

The Ethics of Information Distribution Systems

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Abstract

In November 2010, Wikileaks.org began slowly releasing 251,287 diplomatic cables from the United States of America. [4] Since then some companies and governments have attacked the organization because they are sharing this information. Wikileaks uses BitTorrent, a protocol written by Bram Cohen in 2001, to make sure their information is distributed internationally, so they can't be shut down.

On the 17th of April, 2009, Peter Sunde, Fredrik Neij, Gottfrid Svartholm and Carl Lundstrm of The Pirate Bay were all found guilty "for promoting the copyright infringement of others" and sentenced to serve one year in prison and pay a fine of \$3.5 million. [5] Their website, the Pirate Bay, uses software they wrote to collect "torrent files" for a wide variety of content.

Since 2004, BitTorrent Inc., a company formed by Cohen, has maintained the BitTorrent protocol, continued to build clients and promote people to use their system. Is the building of BitTorrent (and other information distribution systems), an ethical pursuit?

1 Facts

1. BitTorrent Inc. is a company founded by Brian Cohen and maintains the BitTorrent Protocol and an associated client. [6]
2. The BitTorrent Protocol was initially created to share files and distribute information. [6]
3. In a few countries, people have been prosecuted for using BitTorrent for sharing illegal files and promoting copyright infringement. [5]

2 Research Question

Is the building and maintenance of BitTorrent (and other information distribution systems), an ethical pursuit?

3 Extant arguments

It is ethical to develop software to distribute information:

- Since the passing of the Statue of Queen Anne, it is the content creators not the distributors that are punished for the appropriateness of their content (Citation...)
- The dissemination of information makes all individuals equal, which helps the poor, which Rawls' claims is necessary. [?]

It is unethical to develop software to distribute information:

- According to the Software Engineering Code of Ethics, all professional developers are supposed to "work to develop software and related documents that respect the privacy of those who will be affected by that software." [8]
- Tools that make it possible to commit crimes
- "publishers have a responsibility to the public" according to publisher Steven Schragls, and if your content is offensive it isn't helping the public. [2, 46]

4 Applicable analytic principles

- Professionals should "disclose to appropriate persons or authorities any actual or potential danger...associated with software or related documents." [8]
- They must also "be fair and avoid deception in all statements, particularly public ones, concerning software or related documents, *methods* and tools." [8]

- It is ethical to "respect the privacy of those who will be affected by (the) software." [8]
- Professionals should "Be accurate in stating the characteristics of software on which they work, avoiding not only false claims but also claims that might reasonably be supposed to be speculative, vacuous, deceptive, misleading, or doubtful." [8]
- People should act in a way where their actions are motivated by "good willed" intentions, according to Kant. [7]
- People should act such that it causes the greatest amount of "happiness" for the most people, according to Utilitarian principles. [1]

5 Abstract of Expected Analysis

References

- [1] "Utilitarianism." [Online]. Available: http://www.qcc.cuny.edu/socialsciences/ppecorino/intro_text/Chapter%208%20Ethics/Utilitarianism.htm

An explanation of Utilitarian ethics. Useful in analysing problems like the one this paper deals with.

- [2] "The happy hawker," January 1992.

- [3] J. Anderson, "How to write a se code argument / term paper template," May 2010. [Online]. Available: <http://true-reality.net/csc300archive/documents/paperInst.tex>

Used this to get started making the template.

- [4] J. Assange, "Wikileaks cablegate press release," November 2010. [Online]. Available: <http://wikileaks.ch/cablegate.html>

A press release by WikiLeaks, "Wikileaks began on Sunday November 28th publishing 251,287 leaked United States embassy cables, the largest set of confidential documents ever to be released into the public domain."

- [5] enigmax, "Torrentfreak's coverage of the pirate bay verdict," April 2009. [Online]. Available: <http://torrentfreak.com/the-pirate-bay-trial-the-verdict-090417/>

TorrentFreak is a blog, and they did a meticulous job of covering every day of the Pirate Bay Trial, it's verdict and the Appeals. This is their article from the day of the verdict.

- [6] B. Inc., “Bittorrent - management team.” [Online]. Available: <http://www.bittorrent.com/company/management>

A little history about BitTorrent Inc. and their management team.

- [7] R. Johnson, “Kant’s moral philosophy.” [Online]. Available: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-moral/>

A good guide to Kant’s moral philosophy, explaining the principles therein.

- [8] A. of Computing Machinery, “Software engineering code of ethics.” [Online]. Available: <http://www.acm.org/about/se-code>

The Software Engineering Code of Ethics, co-written by ACM and IEEE.

- [9] “Bibtex.” [Online]. Available: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BibTeX#Bibliographic_information_file

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