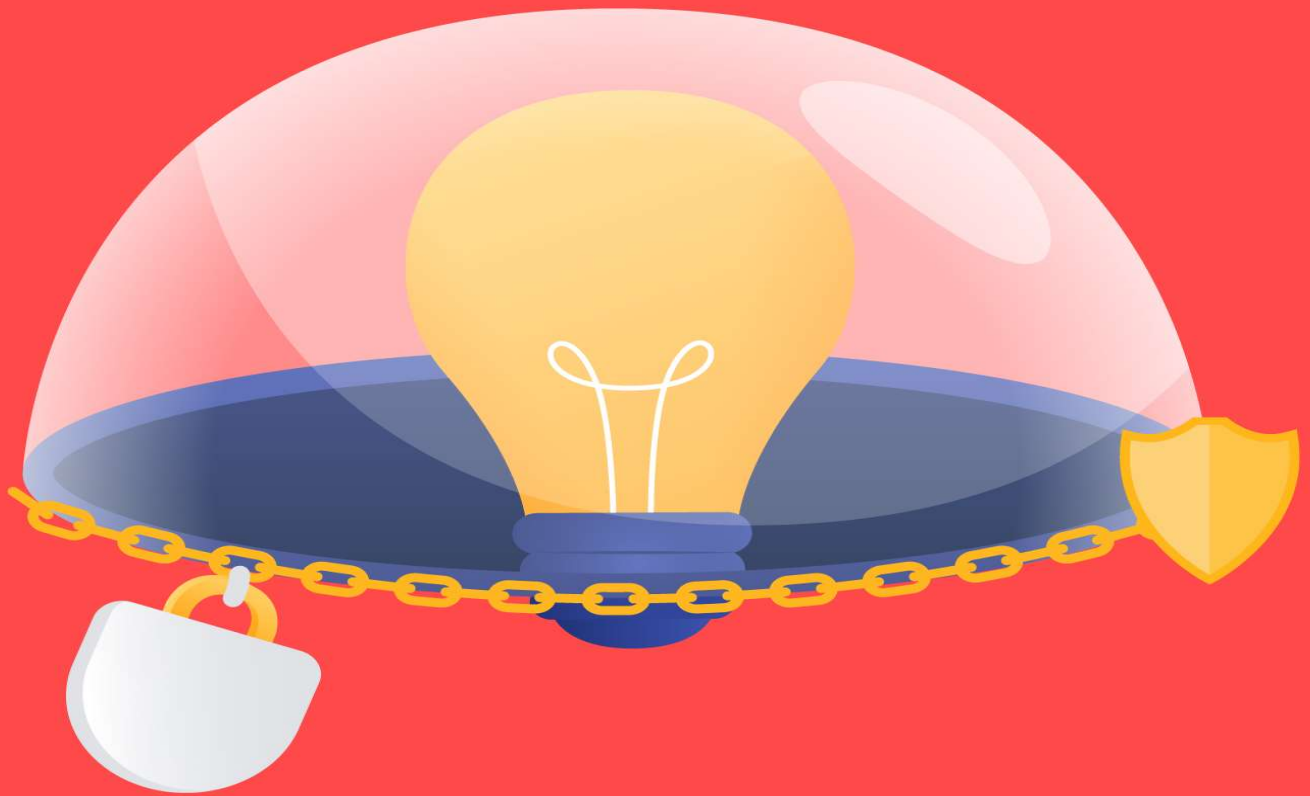# SUMMARY

INFORMATION DOESN'T WANT TO BE FREE

CORY DOCTOROW

Summary of "Information Doesn't Want to Be Free" by Cory Doctorow

Written by Alyssa Burnette

A guide to modern copyright laws.

Table of Contents

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Introduction

Do you remember LimeWire? Entertainment writer Hugh McIntyre does and he remarks that "Limewire was, if not the most famous and notorious of the file sharing sites, perhaps the most-used. Anybody who utilized the program could see that it was clearly designed to be user-friendly, and I personally remember it being much easier to navigate and understand than other options, which at the time was important, as there weren't many people who had a lot of experience with anything like file sharing or peer-to-peer networks. While it initially launched in 2000, LimeWire wasn't the overnight success (if that word can be applied here) that its predecessor Napster was. It did need a few years to reach its peak, when millions of people around the world were actively downloading music for free, but the website clearly benefited from the public gaining an understanding of what these types of programs were, thanks in part to the intense media coverage that Napster (and its demise) received. Once that happened, room was made for new entrants into the market."

Whether you remember LimeWire from personal experience or this is your first encounter with it, one thing is readily apparent: the allure of LimeWire was entirely predicated on its status as a free, peer-to-peer file sharing site. Here's how it worked: let's imagine that you wanted to listen to the latest Gwen Stefani hit. But what if you couldn't (or didn't want to) pay for it? In that case, you would simply download it for free from LimeWire! All you needed was internet access and your Mp3 player and you could take advantage of the pirated track another user had uploaded. With just a few quick clicks, the song was yours for free! Sounds like a pretty great deal, right? A lot of people thought so and that's what all the protesters said when a judge ended the long legal battle between LimeWire and leading record labels, forcing LimeWire to close down in 2010. Outraged, the protestors contended that people should be able to have free access to music if they wanted to. They also argued that piracy is a victimless crime.

But is it really? Are sites like LimeWire unethical, or are they a cost-effective option for consuming art in a capitalist society? Should you be able to download as many songs as you want and never pay the artist a dime? If you download all of Taylor Swift's music without ever paying her for her work, is that the same as stealing? Over the course of this summary, we'll explore the answers to these questions and many more.

How The Internet Has Impacted Paid Content

Given the advent of platforms like LimeWire, one might assume that the internet has opened up an endless stream of possibilities for free file sharing and piracy that deprives creators of their well-deserved payments. And, in many cases, that's absolutely true. As a result, you might wonder how anyone is ever able to make money from their content if it's available online. After all, why would anyone spend money on something when they could simply download it for free? Well, it might surprise you to discover that the answer is not quite as straight-forward as it seems! For example, many people are happy to fork over their hard-earned cash in exchange for a Netflix, Hulu, or Spotify subscription. Why? Because they're committed to paying for quality.

In the age of free digital access, quality has become a major game changer. Because sure, you can pay for a pirated copy of pretty much any song or movie. But you can't guarantee that the content will be good. For example, if you attempt to stream a television show through the file-sharing site Putlocker, your viewing experience is riddled with weird ads, unexpected pop-ups, and poor sound quality. In many cases, the subtitles-- or even the audio content!-- is in a different language that you can't understand! When you add all these inconveniences together, it doesn't make for a very pleasant viewing experience. But if you simply handed over the $7.99 for a Netflix subscription, you can watch anything you want, uninterrupted, at a superior standard of quality. In the end, many people are so committed to quality that they're still willing to pay, even if they have free options available online. This is especially true for film and music snobs who are picky about streaming content at a certain resolution or sound quality. And because subscription services like Hulu, Netflix, and Spotify provide inexpensive access to this quality, they retain a thriving base of subscribers.

Similarly, the author observes that many people are concerned about the ethical implications of their media consumption. For example, let's say that you enjoy the work of a certain independent comic book artist. Maybe you had free access to her drawings on Instagram where she posted her work and

acquired a substantial fan base. But once she realized that her popularity was soaring, she discovered that she could monetize her content by taking it to the subscription service Patreon. Patreon allows artists to create subscriptions for their work; patrons pay a small monthly fee in exchange for access to all of that artist's content for the month. As a result, everybody wins! You get the content you enjoy and the artist is paid for her hard work. This is an awesome scenario for everybody, right? Most people think so and that's why most people are committed to supporting independent artists and ensuring that they receive payment for their work. So, as the author observes, this is one case in which people actually profit from the accessibility of digital content! This case study also indicates that the internet has created its own rules and moral code with regard to content consumption.

How do You Protect Your Content?

It's good to know that many people want to do the right thing and pay artists for their work. But of course, that's never going to be true for everybody. So, how can you protect your content online? If you were in a physical house, you might protect your stuff with locks and alarms. But that doesn't really work for digital content. Here's why: digital locks are not the same as anti-virus software; that's one type of digital protection that everybody needs! But digital locks are a little different. To put it simply, digital locks are an advanced version of passwords. They're a type of fancy lock you put on a digital file to protect it from unauthorized access. And, in theory, digital locks protect against hacking and file-sharing. But in practice, the reality isn't quite so simple.

That's because computer hackers are a thing. This might sound like an overly simplistic explanation, but it's the truth! Just as computer hackers can crack your passcodes and steal your identity, they are also capable of hacking digital locks. In fact, multiple case studies have proven that dedicated hackers can crack any code within days, rendering digital locks useless. And if they want to, they can use these skills to embed viruses in your alleged protection! This unfortunate little side-effect can open computer users up to a world of digital hurt! One school in Pennsylvania found this out the hard way when they attempted to do a good deed. In an effort to provide underprivileged students with easy, at-home internet access, the Lower Merion School District of Ardmore, Pennsylvania purchased a bulk lot of Sony laptops for their students. In total, they distributed 1,800 laptops to their student body. But unbeknownst to the teachers, these laptops were "protected" by a digital lock. This lock had been compromised by a hacker who used his access to install malicious spyware onto the laptops, undetected.

In addition to having the capacity to steal passwords, clone information, and view a user's email, this spyware could also activate a computer's camera remotely. It could even take pictures while the laptop was in use, without the

user ever having any idea! Using their fraudulent remote access, a hacker was able to take thousands of pictures of teenagers in compromising positions. None of the victims had any idea that they were being spied on and it might have gone on that way forever. But one day, the computer snapped a photo that accidentally raised the attention of the school when it captured a student engaging in illegal activity. The resulting discovery launched a controversial court case that examined students' rights and digital privacy. It also provided conclusive proof that digital locks are not foolproof and they're not a great idea for protecting your content!

Free the Internet?

So, if digital locks are no use and hackers can distribute your information anywhere, what are we supposed to do? Is it even possible to stay safe online? How can you protect your information? These are the big questions that dominate our digital age and unfortunately, none of them can be answered in this book. That's because they're all simply too big. While everyone agrees that freedom of speech is important, the law hasn't quite evolved to catch up with the digital age. And as a result, no one can agree about how much information we should be able to access for free. Neither can anyone agree about what type of information that should be.

For example, policies that take censorship to the extreme might want to copyright memes. Can you imagine needing a license to view the funny memes that make our Facebook feeds so much happier? What if you had to pay for a license to share the meme yourself? Most people would agree that this is too much, but it's difficult to draw the line. Because so much content is available for free, the lines that define "appropriate use" have been blurred. Many people have probably shared private or copyrighted information without realizing that they were doing anything wrong! For example, have you ever written fanfiction about your favorite movie or book? Many people enjoy writing alternate endings to their favorite stories and sharing them among fans on free websites like FanFiction.net. But can you imagine if you had to contact the family of J.R.R Tolkein for permission to share your Hobbit fanfic with a friend? Likewise, what if you wanted to go to ComicCon dressed as your favorite superhero? Should you have to get legal permission from Marvel to dress up as Thor? When you're simply enjoying a fictional world for fun and you have no intention of profiting from your creation, it seems a bit much to legislate creativity to that degree.

By contrast, however, we cannot allow copyright laws to continue in their present state. It's not enough to say that digital locks are ineffective and that people are free to pirate content as they please. We need to strike a balance that blends freedom, security, and intellectual property rights for the

appropriate parties. And that's why the author argues that we need to update copyright laws. Around the world, we need a revolution that enables copyright laws to catch up to the digital age. And in so doing, we must create policies that will protect deserving content creators, shut down organizations like LimeWire, and preserve the innocent pleasure of activities like fan fiction and cosplay. The author observes that hackers, protesters, and proponents of sites like LimeWire argue that information wants to be free. By virtue of this argument, they consider themselves to be proponents of free speech and equal access for all. But are they really the crusaders they imagine themselves to be? Or are they simply thieves?

In this respect, this book is much like a "choose your own adventure" story. Because this book can't provide you with a single, concrete answer to these questions. Instead, you must think for yourself and evaluate the ethics of your own opinions because each of us are the policy makers of the future. We get to decide if information wants to be free or not.

Final Summary

In this digital age, we have an excess of electronic information at our fingertips. We stream music on file-sharing sites, watch videos on YouTube, and enjoy countless memes, comics, and posts without ever considering their creator or their copyright status. That's why the author argues that we need a new approach to regulating digital information: a policy that strikes a balance between censorship and unlimited free access to all information. Because after all, some information has to be protected! No one wants a hacker gaining access to their passwords and creators would like to be paid for their art. So in the end, we must decide which information wants to be free and who should enjoy that free access.