', but it's just people saying they like things, and it's usually kids, they're just like 'this is a thing I like', they don't understand that it needs attribution. [...] It's only when you understand that there is a weight to things and that what you're doing is kind of taking away from someone, but if that person hadn't put it up on Tumblr, none of those people would have seen it anyway, [...] and yes it would have been nice if they put a link under it, it's annoying, but is it a crime? It's not like even dropping litter, it's like breaking wind, it's like, well, you know, it's not great but it's not going to kill anyone" (P9).

Others also see it as free advertising that will find its way back to them eventually: "one day they'll see it and go oh yeah I remember seeing that" (P4); "If they really wanna find it they'll figure out what it's from" (P5).

Interestingly, these opinions tended to come from artists who already made a living from their work. For those who did not, any kind of lost publicity can be a massive source of frustration: "I do tend to lose control of comics cos somebody can just copy and paste to Imgur, there's nothing I can do

really. Reddit is the worst one for that. [...] it will get lots of votes on Reddit and then it won't be linking to my site and nobody will know. I get very frustrated at that" (P3).

Lack of attribution also became a big issue when the violation was seen as malicious, and particularly if a company or Web site was seen to be the culprit: "it's just some random joke site that decided to take it and use it as their own. And the fact that they put their own little watermark on it, kind of covered my signature, I thought that was pretty [terrible]" (P1). Unfortunately this kind of violation is seen as highly prevalent: "there's this whole bunch of Web sites that will steal images and put them on their Web site and share them around, and people that go to those Web sites, they just don't care." (P10). Very few creators had any satisfactory outcome of a Web site or company using their work uncredited. Those that did were able to afford to pursue things legally, for example by requesting a fee or issuing a Cease and Desist letter, but these avenues are by no means open to all.

Lack of control and the inability to take action against violations was a big source of dissatisfaction. "Half the time I don't even want them to tell me because there's nothing I can do about it, and it's just really frustrating" (P10). The support of the community surrounding the creator did emerge as a positive however. "I think actually at least with Tumblr, a lot of people using it are aware of that problem, and do care about the artists and will kind of try and chase people up if they see people doing it." (P10). P8 told the story of a colleague who had creations stolen for an app on iTunes; it was the support for the community that got the app taken down by sending multiple messages to Apple. This could provide some support when legal avenues are not an option; fans of webcomics will often 'call out' the repeat offenders on social media such as Twitter and Facebook.



Potential solutions

Given that webcomics creators will continue to encourage sharing of their work as a major part of their business models, laws that focus on measures such as DRM and overall prevention of sharing are actually irrelevant to them, and would in reality damage their way of life. A greater focus on attribution and ways to safely encourage sharing are needed. This paper ends by addressing some strategies both from the literature and presented by the creators we interviewed.

A recurring theme was the power of the crowd — that if a creator suffers copyright violations the law won't help them, but the community of other artists and readers will. The most effective way to fight back is to ask readers to boycott sites and people that persist in violating, and share stories about violation across Twitter, Facebook and other social media. They also remind their own communities to attribute when they share, and make it clear to their readers what they deem acceptable use. It is important to raise awareness of the issues across the Internet at large, and explain why things like attribution are important to working artists. "Ultimately, the most effective ways to curb attribution-scrubbing are to educate Internet users about the problem and crack down on the less ethical image-sharing sites" (Garritty, 2013). These 'less ethical sites' are profit-makers who wish to keep readers on their sites for as long as possible; allowing them to find or click through to other sites is not in their interest. In general, a creator with a small but loyal community would not get a persistently violating site to be taken down or to stop what they are doing, although they may raise awareness and stop others from either visiting that site or posting infringing content themselves; a larger creator who could mobilise thousands of readers to take action would most likely also have other avenues they could pursue, such as affording legal help and advice, and having more personal influence; the Matthew Inman case previously discussed is an example of this.

P10 felt that Google's 'Search by Image' functionality [12], where you can use a picture as a search term, may go some way to addressing issues with attribution: "[y]ou have to hope that at least [...] if somebody did find your work and wanted to know where it came from, it's possible, and not really that hard to find out who it's from, so you know, if they did wanna buy something, they still could" (P10). However, with the fact that the general public don't necessarily care who created a piece or are aware that it should be attributed at all, the number of users actually using the tool for this purpose may be low. From the other side, there is the potential for creators to use this to locate violations on other Web sites by searching for their own images. Although it is by no means a perfect tool, and during a search of several pieces of work by known webcomics artists some failed to identify any source, often within the first few results the original artist or webcomic can be identified. It is an underutilised and under-researched tool that could provide some aid to creators trying to maintain control of their work online. Future work should be done both to make creators aware of this option, and as research into its potential benefits and uses.

Most protection schemes suggested in the literature are aimed at commercial products, not freely shared Web pages, and so they are of little relevance. "The measures needed to really prevent widespread copyright infringement basically involve building the legal and technical infrastructure for widespread censorship" (Kelsey and Schneier, 1999), preventing any form of sharing, which would destroy webcomics and other Internet industries. Hiding information within a work (steganography) would not stop people from taking others' work, nor solve the attribution problem, but simply give creators a way to prove it was theirs in the first place (Petitcolas, *et al.*, 1999). There is also no universally accepted way of protecting work with these methods (van Gompel, 2013), and with technology moving so fast, it is unlikely that a technique could be found that someone would be unable to remove, should they wish (Petitcolas, *et al.*, 1999). There are laws

against tampering with technological measures, but as with much of copyright there is little in the way of policing, and a creator would most likely find it very hard to prove who had removed their marks.

Permanently linking attribution information to a work may be more appealing. Some sites and programs offer the ability to embed a URL into an image file, and one artist found that very useful (P2), particularly because he was able to track the spread of his images this way. A system of metadata tagging combined with visible digital watermarks may provide some protection. Most creators are not computer scientists however; they cannot add complex code to their images, so any system would need to be simple, and preferably automatic, to implement.

Very few of those interviewed used any kind of watermarking technology, preferring instead to put their names and URLs unobtrusively on the artwork, or incorporated into the art in a way that is hard to remove; there is a balance to be sought between making attribution difficult to remove, and reducing the quality of the work. Some felt that the 'iStock' style visible watermarks, printed across an image, were so intrusive that they were actually damaging to artists looking for work: "if you watermark your artwork it looks rubbish, no matter how good your artwork is you immediately see that, [...] the people who do it I don't think are thinking straight, you know, they're thinking more legally than they are about getting work" (P8).

Creators tended to choose how much protection they gave their work based on where it was posted and what type of work it was, as illustrated by P11: "Comic out-takes don't get anything extra on them. If I have time to draw a more extensive picture, they get some sort of information put on them. If the end-location is Tumblr, it gets a URL on it so people can't cut out the source as easily. If it goes on Deviant Art, watermarks get added. Deviant Art is too commonly used as an art harvesting platform." Various simple methods, such as putting a blank layer on top of an image to disable right-click saving have also been put forward [13] but again they often aim at preventing sharing at all, and there is very little that can't be undone.

Some scholars have championed the possibility of reintroducing copyright formalities to the existing copyright laws, such as registration, through digital tools that create links between works and their creators. However this would have to be "fit for the digital era, therefore be sensible, straightforward, and easy to apply. Also, it should not impose unreasonable burdens on authors and right owners" [14]. The existence of a formal registry may discourage people from intentionally stealing works for commercial gain, but would most likely have little effect on the general practices of the Internet at large.

On the other hand, some form of digital protection through registration could work to a certain extent, as works would automatically be attributed (assuming the link was not severed). However introduction into law may be difficult as the Berne Convention prohibits involuntary formalities. "In a digital world, where everyone creates, disseminates, and shares content, and where there is an enormous demand for immediate access to news and information, it would be unfair and socially unacceptable for amateur creators to lose protection due to a failure to complete formalities before posting things online" [15]. Nonetheless, a voluntary database could be encouraged. A similar voluntary program, the Copyright Alert System, focuses on warning potentially infringing users and punishing them by reducing bandwidth, although this system has been criticised for being too broad in what it considers a violation, and for unsatisfactorily dealing with open networks and shared IP addresses (Gerben, 2014).

Chandler (2013), speaking of American copyright law, suggests that there should be a formal right to attribution that can be specifically defended in a civil action suit. However, even with more actionable laws, most creators cannot afford to take legal action. Even as full-time artists they are often one person working at barely minimum wage. Matthew Inman was an exception to this and was able to afford a lawyer to fight FunnyJunk. One creator who was interviewed had signed on with a traditional publisher and therefore left the printing rights and copyright issues to them (P7); another was able to retain an attorney (P4). None of the other creators felt they had the means to pursue lawsuits, although several did mention the possibility of sending 'cease and desist' letters. An issue with this however is that it is often "impossible to figure out which site was the first to remove the creator's name" (Garrity, 2013). Claims from individual creators in the U.K. may be eligible to be dealt with by the small claims court for amounts below £10,000 or the Intellectual Property Enterprise Court for amounts up to £500,000. Court fees and payment to professionals may be necessary however, for example mediation, which is often a required step before an IP claim, can cost up to £650 per party (United Kingdom. Intellectual Property Office, 2016). Additionally self-employed artists may be discouraged by the idea of 'going up against' a company with far more resources available to them, who may keep up a dispute for an extended period of time in order to intimidate them. Nonetheless, these tracks should perhaps be made more visible to artists who may have little to no legal knowledge.

Despite the complications of geography in much of digital copyright law, one measure does seem to have had some affect. The Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) was enacted in America in 1998 to "assist in the 'licensing rights and indicating attribution, creation and ownership'. Among other things, provisions of the DMCA were intended to create attribution-like protection" [16], and include prohibiting the removal of Copyright Management Information [17]. Whilst this can be good news for American creators, it may also give creators from other countries some way of fighting online violations. This is because sites such as Google are bound by the Act and once they receive properly sent takedown notices of potentially infringing sites, they must remove them from search results or disable access (Alm, 2014), and post a notice informing the user: "In response to a complaint we received under the U.S. Digital Millennium Copyright Act we have removed [n] result(s) from this


page. If you wish, you may read the DMCA complaint that caused the removal(s) at LumenDatabase.org. They have a simple looking form [18] to submit a notice that creators may find useful for repeat offenders and particular sites, and a swift Internet search brings up many sample forms, letters, and notices creators can use for other places.

Google now receives well over one million URL takedown requests a day [19] and although they report to have complied with 97 percent of requests between July and December 2011 they do not supply any more recent statistics (Google, 2015). A site not appearing on a Google search may be enough to put them off using other peoples' creations. The same provisions that mean that Google must comply with takedown notices apply to Internet Service Providers and, most likely, social media. However, "courts have not seen many lawsuits over copyrights in social media content" [20]. Alm suggests this is due to copyright owners enjoying the exposure of social media, which certainly applies to webcomics creators, or because sites quickly respond to DMCA notices, which cannot be commented on as none of the creators interviewed mentioned having used this mechanism. Other reasons are likely to include the creators not being able to afford a lawsuit, and the violations being too rampant to catch individuals in any meaningful way.



Conclusions

It is clear that whilst some ways do exist to tackle the issues surrounding online attribution, copyright violations and art theft, many artists are either not aware of them, or do not feel that they are effective enough. They have come to the conclusion that they just have to put up with the problems. An uneasy balance exists at the moment between artists trying to make a living online, and people and Web sites who will take advantage. This is clearly not an acceptable situation, that creators must accept their fate to be copied and create their own coping strategies. Technologies such as watermarking need to be improved. The copyright regime needs to be both simplified and re-organised so that it is relevant to those working in the creative industries online, and within online communities in general. There is also necessity for further discussions on the visibility and complexity of Web site policies, and ways to educate the general public on what is acceptable behaviour.

An area this paper did not cover to any great extent is when online content is misused off-line, as in prints and t-shirts made from others' comics. While an extensive bundle of rights exists in most countries to protect such creators, policing and enforcing those rights falls entirely to the rights-holder. For many individuals the time and cost involved in doing so can be impractical and prohibitive. Creative Commons licenses do not solve these problems, only providing an indication from the creator as to which rights they are willing to give up. The licenses do not act to enforce copyright, or allow a creator any greater protection than the law. The fact is, at the moment, webcomics creators rely on each other — and their readers — in a big way, and do not feel they can rely on the law in the same way. This is visible across other industries also, and with the continued development of life on the Internet, the problem is not going away. 

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Notes

1. An example of this is 'The Nib' (<https://thenib.com>), a collection of political cartoons, comics journalism and humor comics which appear on Medium (<https://medium.com>), a journalistic site anyone can contribute to.
2. 'Savage Chickens' by Doug Savage, which can be read at <http://www.savagechickens.com/>, are hand drawn on typical yellow post-it notes.
3. 'xkcd' (<http://xkcd.com>) by Randall Munroe is perhaps one of the most famous webcomics. With very simple stick figure art, it began as random sketches in school notebooks and is now drawn digitally as a full-time job. It covers both simple every day topics and complex concepts in maths, physics, philosophy, linguistics and a range of other subjects.
4. Good examples of the 'geek comic' are 'HiJinks ENSUE' (<http://hijinksensue.com>) and 'Sharksplode' (<http://sharksplode.com>) by Joel Watson. They are both full colour, digitally-drawn comics that the artist creates full time, referencing a range of pop culture including television, movies, and comic books, as well as, in the case of HiJinks ENSUE, everyday life being a husband, father, artist and geek. Other examples include the gaming comics 'Penny Arcade' by Jerry Holkins and Mike Krahulik (<http://www.penny-arcade.com/>) and 'Control Alt Delete' by Tim Buckley (<http://www.cad-comic.com/>).
5. Examples of the long-form, full-colour, graphic novel type comic include 'Gunnerkrigg Court' by Tom Siddell (<http://www.gunnerkrigg.com/>) and 'Stand Still. Stay Silent', by Minna Sundberg (<http://www.ssscomic.com/>).
6. Alm, 2014, p. 104.
7. Matthew Inman thoroughly blogged about his experiences, beginning at <http://theoatmeal.com/blog/funnyjunk>.
8. Alm, 2014, p. 115.
9. Zimmerman, 2014, p. 35.
10. Chandler, 2013, p. 87.
11. <http://mixtapecomics.tumblr.com/post/68277854434/after-a-discussion-last-week-with-several-of-my>.
12. You can use <https://images.google.com/> to search with an image rather than a string of text. See <https://support.google.com/websearch/answer/1325808?hl=en>.
13. See the comments section of Garrity, 2013, <http://www.tcj.com/life-without-a-signature/>.
14. van Gompel, 2013, p. 1,428.
15. van Gompel, 2013, p. 1,442.
16. Chandler, 2013, p. 79.
17. A summary of this act can be downloaded from <http://www.copyright.gov/legislation/dmca.pdf>.
18. <https://www.google.com/webmasters/tools/dmca-notice?pli=1>.
19. <http://www.google.com/transparencyreport/removals/copyright/>.
20. Alm, 2014, p. 129.

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