

Forbes

A Brilliant Parody of DRM

By: Timothy Lee – February 3, 2013

Gene Quinn, the proprietor of the *IP Watchdog* website, has never struck me as a thoughtful commentator on public policy issues. He tends to devote the bulk of his posts ridiculing and insulting people he disagrees with rather than engaging their arguments on the merits. I had always assumed he was merely an intemperate advocate for the “maximalist” worldview that pushes for ever stronger, and more stringently enforced, copyrights and patents.

But this post, in which he defends his decision to disallow cutting and pasting from his website, brings to mind another theory: Quinn is secretly an advocate of copyright reform, and has adopted the cartoonish “IP Watchdog” persona as an act of satire. Disabling cutting and pasting is such a ludicrous idea that it can’t be a serious business decision. But it brilliantly lampoons the fallacies that have caused major content companies to employ similar (and similarly ineffective) copy protection schemes.

For starters, Quinn’s anti-copying technique is trivially easy to circumvent. All you have to do is look at the page’s source code and scroll down to (or search for) the section of text you want to copy. For that matter, if you turn off JavaScript in your browser the anti-copying code will be disabled. Circumventing conventional DRM isn’t quite this easy, but no DRM scheme has withstood serious efforts to circumvent it.

And that brings us to the second problem with Quinn’s strategy: it inconveniences his legitimate readers while doing nothing to stop pirates. And I really do mean “nothing.” Quinn claims to be concerned with “very large entities that routinely would copy and paste our articles, remove links and any advertisement and then mass distribute just the text of our articles.” But presumably these “very large entities” can train their employees to disable JavaScript in their browsers while they’re cutting and pasting Quinn’s content. Moreover, it’s likely that the large entities in question have automated the process using “scraping” code. Scraping programs typically don’t run JavaScript on the pages they scrape at all, so they’re not going to be affected by this anti-copying strategy.

At the same time, disabling cutting and pasting *may* prevent some less tech-savvy (or lazy) readers from quoting him in their own blog posts, posting links to his content on Twitter, and so forth. So the no-cutting-and-pasting policy likely reduces the amount of traffic to his site without doing anything to prevent mass scraping and republication of his articles. It also makes it harder for users to engage in legally-protected fair use, such as quoting his post for criticism as I did in the previous paragraph.

All of this, of course, parallels the DRM schemes major content companies use to “protect” their copyrighted works. In some cases, it’s actually more convenient to find and download an infringing copy of a Hollywood movie on BitTorrent than it is to purchase a legitimate copy. People who follow the rules are penalized (for example, it

drives me crazy when I can't fast forward through commercials on a DVD I've legitimately acquired) while pirates aren't affected. So kudos to Quinn for the clever illustration of the absurdity of DRM.