



Piracy: The Intellectual Property Wars from Gutenberg to Gates

By Adrian Johns



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Since the rise of Napster and other file-sharing services in its wake, most of us have assumed that intellectual piracy is a product of the digital age and that it threatens creative expression as never before. The Motion Picture Association of America, for instance, claimed that in 2005 the film industry lost \$2.3 billion in revenue to piracy online. But here Adrian Johns shows that piracy has a much longer and more vital history than we have realized—one that has been largely forgotten and is little understood.

Piracy explores the intellectual property wars from the advent of print culture in the fifteenth century to the reign of the Internet in the twenty-first. Brimming with broader implications for today's debates over open access, fair use, free culture, and the like, Johns's book ultimately argues that piracy has always stood at the center of our attempts to reconcile creativity and commerce—and that piracy has been an engine of social, technological, and intellectual innovations as often as it has been their adversary. From Cervantes to Sonny Bono, from Maria Callas to Microsoft, from Grub Street to Google, no chapter in the story of piracy evades Johns's graceful analysis in what will be the definitive history of the subject for years to come.

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- Sales Rank: #466622 in eBooks
- Published on: 2010-01-15
- Released on: 2010-01-15
- Format: Kindle eBook



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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The recording industry's panic over illegal downloads is nothing new; a century ago, London publishers faced a similar crisis when pirate editions of sheet music were widely available at significantly less cost. Similarly, the debate over pharmaceutical patents echoes an 18th-century dispute over the origins of Epsom salt. These are just two of the historical examples that Johns (*The Nature of the Book*) draws upon as he traces the tensions between authorized and unauthorized producers and distributors of books, music, and other intellectual property in British and American culture from the 17th century to the present. Johns's history is liveliest when it is rooted in the personal—the 19th-century renegade bibliographer Samuel Egerton Brydges, for example, or the jazz and opera lovers who created a thriving network of bootleg recordings in the 1950s—but the shifting theoretical arguments about copyright and authorial property are presented in a cogent and accessible manner. Johns's research stands as an important reminder that today's intellectual property crises are not unprecedented, and offers a survey of potential approaches to a solution. 40 b&w illus. (Feb.)

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Review

"Adrian Johns's learned and witty book Piracy is... a compelling cultural history of the paired ideas of piracy and property from the seventeenth century to the present.... The best history takes readers from a familiar present to a strange past, and delivers them back to a present that can be seen in new ways. Piracy is that sort of history." (Nature) "Piracy shows us how the very notion of intellectual property - and its sharp division into the fields of patent and copyright - was created in response to specific pressures and so could be modified dramatically or even abolished." (Times Higher Education) "Invaluable.... Johns concludes in this challenging, richly detailed, and provocative book, that the choices we make about how to balance property, creativity and privacy will define 'the contours of creative life' for the twenty-first century." (Washington Post) "Johns's research stands as an important reminder that today's intellectual property crises are not unprecedented, and offers a survey of potential approaches to a solution." (Publishers Weekly)"

About the Author

Adrian Johns is professor of history and chair of the Committee on Conceptual and Historical Studies of Science at the University of Chicago. He is the author of *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making*, also published by the University of Chicago Press.

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