

Serfing the Net

by Astra Taylor
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we are living in an age of unprecedented creativity, they tell us. But there was a dark time not long ago, the story goes, when authors exercised dictatorial control over passive readers, movie studios foisted films on captive audiences, listeners were held hostage in their own homes by long-playing records, prime-time television only came on once a day, and professional journalists were gatekeepers to world events.

One version of this tale cites the remote control as the first significant tool of human liberation, enabling viewers to change channels at will without leaving the comfort of their sofas. The next great advance in the forward march of emancipation, I've heard people claim, was the joystick, which took the relationship between observer and screen to the next level. And then, unleashing a torrent of interactivity, came the personal computer and its descendants: cell phones, digital cameras, iPods, TiVo, etc. Hook these magical gadgets up to a broadband connection, and innovation abounds: We can copy and paste, comment and link, download and share. The network revolution, the story goes, has finally made culture a two-way street, liberating the masses from the grip of greedy entertainment industries and quaint notions of authorial control and originality. We are all "content generators" now, free to produce, consume, exchange and remix as we like, free of charge in every instance.

This stirring tale of empowerment is told both by big business evangelists and smash-the-state anarchists, an unlikely alliance that is brought together by a shared fascination with the word "free." But, as software guru Richard Stallman has asked, are they talking "free" as in speech or "free" as in beer? "Free" as in liberty or "free" as in markets? Free-spirited creators or freeloading CEOs? For some, the two meanings coalesce in a strange consumerist vision of a communitarian future: Freedom is a world where all the things you could ever want are free—as in gratis—which means you can share them without fear of having less for yourself.

Both versions of "free" were on view at the Open Video Conference in Manhattan last summer, a quasi-academic event focusing, to use the current jargon, on "dispersed creativity": "[W]ill technology and public policy support a more participatory culture—one that encourages and enables free expression and broader cultural engagement?" the meeting's website pondered. "Or will online video become a glorified TV-on-demand service, a central part of a permissions-based culture?"

The phrase "permissions-based culture" signaled that I was among people who likely saw themselves as progressives: The conference was more about "free" as in speech than "free" in beer (it cost 75 bucks to attend). Presenters spoke passionately about the dangers of media consolidation, the dire implications of excessive copyright for the cultural commons, the de facto corporate stranglehold over

the public domain, and the drawbacks of applying outdated conceptions of intellectual property in a digital context.

What's exciting about the Web, I was told, is that people are doing stuff without asking for permission, even though permission is technically required for what they do. People are pasting news articles on their blogs, they're uploading clips from network TV to YouTube, they're downloading movies and songs, and each time they do these things, they're breaking the law. Whether you like it or not, the Internet is a copy-making machine, a place where replicating and sharing feels natural: Every time you send an e-mail to a friend or refresh your web browser a facsimile is made. This capacity, which makes it so easy to pass along the latest cultural diversion to anyone who may care, has some old school media moguls shaking their tight, money-filled fists in rage—a rage so blinding that most of their moves to maintain control and profits have been grotesque missteps: the Recording Industry Association of America's lawsuits against file-sharing children and even a deceased grandmother, for example.

For independent makers of books, films and records, on the other hand, the Web's capacity to produce instant, pristine copies for free is both a source of enthusiasm and anxiety, empowerment and dispossession. The Internet revolution promised to help creators cultivate massive new audiences without interference from middlemen; social networking would substitute for expensive advertising campaigns and digital dissemination would make hard copies, plastic jewel cases and bubble mailers obsolete. But will people pay for art untethered to tangible things, when it can be replicated and transmitted with the push of a button? How are creative types supposed to sustain themselves and their efforts? After all, despite the plummeting cost of online distribution, art still requires an artist, a flesh-and-blood person who does the work and must be paid.

These and related questions were up for debate at the Open Video Conference. Could copyright be reformed to better encourage innovation? the event's organizers wondered. Is defending intellectual property worth being spied on? How can we protect the right to remix TV shows and amuse our friends with the results? Is the notion of originality obsolete? Is stealing actually a form of sharing, and vice versa? Is everything on the Web mine to use, and if it is, has the world become more democratic? There was little consensus among the 700 or so attendees on these and other matters, serving, as we did, various masters. There were freeware designers, techie entrepreneurs, political mash-up artists, an abundance of lawyers and legal scholars, documentary filmmakers like myself—and, of course, pirates.

The most famous pirate was surprise guest Peter Sunde, whose image beamed in from Sweden via webcam so he could discuss The Pirate Bay, a hugely popular website that serves as the point of contact for peer-to-peer sharing of large files via a protocol called BitTorrent. The Pirate Bay's notoriety, and the network's efficiency in permitting users from around the world to trawl the Web for the latest in Hollywood twaddle, had raised the ire of the Motion Picture Association

of America, which instigated a number of lawsuits against them on behalf of various movie studios. Sunde and three co-defendants were found guilty of copyright infringement in the spring of 2009. The four were sentenced to one year in prison and the equivalent of \$3.5 million in damages. When a sympathetic moderator asked Sunde if he was "stressed-out" at the prospect of such punishment, Sunde shrugged, "not really." Since tracking sites don't actually host the files in question, but merely

link to available material, it's hard to claim that they're providing a service different from other search engines. Sunde assured the audience that his case was far from settled and that the appeals would go on for at least five more years.*

There are many peer-to-peer file-sharing websites, but The Pirate Bay, organized by the arts collective Piratbyran (Piracy Bureau), is the most loudly subversive and the most conscientious about connecting freedom to share with freedom of speech. The swashbuckling swagger of the site's impresarios and the high-profile lawsuit had made them an international cause célèbre, spawning officially registered Pirate parties in eight countries. In Sweden, where Piratpartiet is the third-largest political party, the group's platform emphasizes three core issues: online and offline privacy, the abolition of patents and copyright reform; it took more than 7 percent of the Swedish vote in the 2009 European parliamentary elections. The party takes pride in being politically unaligned, neither traditionally left nor right. It's unfettered free content that's paramount, trumping all other social concerns: downloaders of the WWW, unite!

This is why it sometimes seems as though the pirates are digital Zapatistas, with Sunde as their Subcommandante Marcos. Last April an activist "gallery and convergence stage" in Brooklyn hosted a discussion with another founding member of The Pirate Bay, Sara Sajjad. "As Piratbyran says, multiplication can produce powerful numbers. And great music collections," enthused the Facebook invitation. Attendees were advised to "bring your laptop, USB stick or hard drive, and share, swap and propagate like the pirate you arrrrrrr!"

The "Guerilla Music Swap" was imagined as an anti-capitalist statement, a way of sticking it to the money-grubbing, crap-making, public-domain-denying RIAA and MPAA. But if the business author Matt Mason is to be believed, these well-intentioned rebels weren't really challenging the business establishment—they were its unwitting vanguard.

Given the booty to be plundered on the corporate consulting circuit, Mason was probably the richest buccaneer at the Open Video Conference, and the confident optimism of his presentation eclipsed Sunde's insouciance. Mason gave a succinct and breezy talk based on his successful book, *The Pirate's Dilemma: How Youth Culture Reinvented Capitalism*; according to his website, his speaking performances have left Procter and Gamble "Delighted" and struck the executives of Miller Genuine Draft as "Amazing." Pepsi just "loved it" and Disney, only slightly more restrained, found Mason "very stimulating!"

And why shouldn't they love him? Remember what pirates like: Parrots. Eye Patches. And gold, best of all. Mason's argument was sensible enough: Pirates aren't anti-capitalists, they're punk capitalists. "D.I.Y. encourages us to reject authority and hierarchy, advocating that we can and should produce as much as we consume," Mason writes in the opening chapter of his homage to piracy. "Since punk, this idea has been quietly changing the fabric of our economic system, replacing outdated ideas with twenty-first-century upgrades of Punk Capitalism."

"Pirates are taking over the good ship capitalism, but they're not here to sink it," he continues, reassuringly. "Instead they will plug the holes, keep it afloat, and propel it forward."

Dressed to play the one hip guy at the business luncheon, Mason acknowledged that piracy can sometimes cut into profits; but in crisis, as they say, lies opportunity. He gave the example of drug

companies distributing widely pirated patent medicines without charge. “They started winning corporate social responsibility awards,” Mason rhapsodized. “And all the advertising money in the world couldn’t help them do that; pirates managed to reach the place that other advertisers and advertising couldn’t reach.” Or take shoes; instead of suing a Japanese bootlegger for selling altered versions of their sneakers, Nike made a fortune appropriating the redesigns.

As Mason suggested, piracy isn’t just another business model; it is the greatest business model of them all. Its secret, as we shall see, is getting people to work for you, for free.

That’s not “free” as in beer, that’s “free” as in serfdom.

So everyone agrees these days: Hooray for pirates! Art and culture (or, more discouragingly, “content”) should be free. Techno-utopians of the left and right envision a future in which everything ever made is accessible, at no cost, with a click of a button. Those who think “free” as in speech envision a new digital order offering an inclusive cultural commons and mass enlightenment through access to information; those who think “free” as in beer merely see a cheaper way to get rich. “Just because products are free doesn’t mean that someone, somewhere, isn’t making huge gobs of money,” Chris Anderson gushed in the Wired essay that would secure him a hefty advance to write last summer’s blockbuster business hardback, *Free!: The Future of a Radical Price*.

And creative types should be grateful to him. They won’t be the ones making those “huge gobs of money,” but at least they will have been liberated from the tyranny of making a living from their art. Finally their souls will be unsullied!

Such are the insights, anyway, of a well-received academic monograph published last year under the romantic title “Money Ruins Everything.”

Its authors, a team of respectable social scientists, were stunned by what they found online: throngs of people who, instead of engaging in cost-benefit analysis, “produce content for the love of it, for the joy of expressing themselves, because it is fun, to demonstrate that they are better at it than others, or for a host of other non-commercial motivations.”

Another recent research paper, this one published under the auspices of Harvard Business School, allays any suspicion you might have that lack of income could inhibit the world’s creative output. A decline in “industry profitability” won’t hurt production, its authors assure readers, because artists’ unique motivations will keep them churning out content even without pay. “The remuneration of artistic talent differs from other types of labor in at least two important respects. On the one hand, artists often enjoy what they do, suggesting they might continue being creative even when the monetary incentives to do so become weaker. In addition, artists receive a significant portion of their remuneration not in monetary form.” To quote the experts, “many of them enjoy fame, admiration, social status, and free beer in bars.”

Some, like open-source activist and author Cory Doctorow, still believe “there’s a pretty strong case to be made that ‘free’ has some inherent antipathy to capitalism.” That hope is also reflected in a documentary about the virtues of remix culture, *Steal This Film II*, which illustrates the rampant abuse of intellectual property by big business while making the case that enforcement of copyright would require a massive invasion of privacy. The movie then veers off course in a burst of willful naiveté.

“This is the question that faces us today,” the voiceover coos: “If the battle against sharing is already lost, and media is no longer a commodity, how will society change?” Here we come to the core, misguided assumption shared by many copyright reformists: if something is free, as in gratis, it has been decommodified.

Of course if you want to see it that way, you will hear no disagreements from those masters of commodification, the CEOs of Silicon Valley. Here the democratic impulse of liberal social scientists and anarchist filmmakers finds its cynical echo. Kevin Kelly, “senior maverick” at Wired magazine, has also discovered uncompensated creativity and he just can’t believe how awesome it is. “The frantic global rush to connect everyone to everyone, all the time, is quietly giving rise to a revised version of socialism,” Kelly gushes, pointing to sites like Wikipedia, Digg and StumbleUpon. “We’re not talking about your grandfather’s socialism”:

Instead of gathering on collective farms, we gather in collective worlds. Instead of state factories, we have desktop factories connected to virtual co-ops. Instead of sharing drill bits, picks and shovels, we share apps, scripts and APIs. . . . Instead of government rations and subsidies, we have a bounty of free goods.

Behold the majesty of digital communitarianism: It’s socialism without the state, without ideology, and, best of all, without the working class.

Where free is concerned, we’re typically told that “the kids,” impatient and entitled, want their culture this instant and will not pay a dime, so they’ve embraced piracy. But the young pirates aren’t really leading a mass insurrection; they’re a symbol or a scapegoat employed to obscure a larger struggle about culture and value—and in whose pocket that value accumulates. The owners of social networking sites may be forbidden from selling individual songs posted by members, but the companies themselves, including user content, can be turned over for a hefty sum: almost \$900 million for Bebo and far more for YouTube. Google doesn’t see the mammoth archive of books it currently hopes to digitize as a priceless treasure to be preserved; it’s a trove of content to sprinkle with banner ads. Google, as Chris Anderson points out many times, succeeds because of an almost unfathomable economy of scale; each free search brings revenue from targeted advertising and fodder for the data miners: each mouse click is a trickle in the flood. Technology writer Nicholas Carr and others call this “digital sharecropping”: It’s not that the production or distribution of culture has been concentrated in the hands of the few—it’s the culture’s economic value. Somebody’s got a massive financial interest in free, and it’s not the people uploading footage of kittens to Vimeo.

And so we have our conversation about the enormous cultural restructuring that is going on, but we are having it in a senseless vocabulary where “content” takes the place of “art” and “information” substitutes for “culture,” “knowledge,” “literature,” “music,” “cinema” and “meaning.” All the mysteries of the creative process are flattened: the fickle nature of the muse, the idiosyncrasies of scholarship, and the tenacity required to compose a novel. All are reduced to nothing by analogies derived from the logic of computer code, data processing and high-tech business models.

But a deeper problem arises when the idiom of technology supplants traditional social criticism. The “freedom” promoted by the software community always turns out to be the libertarian version. It’s about freedom of information: the desire to see how something is made, to tinker, and to pass those

insights and innovations along. Copyleft, as the advocates of this all-purpose transparency call it, is not “left” in any traditional sense; it has nothing to say about entrenched systems of economic privilege or limits on profitability. Likewise, the open-source movement does not provide the blueprint for a fairer social order. Techno-utopians, wonderstruck by the latest in programming geekery, project insights about software development onto the broader social sphere, and the rest of us mistake technology’s gee-whiz factor for theoretical sophistication.

Meanwhile, the most hyped solutions for survival in a free economy always turn out to be anathema to those who care about art. Make a video that goes viral and lands you a gig directing commercials, we’re advised. Check out a cool app that embeds advertising in your film or song or book. For artists who have spent years resisting corporate values, it is galling to constantly hear that advertising is to be the only viable source of sustenance in the emerging order of total freedom.

Maybe “free” will soon become just another way of saying “service economy.” People won’t pay for music, books or film any longer? The trick, we are told, is to find the “fee” in “free.” Perhaps people will part with their money for the privilege of getting things quickly and with less hassle, kind of like how we buy bottled water when there’s a tap down the hall. Or maybe artists can “add value” to their creations by making themselves into desirable products their audiences can “connect” with. There was a time when the work took the spotlight and the artist receded into the background—no longer: In a world of digital super-abundance, the makers themselves are auto-generating precious scarcity. After all, when you’re working for reputational currency, to use one of Anderson’s stock phrases, you are your most valuable commodity. Celebrity will become even more essential to creative survival, and the cultivation of friends, fans and followers will be a full-time job.

For now, however, the vast majority of artists struggle for sustainability, not profit—and in our rush to “free” we make them canaries in the coalmine of virtual capitalism. There are many self-reliant creators who, even though they appear successful enough, subsist humbly off the proceeds of their work. There are people who spend years toiling to produce something significant before persuading their audience to give them—for an album, a book or a film—perhaps \$10 or \$20 dollars in return. Why not have those who are so eager to sever this meager source of sustenance make the first foray into the land of free? Imagine the savings to society if computer programmers or venture capitalists were paid in beer.

Obviously we must balance our desire for free stuff with a concern for work. But the open-source software tradition, our final authority on all social questions these days, has little to say about labor, oppression, compensation or collective bargaining. The supposed liberation heralded by those who promote free culture is winner-take-all; exploit or be exploited, as long as you share your code. Anderson concedes this point, acknowledging that if we “measure success in terms of the creation of vast sums of wealth spread among more than a few people, Free can’t yet compare to Paid.” Unless artists and their allies organize themselves, it never will. Until then, those who have dreamed up a way to cheat an entire category of workers and call it democracy will get to pose as political radicals, happily cashing their paychecks while telling others to work for nothing.

In the United States, direct government support of the arts peaked during the Cold War, when fear of a Soviet planet prompted a variety of cultural outreach programs at the behest of the State Department; since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the venture capital model has ruled supreme. Reduced to propaganda

or product, art suffers. How relieved I am to be in possession of a Canadian passport. My fellow citizens enjoy access to resources, support and financing that are virtually inconceivable to our independent American counterparts. It's an altogether different form of "free," one based on an investment in creative work that doesn't prioritize profitability, thus liberating artists to explore noncommercial avenues.

Meanwhile, here in America, pirates do the work of mass marketers, while industry pretends to defend the very artists they have exploited for so long. It is a cruel parody of the traditional distinction between art and commerce. As the critic Lewis Hyde observes, "When the song of one's self is coming all of a piece, page after page, an attic room and a chamber pot do not insult the soul." But the same message reduced to an economic truism—decline in industry profitability won't hurt artistic production because artists will work for beer—rings not just hollow, but obscene. There's a dignity, a right livelihood if you will, that comes from supporting oneself through creative work undertaken with integrity. Yes, artists will work for love, not money. There are many occupations where that is the case. But the idea of building a massively profitable industry on the uncompensated labor of, say, teachers, would strike most as loathsome, not daring and innovative. And definitely not progressive.

*Less than two weeks after Sunde's Open Video webcast, it was announced that The Pirate Bay would be sold to a gaming company for around \$8 million.

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Net surfing â€” UK US noun [uncountable] computing the activity of looking at various places one after the other on the Internet
Thesaurus: internethyponym â€” Useful english dictionary. The Art in Heaven Concert â€” Video by Mike Oldfield Released 10 February 2000 (â€” Definition of surfing the net in the Idioms Dictionary. surfing the net phrase. What does surfing the net expression mean? Definitions by the largest Idiom Dictionary.Â Surf here comes from channel-surfing , the practice of switching frequently between channels on a television set in an attempt to find an interesting programme. See also: net, surf. surf the net. tv. to browse through the offerings of the internet. He surfs the net for three hours each evening. See also: net, surf. Want to thank TFD for its existence?