

Sailing the High Seas: A Christian Exploration of Piracy

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background Information

[T]hat ideas should freely spread from one to another over the globe, for the moral and mutual instruction of man, and improvement of his condition, seems to have been peculiarly and benevolently designed by nature, when she made them, like fire, expansible over all space, without lessening their density at any point, and like the air in which we breathe, move, and have our physical being, incapable of confinement or exclusive appropriation. Inventions then cannot, in nature, be a subject of property. Thomas Jefferson [1]

It is generally accepted that piracy is an illegal activity, but what is often overlooked is the legitimate role that piracy plays in a variety of contexts. When it comes to subverting oppressive regimes, for instance, the tools that piracy provides are indispensable and for protecting the interests of consumers from predatory business practices, the abilities of piracy are unmatched. Needless to say, with every unregulated system comes abuse and piracy is no exception. As a Christian, how should one approach such a tool and how can it be utilized for the betterment of God’s kingdom? In the paper that follows, piracy will be analyzed through a number of lenses, culminating in a Christian response to this issue. In doing so, the hope is that the reader attains a fresh, wholistic understanding of the potential value of piracy.

Before proceeding further into the issue of piracy, it is important to have a grasp of what piracy means insofar as how this paper interprets it. The dictionary defines piracy as “the unauthorized use of another’s production, invention, or conception especially in infringement of a copyright.” While this covers the technical definition of piracy, this paper elects to utilize a more wholistic definition. Piracy not only includes the unauthorized use of someone’s work, but it includes the tools and techniques that are commonly used to accomplish this task such as torrent trackers, VPNs, and torrent clients.

1.1.1 Intellectual Property

1. Piracy on an individual level: Very hard to combat, because you are trying to protect things that are immaterial ideas. Ideas flow freely, especially in the Internet. Some people might argue that all ideas should be free.
2. While some people might argue that piracy should not be allowed because it stifles innovation.

1.2 Thesis/Argument

Piracy should not be hastily thrown aside. Piracy is an excellent tool for disseminating information, services, content, &c. that may not have been available any other way.

2 Arguments For Piracy

2.1 Equal Access

1. Piracy allows equal access to information
2. “I am not comfortable with a model which will restrict inquiry to the wealthy.” [1]
3. Increased prices are an artificial barrier to access certain information. Piracy provides a circumvention to said artificial barrier. Piracy gives consumers a way to fight systems they see as unfair/censorship. Piracy is a tool of the consumer to control/balance the economy [2], [3]
4. People pirate medical content. [4] Medical information is valuable to everyone. Having medical information is crucial to advancements in medicine, but sometimes the cost is too high. The paywalls, in this case, are directly harmful to ends that are beneficial to everyone.

2.2 Governance

1. Dissemination of information through means of piracy and torrenting gives access to those within areas where Internet shutdowns are commonplace.
2. Piracy provides a way around an oppressive regime, which are on the rise. [5]
3. IP laws arbitrarily restrict free speech / invention just because someone came up with it first. [6, p. 1339] They are based on the assumption that, in doing so, they are encouraging creativity (to be first to invent/create), when, in reality, creativity doesn't always come first, but may rather be an improvement upon the established. The most creative solution is not always the first one. IP laws and restrictions block slight innovations upon the existing intellectual property.

2.3 Privacy

1. Piracy gives you access to cracked versions of software that provide more sensible privacy/freedom than what is accessible legally. [7]

3 Arguments Against Piracy

While piracy enables free access to information and content, it is crucial to faithfully and charitably explore the potential dangers and economic implications associated with this practice. The arguments against piracy are not easy, nor should be, easy to dismiss. This paper will focus mainly on the ethical and economical concerns that the use of piracy introduces into society.

3.1 Access to Dangerous/Illegal Content

Piracy has been associated with unrestricted access to information and content. As previously discussed, this aspect of piracy provides the means for those in need to access information that would otherwise be unavailable to them; similarly, piracy can thus provide avenues to bypass governmental restrictions on public information. This same benefit, however, becomes a strong argument against piracy when what is distributed is dangerous or illegal content.

3.1.1 Criminality of the Seeder and Leecher

This paper has focused on a more wholistic definition that encompasses the tools, techniques, motivations, and content, but the motivations and content that are involved in piracy should not be ignored. Piracy does involve a form of theft and dissemination of an individual's or organization's intellectual property. Piracy, thus can and most often does violate laws in most jurisdictions. Piracy, when it uses torrenting, involves both the seeder and the leecher (or the uploader and downloader, if not using torrenting). Depending on the legislation of the country in question, the leecher may or may not be found guilty of a crime, but this is complicated by the global context of digital piracy.

In the United States, the downloader/streamer/leecher are generally considered offenders that could be subject of fines or even criminal charges. The severity of the penalties of piracy in these cases pose a major argument against the use of piracy, at least in the United States or nations where the individual downloading can be found guilty of a crime. "Fair use" and statutes of limitations may alleviate penalties, but repeat offences may also lose one's favor in these cases. [8]

3.1.2 Malware

Piracy may openly distribute dangerous illegal content, but arguably the larger threat is the dangerous content that remains undisclosed. Piracy circumvents mainline distribution channels that may incorporate secure policies of data integrity, authenticity, and privacy. Some piracy tools provide some ways to vet the authenticity of an uploader based on past

uploads or based on the user's relationship with the piracy/torrenting site¹, but not all sites provide these metrics or warnings for the average end-user. Instead, the burden is often on the end-user, and it is not unfair to assume that the average person would not be able to analyze downloaded software for malware.

3.1.3 Illegal content

Piracy, as discussed above, provides a way to distribute illegal content. This content is not always beneficial to society; research articles, art, movies, &c. are not the only sorts of content that a pirate may distribute. Piracy opens the door for questionable and illegal content that may be harmful to society or national security.

3.2 Economic

Piracy, as a theft, also causes real harm to businesses. The act of piracy does involve stealing and distributing content from creators and organizations that invested time, money, and effort into the content. In this sense, piracy is stealing from the individuals' revenue and the government's tax revenue. [9]

“According to Gould and Gruben (1996), IPRs protection stimulates economic growth if it is accompanied by a policy of trade liberalization. By encouraging initiatives to innovate, IPRs protection may influence the economic growth of an open country. Park and Ginarte (1997) found that IPRs protection affects economic growth indirectly by stimulating the accumulation of factors of production such as physical capital and R&D capital.” [10] Piracy, therefore, discourages innovation in the capitalist marketplace.

4 Christian Response

A Christian response to piracy should honestly take into account both sides of the debate. As shown above, piracy does have some merit to it. Christians have to admit that piracy-promoting tools do enable

1. Drawing distinctions: Paywall to information is different from withholding information for sake of security
2. Paywalls provide the means of living for artists, writers, &c. Providing ways to circumvent these when unnecessary may hinder their livelihoods.
3. Betterment of mankind as a whole, should not be behind a paywall
4. Piracy provides an avenue for missionary outreach; piracy provides means of secret dissemination within an oppressive regime.
5. Piracy provides the means for access to content/information without much accountability

¹ThePirateBay, for example provides icons to display whether a user is *Trusted*, *VIP*, or *Moderator*

5 Conclusion

5.1 Final Thoughts / Responses

1. In response to economic argument: Would the pirate have bought the product/service in the first place?

Of additional concern is the fact that by making [Intellectual Property] theft a national security threat without being clear about what actually constitutes intellectual property, not only does the U.S. government create a new reason for a militarized Internet, but it also sets the stage for companies to assert that a range of other activities from file sharing to producing counterfeit DVDs threaten national security and require further state intervention. [11, p. 264]

5.2 Applications

5.3 Further Work

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