Viewing Intellectual Property Issues in Cyberspace From a Practicing Attorney's Point of View

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I may face problems different from some of my fellow panelists in that I am basically a practicing attorney whose clients come either wanting to sue or, having been sued, to ask, "Well, what do I do?" and "How do I get out of this problem?" So I have a more focused perspective as to what the problems may be in terms of the current environment. To me, the basic questions are: How does one deal with intellectual property issues in cyberspace in the current environment of the law? What are the existing laws and what do they really mean?

There is a large body of law in the area of intellectual property, including laws related to patents, copyrights, trademarks, and plain misappropriation.1 How do these laws fit into cyberspace, and how does the practitioner deal with such laws?

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To me, it really depends on the type of problem with which you are dealing. Patents are very important to me, not in the content provider sense but, rather, in the system sense. Therefore, in the context of a cyberspace symposium like this, there is not much discussion about patents, although patents are very important to the actual underlying technology. Further, I do not believe trademarks pose a significant problem.

The more interesting inquiry involves questions of copyright, misappropriation, and other issues. In terms of dealing clients' problems in the real world, these are the matters being litigated today. The real questions concern the adequacy of the current laws and what relief they can provide. On the other hand, there is a fair amount of existing law which must be addressed and be considered seriously. If, for example, you represent a content protector, it is evident from the series of Scientology cases and others like them that there are different theories of liability that can be applied against people who post the information, as well as against people who run the systems.

What is interesting to me is the application of conventional theories of direct and contributory infringement to address problems

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6 See Playboy, 839 F. Supp. at 1556 (holding subscription computer bulletin board service liable for displaying copyrighted photographs without Playboy's authority); see also Sega Enter., Ltd. v. Maphia, 857 F. Supp. 679, 687 (N.D. Cal. 1994) (granting preliminary injunction in favor of manufacturer and distributor of computer video games against computer bulletin board company and individual in control of bulletin board for copyright and
that did not exist when those laws were written. The result is some creative litigating in deciding how to take more or less judge-made rules regarding contributory infringement and direct infringement and apply them to the situation at hand.\(^7\)

From my experience, at least as a litigating attorney, it is all very commendable to discuss what Congress will do someday—as with the NII\(^8\) for example. However, when an attorney makes a motion for a preliminary injunction, the judge must address it with what the law is today. Therefore, the attorney must be prepared to deal with the issues under the laws as they now exist.

I will provide a couple of examples of what is happening at the moment in the real world. Last summer, I was litigating a matter for Compaq to protect threshold values for some of their failure warning systems.\(^9\) The issue which was hotly debated was whether, under Feist, there is any copyrightability in a series of numbers.\(^10\) For example, can you take a series of five unique numbers and determine copyrightability? In that particular case, I was fortunate to persuade the judge that it was, in fact, possible.\(^11\) It is, however, an extremely narrow and complicated issue, which a few years ago might not have been an issue at all.\(^12\)

One of my clients, Motorola, was sued recently by the National Basketball Association (NBA) which believes it owns all of the trademark infringement and unfair competition). See generally Barry D. Weiss, Barbed Wires and Branding in Cyberspace: The Future of Copyright Protection, in Understanding Basic Copyright Law 1996, at 397, 414-15 (PLI Pat., Copyrights, Trademarks & Literary Prop. Course Handbook Series No. G4-3974, 1996) (discussing on-line service providers' liability for copyright infringement based on theories of direct and contributory infringement).

\(^7\) See, e.g., Religious Tech. Ctr., 907 F. Supp. at 1367 (finding Internet access provider not liable for contributory infringement based on messages posted on usenet group before receiving notice of infringement from copyright holders).


\(^10\) See id. at 1418 (citing Feist Publications v. Rural Telephone Serv., 499 U.S. 340, 345 (1991) (holding facts are not copyrightable)).

\(^11\) See id. at 1421 (holding defendant Procom's use of Compaq's copyrighted information outside fair use doctrine and thus counter to purpose of Copyright Act).

scores and the statistics in basketball. The question is if someone copies down the scores from television, and then either submits them to America On-Line or to a pager, who owns this information? Is the information owned by the NBA, as the NBA claims? Or, is it free information and thus open to my client, Motorola, to put out on a pager so that anybody can have a sports pager? This is an open question; it is a question not decided by the law. What legal theories can one look to for guidance? The NBA, since there is no real body of law, argues copyright, on one hand, and argues misappropriation under the old INS case on the other. The question is, how does all of this work together?

From a practicing attorney's point of view, this is a question that gets resolved now. It does not matter what Congress will do; it does not matter what will happen ten years from now. Can two competing business and property interests co-exist now or will one be able to shut the other down? That, to me, from a practicing attorney's point of view, is the more practical and current issue in terms of cyberspace and the law.

From an intellectual point of view, I am surprised by the large number of people who believe that once you go into cyberspace, all of the rules for intellectual property no longer exist. It is as if there were property rights with hard copy, but once it enters cyberspace, anybody can have it. That, to me, does not make much sense. In cyberspace, as well as in other worlds, if you are going to get people who are willing to put their creative work into the media, they must have some form of assurance of protectability. It is not acceptable to say, "Well, cyberspace is another world and none of the old rules apply."
I believe that intellectual property in cyberspace is a problem that must be addressed. From my perspective, it tends to be addressed on a case-by-case basis in the courtroom. I believe that we will, in fact, see the problem addressed at a higher level, from a legislative point of view, both in terms of new legislation from Congress and in terms of other incentives.