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DIGITAL PIRACY, STREAMING AND COPYRIGHT INFRINGEMENT IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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• ABSTRACT:

The fast-growing internet and technologies in the world have transformed how content is consumed, produced or distributed. Netflix, Amazon Prime, Disney+ Hotstar, and YouTube revolutionised access to entertainment content by providing it to everyone at affordable prices. But apart from these revolutionary advancements, the challenges regarding Intellectual Property Rights have also increased significantly, and the main challenge is Digital Piracy.

Digital Piracy includes illegal streaming, torrent websites, and unauthorised downloading, etc. It has caused significant economic loss to the people working hard on that content, which in turn discourages innovation in this industry.

This Research Paper studies the idea of digital piracy, the history of digital streaming, and the law governing infringement of copyright in the internet or digital era. It studies copyright, conventions, copyright law, and judicial decisions that led to its development and all the challenges. The paper also studies the role of AI, technology, and digital middlemen in copyright infringement. And hence, at last, the paper studies the law governing the enforcement of copyright.

Keywords: Digital Piracy, Copyright Infringement, Streaming Services, Intellectual Property Rights, Copyright Act, Information Technology Act, OTT Platforms, Artificial Intelligence.

• INTRODUCTION:

The digital revolution has fundamentally transformed the creation, dissemination, and consumption of intellectual property. High-speed internet, cloud computing, smartphones, and streaming technologies have enabled millions of users to access music, films, books, software, games, and educational content with unprecedented convenience. Digital streaming has replaced physical media such as DVDs and CDs, making entertainment accessible at the click of a button. The rise of Over-the-Top (OTT) platforms has further accelerated this transformation by offering subscription-based access to vast libraries of content.

The digital change has fully transformed intellectual property consumption. Despite these advancements, the digital environment has also facilitated large-scale copyright infringement. Digital piracy has become one of the most persistent threats to creators, authors, musicians, filmmakers, software developers, publishers, and broadcasters. Unlike traditional piracy,

digital piracy enables unauthorized copying and global distribution of copyrighted material almost instantly, making enforcement increasingly difficult.

The anonymity provided by the internet, coupled with rapidly evolving technologies, has made piracy more sophisticated. Illegal streaming websites, peer-to-peer file-sharing networks, torrent platforms, unauthorized IPTV services, and cyberlockers allow users to obtain copyrighted works without obtaining permission from copyright owners. Consequently, the entertainment industry suffers billions of dollars in losses annually due to unauthorized distribution and consumption of creative content.

Copyright law aims to strike a balance between encouraging creativity by protecting creators' rights and ensuring public access to knowledge and information. However, technological developments continue to challenge traditional legal frameworks. Legislatures and courts worldwide are therefore required to continuously adapt copyright laws to emerging digital realities.

This paper critically analyses the legal issues surrounding digital piracy and streaming, with particular emphasis on India's legal framework and international copyright standards.

2. Understanding Digital Piracy

Digital piracy refers to the unauthorized reproduction, distribution, communication, storage, downloading, uploading, streaming, or sharing of copyrighted works through digital technologies without obtaining permission from the copyright owner.

Unlike physical piracy, which involves counterfeit DVDs or CDs, digital piracy occurs entirely through electronic means. A single digital copy can be replicated infinitely without any loss in quality, making infringement both widespread and economically damaging.

Common examples of digital piracy include:

- Downloading movies from unauthorized websites.
- Streaming copyrighted films through illegal platforms.
- Sharing copyrighted software through torrent networks.
- Uploading copyrighted music on unauthorized websites.
- Distributing e-books without the author's permission.
- Cracking licensed software.
- Sharing subscription credentials beyond permitted limits.
- Live streaming sporting events without authorization.

Digital piracy affects virtually every creative industry, including cinema, music, publishing, software, gaming, broadcasting, education, and journalism.

3. Evolution of Digital Streaming

Streaming technology has revolutionized the digital economy. Unlike traditional downloading, streaming enables users to access content instantly without permanently storing the complete file on their devices.

Modern streaming services operate through cloud-based infrastructure, delivering multimedia content in real time over the internet. Subscription-based business models have significantly reduced dependence on physical media while offering consumers greater convenience, affordability, and accessibility.

Major streaming platforms include:

- Netflix
- Amazon Prime Video
- Disney+ Hotstar
- Spotify
- Apple Music
- YouTube
- Sony LIV
- Zee5
- JioCinema

These services operate through licensing agreements with copyright owners, ensuring that creators receive royalties and compensation for the use of their works.

However, the popularity of streaming has simultaneously encouraged illegal alternatives. Numerous unauthorized streaming websites reproduce copyrighted content immediately after its release, allowing users to watch films, television programmes, sports broadcasts, and music without paying subscription fees or obtaining legal authorization.

4. Digital Piracy in the Streaming Era

The expansion of streaming platforms has fundamentally changed the nature of copyright infringement.

Traditional piracy generally involved downloading copyrighted material. Today, users increasingly consume infringing content through illegal streaming websites that host or facilitate access to copyrighted works without authorization.

Common methods of digital piracy include:

A. Torrent Websites

Torrent platforms use Peer-to-Peer (P2P) technology that allows users to simultaneously download and upload copyrighted files from multiple users.

Examples include:

- The Pirate Bay
- 1337x
- RARBG (formerly operational)

Although many torrent platforms claim merely to facilitate file sharing, they are frequently used for distributing copyrighted content without authorization.

B. Illegal Streaming Websites

Unauthorized streaming platforms upload or link copyrighted movies, web series, live sports events, and television programmes immediately after release.

Unlike legal streaming platforms, these websites do not compensate copyright holders.

C. IPTV Piracy

Illegal Internet Protocol Television (IPTV) services provide access to premium television channels and sports broadcasts without obtaining valid broadcasting licences.

Such services have become increasingly common due to low subscription costs and global accessibility.

D. Password Sharing

Although sharing streaming accounts among family members is generally permitted under subscription agreements, commercial resale or unauthorized sharing of account credentials may violate contractual terms and reduce revenue for streaming services.

E. Software Piracy

Digital piracy extends beyond entertainment. Unauthorized copying of computer software, operating systems, professional applications, and video games continues to cause substantial financial losses to software developers.

5. Copyright Infringement in the Digital Environment

Copyright is a legal right granted to authors and creators over their original literary, dramatic, musical, artistic, cinematographic, and software works. It provides exclusive rights to reproduce, distribute, communicate, perform, adapt, translate, and commercially exploit creative works.

Digital piracy constitutes copyright infringement because it violates these exclusive rights without the copyright owner's consent.

The digital environment has amplified copyright violations due to several factors:

- Instant global distribution of digital content.
- Low cost of reproduction.
- Anonymous online identities.
- Cloud storage technologies.
- High-speed internet connectivity.
- Cross-border nature of online platforms.
- Difficulty in identifying infringers.

Unlike traditional copyright infringement, digital infringement can affect millions of users simultaneously within a very short period. A single unauthorized upload may be replicated across hundreds of websites within hours, making enforcement extremely challenging.

The emergence of artificial intelligence has further complicated copyright protection. AI-powered systems can reproduce images, music, videos, and written content using copyrighted material during training processes, raising complex questions regarding ownership, licensing, originality, and fair use. Legislators worldwide are therefore increasingly examining whether existing copyright laws adequately address these technological developments.

As digital technologies continue to evolve, copyright law must also adapt to ensure that creators receive adequate protection while promoting innovation, access to knowledge, and technological progress. The following sections of this research paper examine the international and Indian legal frameworks governing digital piracy and copyright infringement, along with significant judicial decisions that have shaped modern copyright jurisprudence.

6. International Legal Framework Governing Digital Piracy

Digital piracy is a transnational problem that cannot be effectively addressed by domestic legislation alone. Since copyrighted works are frequently distributed across national borders through the internet, international cooperation has become essential. Several international treaties administered by the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) establish minimum standards for copyright protection in the digital environment.

6.1 Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works, 1886

The **Berne Convention** is the cornerstone of international copyright law. It establishes the principle that copyright protection arises automatically upon the creation of an original work without the need for formal registration. The Convention grants authors exclusive rights over the reproduction, translation, adaptation, and public communication of their works.

The Convention is founded on three key principles:

- **National Treatment**, requiring member States to provide foreign authors the same protection afforded to domestic authors.
- **Automatic Protection**, eliminating registration as a condition for copyright.
- **Minimum Standards of Protection**, prescribing the minimum rights that member countries must recognize.

India became a member of the Berne Convention in 1928 and has incorporated many of its principles into the Copyright Act, 1957.

6.2 Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS), 1995

The **TRIPS Agreement**, administered by the World Trade Organization, strengthened copyright enforcement by introducing internationally enforceable standards for intellectual property protection.

TRIPS requires member States to provide:

- Effective civil remedies.
- Criminal penalties for commercial-scale piracy.
- Border measures to prevent importation of infringing goods.
- Judicial procedures for copyright enforcement.

The Agreement also incorporates most substantive provisions of the Berne Convention while strengthening enforcement obligations.

As a WTO member, India has amended its copyright legislation to comply with TRIPS standards.

6.3 WIPO Copyright Treaty (WCT), 1996

The rapid emergence of the internet exposed significant gaps in traditional copyright law. To address these developments, WIPO adopted the **WIPO Copyright Treaty (WCT)**.

The Treaty introduced protection for:

- Computer programs.
- Databases.
- Digital communication of copyrighted works.
- Online distribution rights.

Importantly, the WCT obligates member States to provide legal protection against the circumvention of technological protection measures (TPMs) such as encryption and digital locks used by copyright owners.

6.4 WIPO Performances and Phonograms Treaty (WPPT), 1996

The **WPPT** extends protection to performers and producers of sound recordings in the digital environment.

The Treaty grants performers rights over:

- Online communication of performances.
- Digital distribution.
- Reproduction of sound recordings.

The WPPT has become increasingly relevant due to the widespread availability of music streaming services such as Spotify, Apple Music, and YouTube Music.

7. Indian Legal Framework on Digital Piracy

India has developed a comprehensive statutory framework to address copyright infringement occurring through digital technologies.

7.1 Copyright Act, 1957

The **Copyright Act, 1957**, as amended by the Copyright (Amendment) Act, 2012, remains the primary legislation governing copyright protection in India.

The Act protects:

- Literary works
- Dramatic works
- Musical works
- Artistic works
- Cinematograph films
- Sound recordings
- Computer programs

Section 14 defines copyright as a bundle of exclusive rights, including the rights to reproduce, issue copies, communicate works to the public, adapt, translate, and commercially exploit protected works.

Digital piracy infringes these exclusive rights whenever copyrighted content is uploaded, downloaded, streamed, copied, or distributed without authorization.

The 2012 Amendment significantly modernized Indian copyright law by introducing:

- Protection for digital rights management information.
- Protection against circumvention of technological protection measures.
- Rights for authors and performers in digital media.
- Expanded licensing provisions for broadcasting and online communication.

These amendments aligned Indian copyright law with international treaties such as the WCT and WPPT.

7.2 Information Technology Act, 2000

While the Copyright Act specifically protects intellectual property, the **Information Technology Act, 2000** provides additional legal mechanisms to combat cyber offences associated with digital piracy.

Relevant provisions include:

- **Section 43** – Unauthorized access and damage to computer systems.
- **Section 66** – Computer-related offences.
- **Section 66C** – Identity theft.
- **Section 66D** – Cheating by personation using computer resources.
- **Section 67** – Publication or transmission of obscene electronic material.

Although these provisions do not directly criminalize copyright infringement, they frequently apply where piracy involves hacking, unauthorized access, fraudulent online activities, or illegal digital distribution.

7.3 Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021

Recognizing the role of digital intermediaries, the Government introduced the **Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021**.

The Rules require intermediaries to:

- Exercise due diligence.
- Establish grievance redressal mechanisms.
- Remove unlawful content upon receiving valid legal directions.
- Preserve digital evidence.
- Cooperate with law enforcement agencies.

Significant Social Media Intermediaries (SSMIs) must appoint compliance officers and resident grievance officers in India.

These obligations strengthen accountability among online platforms that may host or transmit copyrighted material.

8. Landmark Judicial Decisions

Judicial interpretation has played a crucial role in shaping copyright protection in the digital age.

8.1 *Shreya Singhal v. Union of India* (2015)

Although primarily concerning freedom of speech, this landmark judgment significantly influenced internet regulation in India.

The Supreme Court struck down Section 66A of the Information Technology Act as unconstitutional, holding that vague restrictions on online speech violated Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution.

The judgment reinforced that digital regulation must remain consistent with constitutional guarantees.

8.2 *Super Cassettes Industries Ltd. v. MySpace Inc.*

In this important copyright dispute, the Delhi High Court considered the liability of online intermediaries hosting user-generated content.

The Court held that intermediaries cannot claim blanket immunity where they possess actual knowledge of copyright infringement and fail to remove infringing content after receiving notice.

The decision strengthened the notice-and-takedown mechanism in India.

8.3 *UTV Software Communication Ltd. v. 1337X.to* (2019)

This landmark judgment addressed the problem of rogue piracy websites.

The Delhi High Court recognised "dynamic injunctions," enabling copyright owners to block mirror websites and newly created domains that continue infringing activities after initial blocking orders.

The judgment significantly strengthened judicial remedies against online piracy.

8.4 *RG Anand v. Deluxe Films* (1978)

Although decided before the internet era, this Supreme Court judgment established the test for copyright infringement in India.

The Court held that copyright protects the expression of ideas rather than the ideas themselves.

This principle continues to guide modern digital copyright litigation.

9. Important International Decisions

***A&M Records, Inc. v. Napster, Inc.* (239 F.3d 1004 (9th Cir. 2001))**

The United States Court of Appeals held Napster liable for contributory and vicarious copyright infringement because its peer-to-peer file-sharing service facilitated widespread unauthorized music distribution.

The decision transformed global approaches toward intermediary liability.

***Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc. v. Grokster, Ltd.* (545 U.S. 913 (2005))**

The U.S. Supreme Court held that technology providers encouraging copyright infringement may themselves be liable even if their technology has legitimate uses.

This case established the doctrine of inducement liability in copyright law.

***Cartier International AG v. British Sky Broadcasting Ltd.* ([2016] EWCA Civ 658)**

The Court of Appeal of England and Wales recognised judicial authority to order Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to block websites facilitating intellectual property infringement.

The judgment reinforced website-blocking remedies against piracy.

10. Critical Evaluation

The existing legal framework demonstrates that India has substantially modernised its copyright regime to address challenges arising from digital technologies. Legislative reforms, judicial innovation, and international treaty obligations have collectively strengthened copyright protection.

Nevertheless, enforcement remains difficult due to:

- Anonymous online users.
- Cross-border jurisdiction.
- Rapid creation of mirror websites.
- Cryptocurrency-based piracy networks.

- AI-generated infringing content.
- Limited international cooperation.

Consequently, stronger technological measures, international collaboration, efficient judicial remedies, and greater public awareness remain essential for combating digital piracy effectively.

11. Impact of Digital Piracy

Digital piracy has far-reaching consequences that extend beyond the entertainment industry. It affects creators, businesses, governments, consumers, and society as a whole. Although many internet users perceive piracy as a victimless act, its economic, legal, and ethical implications are significant.

11.1 Economic Impact

The most immediate consequence of digital piracy is the enormous financial loss suffered by copyright owners. Film producers, music companies, publishers, software developers, gaming companies, and OTT platforms invest substantial resources in creating original works. When copyrighted content is distributed without authorization, these creators lose legitimate revenue, reducing incentives for innovation and creativity.

The Motion Picture Association (MPA) and other industry reports estimate that digital piracy costs the global entertainment industry billions of dollars annually. In India, illegal streaming websites frequently upload newly released films within hours of their theatrical or OTT release, resulting in considerable losses for producers and distributors.

Piracy also affects government revenue through reduced tax collection and discourages foreign investment in creative industries.

11.2 Social Impact

Digital piracy undermines respect for intellectual property rights and normalizes unauthorized consumption of creative works. Many users, particularly young internet users, often fail to recognize that downloading or streaming pirated content constitutes copyright infringement.

Piracy also threatens employment opportunities across the creative sector. Artists, actors, musicians, software developers, writers, editors, technicians, and production staff depend upon copyright protection for their livelihoods. Reduced revenues may result in fewer employment opportunities and decreased investment in future projects.

11.3 Legal Impact

The increasing sophistication of piracy networks places considerable pressure on legal systems worldwide. Courts face complex questions concerning intermediary liability, cross-border jurisdiction, website blocking, and enforcement against anonymous online infringers.

The rise of decentralized technologies, encrypted communication platforms, blockchain-based storage systems, and peer-to-peer networks has further complicated enforcement efforts.

11.4 Ethical Considerations

Digital piracy raises important ethical concerns. Intellectual property represents the creative labour, skill, and financial investment of authors and creators. Unauthorized copying deprives creators of fair compensation and weakens the incentive to produce original works.

Ethical digital citizenship requires users to respect copyright, purchase legitimate subscriptions, and support lawful distribution channels.

12. Challenges in Enforcing Copyright in the Digital Era

Despite significant legislative reforms, enforcing copyright online remains difficult.

(a) Cross-Border Nature of the Internet

Pirated content is often hosted on servers located outside India. Different legal systems, jurisdictional limitations, and conflicting enforcement mechanisms delay effective action against infringing websites.

(b) Anonymous Users

Pirates frequently conceal their identities using Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), proxy servers, encrypted browsers, and anonymous payment systems, making investigation extremely difficult.

(c) Mirror Websites

Even after courts block piracy websites, identical "mirror" or "clone" websites quickly emerge under different domain names. This continuous reappearance reduces the effectiveness of traditional injunctions.

(d) Technological Advancements

Artificial Intelligence, blockchain technology, decentralized file-sharing platforms, cloud storage, and encrypted communication applications have enabled increasingly sophisticated methods of copyright infringement.

(e) Lack of Public Awareness

Many internet users remain unaware that unauthorized streaming, downloading, and sharing of copyrighted material constitute legal violations. Public awareness campaigns remain limited compared to the rapid expansion of internet access.

13. Role of OTT Platforms in Combating Piracy

OTT (Over-the-Top) platforms have transformed the entertainment industry by offering affordable, high-quality, and legally licensed digital content.

Major OTT services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Disney+ Hotstar, Sony LIV, Zee5, and JioCinema have significantly reduced dependence on physical media while providing consumers with convenient access to films, television programmes, documentaries, and sports broadcasts.

To combat piracy, OTT platforms employ several technological measures, including:

- Digital Rights Management (DRM) systems.

- Encryption technologies.
- Watermarking of digital content.
- Multi-factor authentication.
- AI-powered content monitoring.
- Automated copyright detection systems.
- Notice-and-takedown procedures.

Many platforms also collaborate with law enforcement agencies and internet service providers to identify infringing websites and initiate legal proceedings.

14. Artificial Intelligence and Copyright Protection

Artificial Intelligence has emerged as both a solution to and a challenge for copyright law.

On one hand, AI assists copyright owners by:

- Detecting unauthorized uploads.
- Identifying duplicate content.
- Monitoring piracy websites.
- Automating copyright enforcement.

On the other hand, AI raises novel legal questions.

Generative AI systems are often trained using enormous datasets that may contain copyrighted books, music, artworks, software, photographs, and films. This has generated ongoing debates regarding:

- Whether AI training constitutes copyright infringement.
- Ownership of AI-generated works.
- Fair use and fair dealing.
- Licensing requirements for training datasets.
- Liability for AI-generated infringing content.

As AI technologies continue to evolve, legislators worldwide are reconsidering existing copyright frameworks to address these emerging issues.

15. Recommendations

An effective response to digital piracy requires a combination of legal reforms, technological innovation, international cooperation, and public awareness.

The following measures are recommended:

1. **Strengthen International Cooperation:** Governments should cooperate through mutual legal assistance treaties and cross-border enforcement mechanisms to combat transnational piracy.

2. **Promote Digital Literacy:** Educational institutions should incorporate intellectual property awareness into school and university curricula to encourage respect for copyright laws.
3. **Improve Technological Protection Measures:** Copyright owners should invest in advanced encryption, watermarking, blockchain authentication, and AI-based monitoring systems.
4. **Expedite Judicial Remedies:** Courts should continue granting dynamic injunctions against mirror websites and develop faster procedures for online copyright disputes.
5. **Enhance Intermediary Accountability:** Social media platforms, search engines, hosting providers, and streaming services should promptly remove infringing content upon receiving valid notices.
6. **Encourage Affordable Legal Alternatives:** Competitive subscription pricing, flexible payment options, and broader access to licensed content reduce incentives for piracy.
7. **Regular Legislative Review:** Copyright legislation should be periodically updated to address emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, blockchain, and decentralized digital platforms.

16. Conclusion

Digital piracy represents one of the greatest challenges confronting copyright law in the twenty-first century. While digital technologies have revolutionized access to information, education, entertainment, and innovation, they have simultaneously enabled the rapid and unauthorized dissemination of copyrighted works on an unprecedented scale. Streaming services have transformed content consumption by providing lawful and convenient access to creative works; however, illegal streaming platforms, torrent networks, and unauthorized digital distribution continue to undermine these legitimate markets.

India has developed a robust legal framework through the Copyright Act, 1957, the Information Technology Act, 2000, the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, and judicial precedents that seek to balance the interests of copyright owners, intermediaries, and consumers. International instruments such as the Berne Convention, the TRIPS Agreement, the WIPO Copyright Treaty, and the WIPO Performances and Phonograms Treaty further strengthen global copyright protection by establishing common legal standards.

Nevertheless, effective enforcement remains a significant challenge due to anonymous online activities, cross-border jurisdictional issues, rapidly evolving technologies, mirror websites, and artificial intelligence. These developments demonstrate that legislation alone cannot eliminate digital piracy. Sustainable solutions require collaboration among governments, courts, technology companies, internet service providers, educational institutions, copyright owners, and users.

Ultimately, copyright law must continue evolving alongside technological innovation. A modern legal framework should encourage creativity, reward innovation, facilitate public access to knowledge, and ensure that the digital economy remains fair, secure, and

sustainable. Protecting intellectual property is not merely a legal obligation but an essential prerequisite for fostering cultural development, economic growth, and technological progress in the digital age.

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