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“You Guys Who Download Stuff Illegally, Don’t You Ever Feel Guilty?”: Initial Analysis of Changes in Practices and Values Among Swedish Illegal File Sharers 2007-2012

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Abstract

This study investigates self-reported practices and values of Internet-based cultural consumption in relation to illegal file sharing in Sweden during 2007-2012. It is based on more than 1.000 posts in an Internet discussion forum and focuses on expressed senses of guilt, whether file sharing is right or wrong, buying media, and dimensions of stakeholders and media genres. This note presents work-in-progress results of initial quantitative analysis, suggesting that no changes in feelings of guilt were detected during the time period, despite legislative changes. More posts report to now buy media, while there at the same time is an increase in posts expressing that file sharing, despite its current illegal status, is a right thing to do. A deeper qualitative analysis is needed to further understand the complexity of changes in file sharers’ justifications for what content to acquire through illegal file sharing, what they choose to pay for – and why.

Keywords: Internet-based cultural consumption, file sharing, guilt-feeling, right-or-wrong, Flashback.org

Introduction

In the context of Internet-based Cultural Consumption (IBCC) discussed by Nolin (2010) more and more people are using the Internet as an arena for their cultural consumption. IBCC entails different genres such as music, movies, games and e-books, and legal and illegal file sharing are established means for acquiring this content. In the history of IBCC file sharing some key points can be identified with respect to: technological development and applications such as the MP3 codec in 1987, Napster, Kazaa, and the BitTorrent technology; and, legislative actions taken by government agencies, such as The Digital Millennium Copyright Act (1998). One of the main problems within the legislation drive during the 1990s’ was the difficulty of policing millions of users within each national context. A global trend toward solving this problem by decentralizing file sharing legislation, led to the EU directive on the enforcement of intellectual property rights (IPRED). IPRED came into force in May 2004 and directed member states to comply with it within two years.

Sweden, a country characterized by early adoption of Internet technology in general and as perhaps the most prolific European country in file sharing technology development and use, was a late adaptor. File sharing was widespread and had been steadily increasing during the 2000s’ and the pioneering file sharing site Piratebay.org was hosted here, attracting users from all over the world. It could be argued that in Sweden, the threshold towards sharing material (both copyrighted and own) was low, due to the fact that there already were legislated procedures allowing private copying material and sharing it in closed groups between friends and family, i.e. ‘fair use’. Thus, the IPRED implementation was highly controversial and led to several internal rifts within leading political parties. Right before the law, the debate among government agencies and copyright owners was intense and far from obvious when it came to outcome and opinions.

In April 2009, IPRED came into force. Overnight, file sharing practices among millions of Swedes went from being a (relatively) socially accepted way of acquiring and consuming culture, to be re-confirmed as an illegal act. This shift happened without any visible external changes such as changes in

technology or in what content that was possible to download. In other words, nothing really changed, except for the introduction of a law that re-confirmed file sharing as a criminal offense. How did Swedish file sharers react to the implementation of this legislation? Overall, studies suggest that the IPRED law led to some temporary changes among the general public, but that the activities now are back to the same levels as before the law. According to a study by Larsson and Svensson (2012) file sharing behaviour had, six months after IPRED was implemented, somewhat decreased while social norms seemed to be unaffected. With few exceptions, Larsson and Svensson (2012) being one, these changes have been measured through static measurements of data traffic and discussed in dichotomized terms of piracy, internet warriors, and free information on one hand and intellectual property rights and economic interests on the other.

The purpose of this work is to explore self-reported behaviors and motivations among illegal file sharers during a five year time period of increased juridical legislation and societal pressure in Sweden. This paper presents the initial results of a quantitative analysis of a discussion topic at the Internet forum Flashback.org devoted to feelings of guilt in relation to file sharing.

Case Description: Flashback.org

The Swedish discussion forum Flashback.org is one of North Europe's oldest and most well known Swedish Internet forums, although often regarded with a lot of scepticism by media and the general public. According to the official mission statement Flashback.org is politically and religiously independent and its purpose is to protect and defend free speech. By international comparison it resembles the 4chan bulletin board in how it accepts and attracts a wide range of discussion topics including, but not limited to, illegal activities and phenomena. As of September 2012, Flashback.org had 685.179 registered members and 37.168.504 posts. The most active discussions are dealing with Computers and video games; Relationships; National politics, Integration and Immigration; Music; and Crime. These discussion categories consist of 0.8 to 1.3 million posts each, distributed over a large number of topics.

We chose to investigate a topic from this particular forum for several reasons: 1) it is one of Sweden's' most active arenas for discussing file sharing, as the File-sharing category alone consists of 23.000+ topics including approximately 450.000 posts; 2) the forum content dates back to before year 2000, enabling analysis of possible changes in discussions and perceptions over time. Furthermore, the specific topic we chose provides us with the unique opportunity to access perspectives from active file sharers in Sweden during a time when significant political and legislative changes occurred.

The person who started this particular topic directly addresses active file sharers, asking whether they ever felt guilty because of their activities. Thus, the topic title translates roughly to "You guys who download stuff illegally, don't you ever feel guilty?" (In Swedish: "Ni som laddar ner olagligt, får ni inte dåligt samvete någongång?")

Methods: Study Design, Data Collection and Analysis

We conducted a basic quantitative content analysis of the aforementioned topic in the Flashback forum. The topic thread was created in 2007 and exhibits three distinctive "burst" of activity, in 2007, 2010 and 2012. With the exclusion of three posts during one day in 2011, this makes up a natural division for comparison between groups over time.

Table 1. Discussion activity distribution 2007-2012

Year	2007	2010	2012
Discussion active between	March 12 th -May 15 th	Nov 1 st -Dec 26 th	March 8 th -Aug 6 th
Number of posts included in this analysis*	358	401	318

*Empty posts, spam or nonsense (e.g. "Hey there!!") were omitted from this analysis (n=12).

The discussion consisted of 1089 posts (in Swedish) by 796 unique anonymous authors (unique user names). We assume that the authors of this publicly available discussion are Swedish and that they are engaging in illegal file-sharing activities, because they respond in Swedish to the question posed in

the topic title which addresses illegal file sharers. Flashback.org does not provide any member demographics and there is a limited amount of information about member profiles available for non-members.

Activity wise, while the majority of the posts were unique, the 2007 period had somewhat more interactive discussion and reoccurring posters than the other two. However, there were few posters moving between the time periods, only 12 (1.5%) of the authors posted in more than one of the three time periods. Content wise, the posts could be anywhere between a simple yes or no as answer to the question posed in the topic title, and elaborate reasoning and rationales for a certain stance, spanning several pages.

We developed a coding scheme following Neuendorf's (2002) suggested method, including several researchers in all steps of the process. We recorded e.g. whether the posts expressed feeling guilty or not in relation to file sharing, whether file sharing is considered right or wrong, buying of media, any mentions of media genres or stakeholders, and, if any of the posts expressed change of mind or behaviour at some point. The posts were manually coded into SPSS and analysed by two researchers. Data was analyzed through frequency calculations of occurrences of the items described above, first within and then across the time periods.

Results

Is File Sharing Considered Right or Wrong?

A small number ($n=127$, 12%) of the posts explicitly stated whether they thought file sharing was right or wrong. When contrasted across time periods, changes were detected in response distribution.

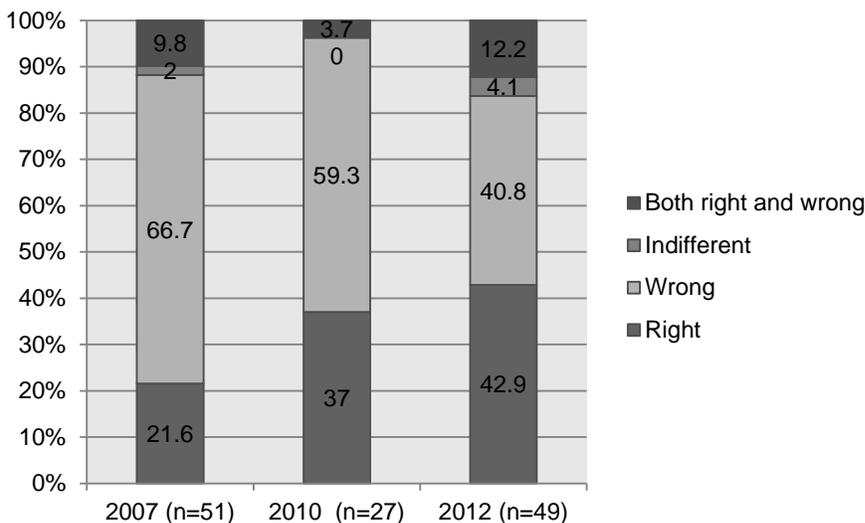


Figure 1. Distribution of posts expressing file sharing to be right or wrong

The responses stating that file sharing was right doubled from approximately one-fifth to two fifths. Correspondingly, the share of respondents indicating that it was wrong dropped from two-thirds to approximately the same share as their opposites (two fifths). However, there seem to be a slightly higher proportion of posts reporting "both right and wrong". Taking into account the respondents answers that indicate both yes and no the affirmative responses rise from less than a third to more than half of the respondent between the three time periods. It should, however, be noted that the number of posts explicitly mentioned this aspect was very low in each of the time periods.

Changes in Behavior

Overall, a small portion of the total posts ($n=40$, 3.7%) reported changes in behavior or opinion in relation to their file sharing practice. As illustrated below, there were more posts reporting this in 2010 than during the other time periods.

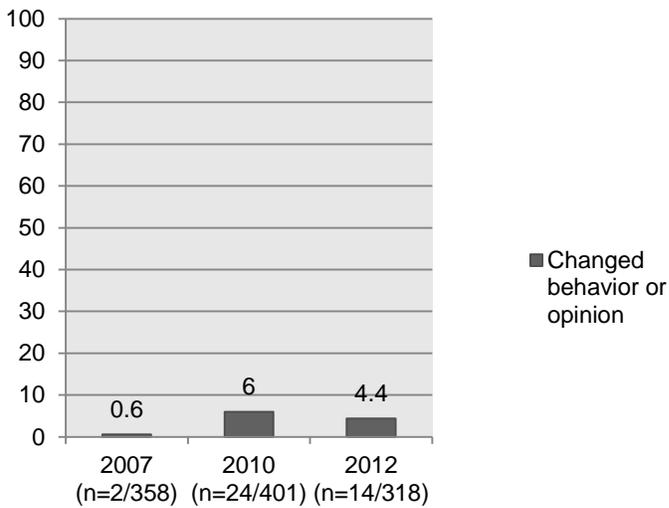


Figure 2. Distribution of posts stating changes in behavior or opinion

After IPRED was introduced in April 2009, there were reports of decreased Internet data traffic. The first indications by general media indicated that data traffic in Sweden dropped with 30–50% within the first 24 hours after the law was in force (Lewan, 2009). These data were almost immediately criticized and the next day Pirate Bay reported that the traffic on their site dropped by a mere 3.5 % (Aftonbladet, 2009). The results found in this study correspond with these studies, in suggesting that the law had a temporary scare effect.

Buying Media

Overall, a total number of 298 posts (~28%) explicitly stated to be paying for/not paying for cultural consumption, in the sense of monetary purchases of media.

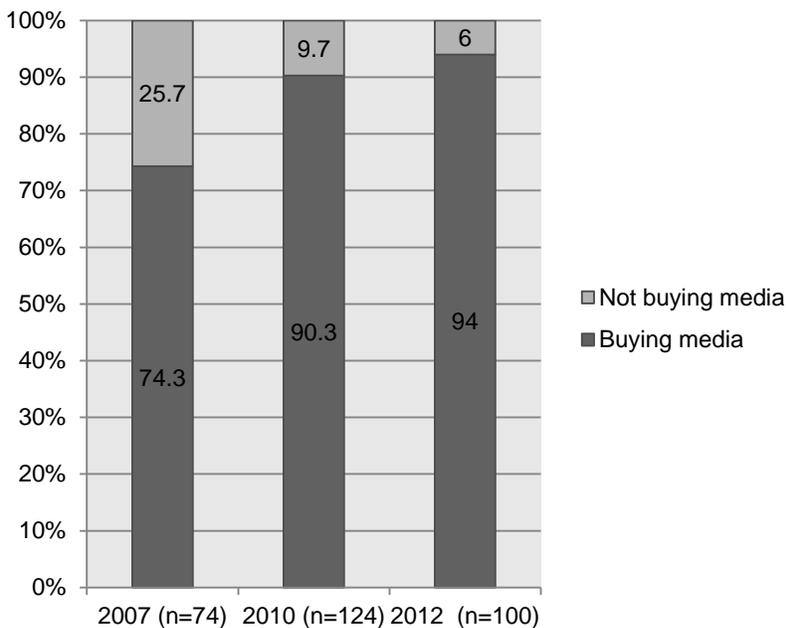


Figure 3. Changes in buying media

Allegedly, the respondents in this study are involved in illegal file sharing (since that was the stated at the outset in the initial question), yet the affirming share of posts who states to be paying for some of their culture consumption actually increases from 74.3% to 94% during the time of the study. However, it is important to be careful when interpreting these numbers, as well as illustrating a change induced by the IPRED law they might simply mirror the fact that there is more content available through legal services today, such as Spotify, iTunes, Netflix etc.

Genres and stakeholders

The majority of the posts mentioned one or several media genres and/or different stakeholders. The notion of stakeholders include reasons, rationales and justifications for file sharing in relation to “personal” motives such as financial or ideological, “business” as in relation to the media industry, and “artist” as in the performer, artist or author of a particular piece.

Table 2. Mentions of stakeholders per media genre

Genre Stakeholder	2007	2010	2012	Trend	
	Period 1 (n=420)	Period 2 (n=640)	Period 3 (n=460)		
TV	Personal	0,7%	3,3%	3,9%	
	Business	0,7%	0,6%	2,2%	
	Artist	0,0%	0,5%	0,7%	
Games	Personal	5,0%	7,3%	7,0%	
	Business	1,7%	3,6%	2,8%	
	Artist	1,9%	2,3%	3,0%	
Music	Personal	14,3%	13,4%	16,1%	
	Business	16,0%	9,2%	8,0%	
	Artist	17,4%	11,1%	12,2%	
Movies	Personal	9,3%	14,1%	15,4%	
	Business	6,4%	8,1%	8,5%	
	Artist	7,1%	6,7%	8,5%	
Other	19,5%	19,7%	11,7%		

For example, the posts where the genre “Movies” and stakeholder “Personal” are mentioned increased from 9.3% to 15.4% during the time period. This might be interpreted as file sharing and the media genre “Movies” is increasingly discussed in relation to personal motivations and justifications and to a greater extent than aspects related to the movie industry or individual actors.

Feeling guilty

In all, 603 posts (56%) explicitly responded to the question posed in the topic title: “You guys who download stuff illegally, don’t you ever feel guilty?” The large majority of these reported not having any feelings of guilt. However, when analyzing data across the time periods, we detected small nuances.

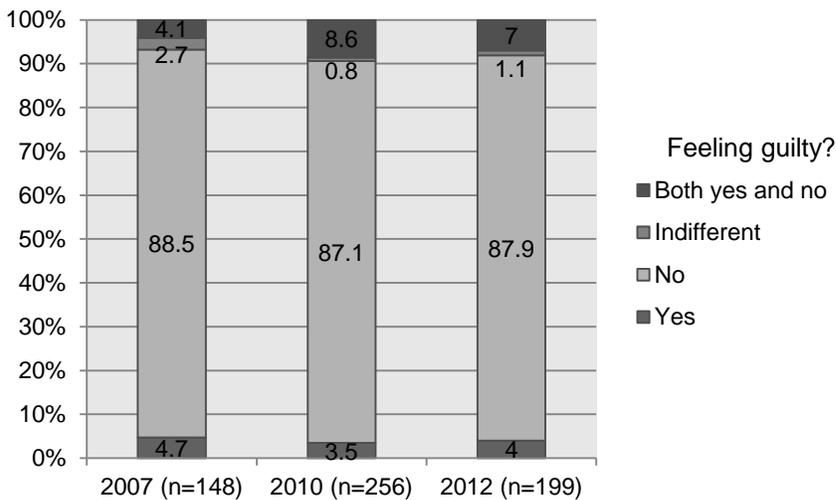


Figure 4. Distribution of posts expressing feeling guilty or not

In 2010, there was a small dip in the responses of feeling guilty. In addition, there were a slightly higher proportion of posts stating a more nuanced response, as in “both yes and no”, especially compared to 2007 – where on the other hand a larger portion of posts reported indifference to the question. This could indicate a degree of ambivalence to the practice, but at the same time also that the legislative enforcement might have had very little effect on the social norms among file sharers.

Discussion

Our preliminary results suggest that the majority of the posts responding to the question in the discussion topic title do not feel guilty for practicing illegal file sharing. Even though file sharing in Sweden during this time period went from a legal gray zone to being illegal, an increasing share of the posts state that file sharing is a right thing to do. Furthermore, our results indicate more buying of media, and possible changes in different rationales and practices for different genres and stakeholders. In all, the results show a multifaceted practice discussion which implies that IBCC is more much complex than just the question of illegal sharing of copyright protected files. These deeper aspects are challenging to investigate because it for obvious reasons might be hard to find active illegal file sharers and such explicit expressions of their perspectives like we did in this particular discussion topic.

The analysis presented in this paper is part of a larger study, in which illegal file sharing is investigated from different perspectives. Although not included in this study phase, when coding the data we noted a certain moral flexibility in the sense that different strategies and justifications seemed to be employed for different media genres. However, a deeper qualitative analysis is needed to further understand the complexity of current changes in file sharers’ justifications for what content to acquire through illegal file sharing, and what they choose to pay for – and why. Ultimately, this understanding would contribute to technical development of applications, systems and services for legal and fair IBCC by identifying different motivations, rationales, and justifications related to whether it is film, music, games, or programs that are consumed.

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