

Why Do We Still Use Piracy Even Though We Know It Is Not Ethical?

by Didem Özçakır

Like it or not, nearly all of us use piracy as an option for music, movies, and books. It can be in the form of using free online streaming services with a lot of ads, or it can be like having an archive of 5 hard disks full of albums. When we think about it, we can conclude that piracy is not the most ethical thing to do, there are some people who give serious effort into this intellectual property. However, we are still downloading songs and books without spending a single cent for them. So why do we keep on using piracy even if we know that it is not ethical?

The answer to this question depends on which industry we are dealing with, yet we can still create a generally applicable model. Whether we will use pirate websites will depend on two factors: Whether we can find the content we are looking for through legal means easily and whether the legal alternative's cost is reasonable.

Let us start by examining movies and TV series. When compared with music, we use piracy way more for movies. Why is this the case? By using the previous model we have created, we can get an answer to this: It is practically impossible to find a legal alternative for each and every movie you want to watch. In the year 2020, we do not use CDs or DVDs, most of us do not even have a CD player at home! Even if we have a CD player, the cost of a CD is too high for most of us. Besides, using a CD requires for you to decide which movie you are going to watch 3 days later today, so that you can go and buy or rent it. However, our information consumption has evolved to be way more spontaneous. We know neither when we will want to watch a movie nor what we will want to watch at that peculiar moment.

Using Netflix and its equivalents can be an option. The main problem that they pose is that they do not have each and every movie that we want to watch. Still, these online streaming platforms are effective in decreasing piracy since they address the issue of spontaneous consumption. The main reason why we give money to these platforms is because of their user-friendly design. Besides, they have stronger legal protection for their peculiar content, so it might be impossible to find the "originals" elsewhere.

The music industry has managed to create a way stronger response to piracy. The main forms of music consumption are through YouTube or online streaming services like

Spotify. Spotify's strongest point is that it solves the issue of both spontaneous consumption and diverse content. Whatever you want to listen to, you will most probably find it on Spotify in thirty seconds whenever you want to. Besides, you can categorize and personalize your music consumption through playlists and find new music just for yourself through the recommendations channel. Spotify is way easier than spending time and energy on pirate websites when compared to its reasonable cost. The same holds for YouTube. Music industry owes most of its profits to YouTube ads.

The difference between these two industries regarding piracy can be explained by looking at the evolution of piracy. The Internet started to become widely used in the 1990s and accelerated throughout the 2000s. The existence of the internet and the discovery of easily transmittable file forms like the MP3 meant that online piracy would now become a threat for every intellectual property right holder. The movie industry in the USA had stronger ties with the government, so they could more forcibly endorse the application of intellectual property right laws within their domain. However, the music industry was left alone. They had to find their own ways of gaining money in the era of the internet. Solutions like YouTube ads and online streaming services were developed as an answer to this. They had to create their own natural, user-friendly solutions. However, the movie industry did not need these solutions for a long time as they had their legal protection. They did not have the need for developing natural solutions, instead, they were trying to dictate a way of consumption that went against the will of consumers.

This dictation was not sustainable, whereas the natural solutions of the music industry were. When legal protection could no longer protect movies and TV shows as a consequence of enlarging and globalizing internet, they understood that they needed user-friendly solutions to piracy as well. You can not dictate spending money, because the consumer will find a way of free consumption if they know that they have the chance to do so. Netflix and equivalents can be regarded as a consequence of this realization.

Back to our original question, why do we still use piracy even though we know it is not ethical? For the simple reason that legal means are not user friendly and reasonably priced. Think about university-level textbooks. If there were no PDFs, this would mean we would have to spend more than 2000 Turkish Liras every semester for our books, nearly as much as the minimum wage in Turkey. Needless to say, this would create a great inequality in access to education. We can eliminate the effect of exchange rate through piracy, besides we can find the books that are not available in our country. In such a case, piracy is not an option with ethical questions, it is an obligation for education.

To sum up, it would not be a reasonable thing to do when creating an economic theory, to assume consumers are guided by their ethical concerns. The main reason why we still

use piracy lies in accessibility and the drastic differences between prices. In an era when free alternatives for every product of intellectual property is accessible through the internet, the producers have the luxury of neither trusting the ethical concerns of consumers nor expecting applicable legal solutions applied by the governments. They should find ways to adapt and accept that it is not possible for them to protect their monopolistic power in the 21st century.