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Portfolio Essay 1

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If Copyrights Didn’t Exist

The book *The Book: A Life History of Technology* by Nicole Howard sparked the pondering about ways copyright could be different from how it is known in the present. The most major way it could have been different is if it didn’t exist and there were no copyright laws at all. There are arguments that depict copyright laws as actually being detrimental to society. This essay will take the opposite stance. Copyright is a benefit to society that has positive effects that are proven by history, the fact that it gives monetary incentive, which allows authors to support themselves by presenting their ideas.

There are deficiencies to copyright laws but the positives far outweigh the negatives. For a fair judgment to be made, it is critical to state the arguments to abolish the copyright laws as well as the points to keep them. Possibly the primary objection to copyright laws is that they restrict the public from sharing ideas thus slowing the spread of knowledge. It’s more difficult to spread ideas with copyrights in place because to attain a published version of an idea it is usually required to pay for it. However, the inconvenience of copyright notifications and buying the piece of work is far inferior to the alternative of not having copyright laws.

The argument that society would be better off without copyrights is defended by proof that doesn’t involve hypotheticals of the future. Instead of looking into the future with little to no facts to support it, history presents a strong argument that copyright is greatly beneficial. In the past there was no copyright and is therefore a useful place to start from to try to see how the distribution of ideas would be different without copyright. At this point in history, writer’s ideas were pirated with ease because there was no law against it. Publishers would steal the books of an author by working together to give each other the works and therefore not having to give a cut of the income. Publishers would also put some inventory aside without the authors knowing and sell it for a discounted price while not honoring the author’s percentage of pay. Because of the lower costs without having to worry about paying the author, these books sold faster and gave publishers extra income. Before copyright “piracy in its various forms were rampant”. (Howard,100) The result of the high rate of piracy can be compared to when there was legal action against stealing another individuals ideas to see which time period enjoyed greater benefits.

At last the Copyright Act of 1710 was enacted “under Queen Anne’s reign, in 1709, legal protection of an author’s right was granted for the 1st time in history”. (Foster,13) This was followed by other countries doing the same, which included   
Denmark in 1741, and at least Germany in 1870 was among the last countries to follow suit. Directly after the first copyright laws were enacted in the 18th century is the greatest proof that copyrights don’t hinder, but in fact foster the sharing of ideas. This period is known as the Enlightenment, which is an “intellectual movement” that is “usually associated with the 18th century.” (Brians) This was a period of advancements in many fields including science, philosophy and literature. Such intellectuals as Denis Diderot, Jean Jacques Rousseau and John Locke all benefitted from copyright as their major works were published in 1772, 1762 and 1690 respectively. The correlation between the copyright laws being enacted and possibly the greatest intellectual advance the world has ever seen is no coincidence. Copyright laws gave the authors complete ownership of their ideas and with it came compensation along with respect of their work.

There are a few reasons why receiving compensation for their ideas allow for more spread of knowledge than a society without such copyright laws would. Receiving monetary compensation for ones work would seem like an obvious reason to share ideas. It gives “an incentive for authors and scientists to create and explore” which is how the framers of the United States Constitution viewed compensation. (Vaidhyanathan,21) The fact that authors will make a large sum of money for coming up with new ideas and publishing them presents a great reason to endeavor upon creating these new ideas. An argument against this is that the individuals who come up with advances in science, history and other areas have a passion for the topic they are writing about which is why they do it. In other words they don’t do it for the money and would pursue whatever topic they love regardless if there was money involved or not. While this is true, although not always, these people who come up with ideas for the passion of it don’t have to publish and disseminate them. Because copyright laws allow authors to make money off their ideas, it creates more incentive along with respect to publish their thoughts.

Another reason why it’s vital to have copyright laws is because the individuals who have these great ideas have to make a living. As stated above monetary compensation creates incentive for authors and if they aren’t making money they need some means to feed, house and cover many living expenses. If authors did not receive a lot of compensation, then they would have to take on an additional job or other ways to make money. This would in turn take time away from thinking about new ideas and creating works to present these ideas. The copyright laws allow authors to make a living while also improving society by sharing their ideas. With the benefit of their ideas being protected they can use their time to have new ideas and publish them, which will in turn assist in furthering society.

In conclusion, if copyright laws never came about, society would be much worse off and possibly still stuck in the same thinking as before the Enlightenment. Although it is sometimes annoying to pay for ideas and seems harder to share information, it is overall a societal advantage. If they were never enacted authors wouldn’t be as obliged to publish their ideas to the public. Those ideas that are seemingly more difficult to share because of the laws, would never have even been disseminated if it weren’t for those same laws. History provides proof that the added monetary incentive and protection of ideas via copyright laws benefits the public.

Works Cited

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