



NOTE

Beyond Infringement: Rethinking DMCA § 1202 for
Generative AI

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Abstract. With the emergence of large language models (LLMs) like ChatGPT, scholars and courts have fervently debated whether LLMs’ training on and reproduction of copyrighted materials amounts to fair use. But in a recent series of cases, a lesser-known challenge to LLMs has reared its head: § 1202 of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act. This provision requires that when a work is copied, its associated copyright management information (CMI)—such as its license or terms of use agreement—is copied with it. The requirement was originally intended to modernize copyright for the Internet by ensuring all users would be aware of the terms of their use. Now, § 1202’s unintended overbreadth threatens to block LLM development and use as it swallows questions of infringement and fair use entirely.

This Note argues that § 1202 is broader than traditional copyright infringement in three critical respects: It allows liability without any showing of copyrightability, provides no fair use defense, and permits disproportionate statutory damages. While § 1202 includes an intent requirement, that requirement is so minimal that it fails to meaningfully limit the statute’s reach—especially in the LLM context, where the act of violating § 1202 may itself satisfy the mental requirement.

In response to these concerns, this Note proposes that courts adopt an identity requirement for § 1202 claims against LLMs. This requirement would cabin liability to outputs that exactly match training data—cases where the removal or alteration of CMI is both clear and technically avoidable. The approach mirrors Congress’s existing accommodation of technological limitations for broadcasters in cases of technical infeasibility or financial hardship. A similar understanding for LLMs would preserve § 1202’s core purpose, resolve a growing district court split, and ensure the most consequential copyright question raised by generative artificial intelligence is answered on its merits—not sidestepped by a statute never designed to decide it.

[†] [Acknowledgment Text]

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
I. The DMCA’s Purpose: Maintaining Copyright Liability in a Digital World	9
II. The DMCA in Practice: Liability Explodes	12
A. Weakened Standard for Proving Copying	13
B. No Fair Use Defense.....	24
C. Heightened Statutory Damages	27
D. The Intent Requirement Fails to Cabin.....	30
III. Applying the DMCA to LLMs	34
Conclusion.....	53

inventive or expressive the duplicated content, the more likely the duplication resulted from copying.”⁹⁰

In addition to copying in fact, infringement claims must show “copying in law.”⁹¹ The role of this prong is to decide whether an established act of copying legally rises to the level of infringement.⁹²

In particular, copying in law ensures that only copyrightable material can be found to be infringed⁹³ and that the copying of this material is “substantial.”⁹⁴ To that end, in the Ninth Circuit, for example, the substantial similarity test involves filtering for protectable components in the plaintiff’s work before conducting an objective comparison of the two works, and then subjectively determining whether the “total concept and feel” of the two works is similar.⁹⁵

While the normal standard to find infringement requires substantial similarity, “when a work is entitled to ‘thin’ protection, courts typically require ‘virtual identity’” instead.⁹⁶ This means the validity or strength of a work’s copyright protection moderates the level of similarity required for a finding of substantial similarity. That is, where copyright is at its thinnest, as in a factual compilation,⁹⁷ “liability hinges on entire duplication.”⁹⁸

Various doctrines govern whether material is copyrightable. The idea-expression dichotomy, for example, permits protection only for a work’s

⁹⁰ Robert F. Helfing, *Substantial Similarity and Junk Science: Reconstructing the Test of Copyright Infringement*, 30 *Fordham Intell. Prop. Media & Ent. L.J.* 735, 763-64 (2020).

⁹¹ Mark Edward Blankenship Jr., *Dead Frogs, Dissected Jokes, & Thin Copyright: Analyzing Copyrightable Elements and Legal Protection of Stand-Up Comedy*, 2 *Florida Entertainment & Sports L. Rev.* 117, 128 (2022).

⁹² Restatement of the Law, *supra* note § 7.04 (“Proving improper appropriation requires the plaintiff to prove that sufficient protected expression was copied from the copyrighted work such that there is a substantial similarity between the alleged infringing use and the copyrighted work.”).

⁹³ See *Feist Publications, Inc. v. Rural Tel. Serv. Co.*, 499 U.S. 340 (1991) (“As a constitutional matter, copyright protects only those constituent elements of a work that possess more than a *de minimis* quantum of creativity.”); see Blankenship, *supra* note at 127 (“[Copying in law] considers whether the defendant copied a copyrightable expression in such a way that liability should follow.”); See Nimmer on Copyright, *supra* note 25 § 13D.06 (“[T]he substantial similarity step of the infringement analysis focuses only on the protected elements of plaintiff’s work that defendant copied.”).

⁹⁴ Alan Latman, “*Probative Similarity as Proof of Copying: Toward Dispelling Some Myths in Copyright Infringement*,” 90 *Columbia L. Rev.* 1187, 1189 (1990) (“[N]ot only must [defendant] copy protected material, but also such protected material must be ‘substantial.’”).

⁹⁵ *Rentmeester v. Nike, Inc.*, 883 F.3d 1111, 1118 (9th Cir. 2018) (overruled on other grounds).

⁹⁶ *Advanta-STAR Auto. Rsch. Corp. of Am. v. Search Optics, LLC*, 672 F. Supp. 3d 1035, 1049 (S.D. Cal. 2023).

⁹⁷ *Feist Publications, Inc. v. Rural Tel. Serv. Co.*, 499 U.S. 340 (1991) (“This inevitably means that the copyright in a factual compilation is thin.”).

⁹⁸ Nimmer On Copyright, *supra* note 25 § 13D.32 (adding that multiple circuits agree with this approach, and that “virtual identity is not the same as absolute identity.”).

expressive elements—not its underlying ideas.⁹⁹ For instance, a book describing a “particular bookkeeping system” is itself copyrightable, but the method of bookkeeping it illustrates is not.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, facts are not protected,¹⁰¹ though the “selection and arrangement” of facts in a compilation may be.¹⁰² The merger doctrine holds that if there are few ways of expressing an idea, that expression “merges” with the idea and is unprotectable.¹⁰³ For example, a jewel-encrusted pin shaped like a bee is unprotected because there are limited ways to depict that idea.¹⁰⁴

is Finally, works in the public domain are not protected by copyright.¹⁰⁵

§ 1202. Section 1202’s framework does not include an analysis of copying in fact or copying in law. The provision does, however, require that a violating work is a “copy” of the violated work.¹⁰⁶ This requirement comes from § 1202(c)’s definition of “copyright management information” as various types of “information conveyed in connection with copies ... of a work.”¹⁰⁷ In other words, a work creating § 1202 liability cannot be a *new* work, unrelated to the allegedly violated work. To ensure this standard is met, courts have developed two different standards that serve as proxies for whether the work in question is a copy of the original, allegedly violated work.¹⁰⁸

⁹⁹ *Id.* § 2.03.

¹⁰⁰ Edward Samuels, *The Idea-Expression Dichotomy in Copyright Law*, 56 Tenn. L. Rev. 321, 326-27 (1989).

¹⁰¹ *Eldred v. Ashcroft*, 537 U.S. 186 (2003) (“[C]opyright gives the holder no monopoly on any knowledge. A reader of an author’s writing may make full use of any fact or idea she acquires from her reading.”).

¹⁰² *Feist Publications, Inc. v. Rural Tel. Serv. Co.*, 499 U.S. 340 (1991) (“As applied to a factual compilation, assuming the absence of original written expression, only the compiler’s selection and arrangement may be protected; the raw facts may be copied at will.”).

¹⁰³ William E. Greenspan, *Applications of the Idea/Expression Merger Doctrine in Copyright Infringement Cases*, 26 Bus. L. Rev. 1, 2 (1993).

¹⁰⁴ *Herbert Rosenthal Jewelry Corp. v. Kalpakian*, 446 F.2d 738, 742 (9th Cir. 1971). Instead of finding the expression entirely unprotectable, some courts instead subject it to “thin” copyright. See David G. Luetgen, *Functional Usefulness vs. Communicative Usefulness: Thin Copyright Protection for the Nonliteral Elements of Computer Programs*, 4 Tex. Intell. Prop. L.J. 233, 255 n. 118 (1996) (“*Feist* and *Bonito Boats* suggest that copyright law should never afford borderline factual and functional works more than ‘thin’ protection against wholesale appropriation of surface expression.”).

¹⁰⁵ Faith O. Majekolagbe, *Public Domain and Access to Knowledge*, 31 J. Intell. Prop. L. 1, 2 (2024).

¹⁰⁶ 26 U.S.C. § 1202(c) (defining “copyright management information” as “information conveyed in connection with copies...”). Note that the provision again refers to copies in § 1202(b)(3), which specifies “copies of works” in its prohibition of distribution, import for distribution, and public performance of works.

¹⁰⁷ *Id.*

¹⁰⁸ One understanding is that courts derive their identity and similarity standards from the requirement that a work be a “copy.” See Nimmer On Copyright, *supra* note 25 § 12A.10(C)(1) (“[§ 1202(b)(3)’s mention of ‘copies of works’] therefore serves as the statutory hook to prevent nonsensical claims that plaintiff has a right to complain about