

Cultural Interpretations of File-Sharing Technologies: the Case of Independent Ukraine

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Peer-to-peer systems allow the seamless sharing of digital materials between strangers who may live in different countries or different continents. As networks such as Kazaa and Gnutella shuffle files effortlessly over the Internet, national boundaries are visible only to those who bother to look up the IP addresses of the machines involved. In the eight years since the debut of Napster, a huge volume of legal, popular and scholarly attention has been paid to peer-to-peer file sharing. But despite the inherently global nature of these networks, very little of this attention has been devoted to use of these networks outside North America and Western Europe.

I explore the cultural meanings of file sharing in Ukraine. Ukraine, the second most populous of the former Soviet republics, had been named as one of the ten “priority countries” with “unacceptable piracy rates.” IFPI and other industry and governmental bodies present piracy in straightforward terms as a crime, and emphasize links between music piracy and violent organized crime. The international struggle against piracy is seen as a matter of building a strong legal framework in developing countries and then making sure that local authorities enforce these laws. They assume that national development follows a linear path from the lawless frontier of unchecked piracy to the well policed copyright regime evidenced in the United States.

In contrast, I argue that file-sharing practices in Ukraine reflect distinctive features of its cultural heritage. They are not simply the result of a primitive stage of legal development. Until 1991, Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union. The USSR did not recognize the concept of intellectual property, particularly as it related to foreign and scientific works. For example, generations of Soviet children grew up reading a popular story by Russian writer Aleksander Volkov. It told of a little girl from Kansas who was transported by a tornado with her dog Totoshka on a trip to visit a wizard. Even today, few realize that the work is a translation.

Internally, however, Xerox machines were banned, and as dissident culture developed from the 1960s onward the illicit reproduction of unsanctioned material was seen as an heroic act of resistance. Manuscripts were photographed, retyped or copied long hand and passed from person to person in a practice known as samizdat. This was punishable by long terms in prison labor camps.

As I pursued my own research on the use of file sharing technology in Ukraine, I started to wonder what the experience of seventy years of Soviet rule done to shape Ukrainian thinking on the issue of file sharing and music downloading. I began to realize that Ukrainian users had a quite different sense than their American comrades of the copyright issues involved, the relevance of communism to file sharing, and indeed the cultural meaning of file sharing technology within Ukrainian society.

These, I argue, can only be understood through reference to their diverging historical experiences. Analysis of the discussion of copyright, piracy and Internet file sharing in the

Ukrainian press and within the Ukrainian community website Muzon.com demonstrates that local attitudes and practices have been profoundly shaped by the Soviet experience. Today's intellectual property environment reflects both Soviet culture's lack of concern for the rights of individuals, businesses, and foreign government and the struggle of opposition and nationalist groups to freely distribute material outside the control of Soviet authorities. These two factors, while in many ways opposed, both influence Ukrainians to reject constraints on the free distribution of copyrighted materials. In addition, the efforts of Western businesses and governments to enforce their own copyright regimes on Ukraine trigger resentment in a nation that long suffered under the dictates of the Kremlin.

File sharing enthusiasts often present themselves as members of an underground movement fighting "the rulers of the world corporations" and even a way to realize aspects of the communist utopia once promised to them. I show a number of technical and cultural similarities between the practices of Internet file sharing and those of Soviet samizdat, which I argue lead some Ukrainians to interpret the struggle against Western copyright as expression of political freedom and national identity.

My findings suggest that scholars concerned with the use and social meaning of internet file sharing should not assume that a given technology or network will have the same meaning for users in all countries, but should be prepared to integrate their studies of information sharing behavior within a broader analysis of the social and national milieus in which they take place.