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PLATFORM

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Copyright anomaly in a digital age

THE purpose of the Internet should be to undermine copyright. The easier and cheaper it is to make copies of something, the less sense there is in having intellectual property.

The rationale for intellectual property — primarily copyrights and patents — has never been very good. Physical things, such as bread, shoes, cars or land, can only be used by one or a few people at a time. In the case of ideas and information, the originator has full use even after copies have been made.

Some producers argue that they are entitled to intellectual property rights because of the labor they have contributed. But all intellectual products depend, in part, on society. This includes previous thinkers as well as parents and teachers who worked to develop a person's creative skills. Why should rights to an entire chain be given to the final link?

The only decent justification for intellectual property is that it fosters the creation of more ideas. The original rationale for copyrights and patents was to reward artistic creators by giving them a temporary monopoly.

The system, however, is totally out of control. Copyright now covers every kind of intellectual production, from business memos to idle doodles. Furthermore, the period of protection has been extended and now lasts decades after a creator's death. If anything, the copyright period should be getting shorter as electronics shortens the period between creation and obsolescence.

The trouble is that intellectual property is very lucrative to corporations and governments. They are the ones that are able to buy copyrights and patents and make

money out of other people's labor. Often, it is not creators who are rewarded by intellectual property, but bosses and purchasers.

There have been massive protests in the Third World at the granting of patents on genetic materials — many of which were developed by indigenous farmers over many decades — to pharmaceutical multinationals.

It would cost rich countries very little to provide the benefits of drugs, documents and software to the poor peoples of the world. Instead, Western governments have

pushed to extract every possible cent from those who can least afford it by pushing through a tough stand on intellectual property as part of GATT.

Even countries like Australia pay

more for intellectual property than they receive.

Intellectual property is the wrong term. It should be called monopoly privilege, since it involves a temporary monopoly protected by the government. In an age of deregulation and alleged primacy of the free market, this sort of government-sponsored monopoly is an anomaly.

So easy is the reproduction and distribution of digital materials that it now may make sense to not bother trying to enforce intellectual property rights.

Scientific ideas are not copyrighted, and anyone can use a formula published in a mathematical journal. By being able to use and develop other people's ideas without restraint, science has proved to be a dynamic system. That should be a model for social development in a digital age. ©

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