Chapter 16
Unravelling Intellectual Property in a Specialist Social Networking Site

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines how the complexity of motivations and practices found in a specialist social networking site intersect with the institutions of intellectual property. The popular niche or specialist social networking site (SNS) called Ravelry, which caters to knitters, crocheters and spinners, is used as a case study. In this site people use, buy, sell, give away, and consume in a mixed economy that can be characterised as a 'social network market'(Potts et al., 2008). In a co-creative social networking site we find not only a multidirectional and multi-authored process of co-production, but also a concatenation of amateurs, semi-professionals and professionals occupying multiple roles in gifting economies, reputation economies, monetised charitable economies and full commercial economies.

INTRODUCTION

Co-creative online social environments have many emergent qualities – they are evolving and fluid as new possibilities are encountered and developed (Banks and Humphreys, 2008). Intellectual property (IP) on the other hand is a legal institution that is complicated, unwieldy, and based on industrial-style production and distribution models that are reasonably fixed, linear and inflexible in character (Benkler, 2006). The users of online social networking sites find themselves having to come to grips with the complexity of IP law in order to participate fully in the environment and its markets. For those that engage with it, IP is proving to be overwhelming and confusing. It may ultimately stifle the entrepreneurial gambits of some, and chill the creative efforts of others, without necessarily effectively protecting the creative work of those whom it is designed to benefit.

This chapter explores conversations between users on a number of bulletin boards within *Ravelry* that shed light on attitudes, practices and issues that arise in the negotiation of IP law. It shows the differing interests professionals, semi-professionals and amateurs have and highlights the co-existence of an emergent 'norms-based' IP System (Fauchart and von Hippel, 2006) alongside the law-based IP system. This combination of implicit and explicit rule systems is a reflection of the overall structure of the site which is one based on both social and commercial exchange economies. It reveals the intersection of these differing systems as contested and abrasive rather than seamlessly compatible. Analysis of discussions demonstrates that the discourse of the legal IP system is being used in the service of creating norms within the community that in some cases work to valorise commercial gain over social gain, and which can overstate the actual reach of the law. Thus the chapter explores the negotiation of IP law and norms by a mixed group of professionals, amateurs and semi-professionals in an environment where the affordances of the internet and social networking sites have created a great deal of uncertainty.

RAVELRY

In this chapter an analysis of the discourses and practices around intellectual property is carried out on the specialist social networking site *Ravelry*. This site is for knitters, spinners and crocheters[1] and has attracted over 600 000 users (in the two and a half years to March 2010[2]), many of whom are very active contributors to the site. Individuals have their own profile areas on the site where they are able to upload photos of the items they are knitting, with details of the yarn they used and the patterns they followed and any modifying for their own purposes. These details are aggregated for other users to find, and linked variously to commercial and non-commercial sites where

the patterns or yarn can be found (sometimes for sale, sometimes for free in the case of patterns) both on and off the *Ravelry* site. Local yarn stores and libraries are also linked (with maps and contact details). Searches allow the user to browse photos of the multiple versions of a pattern that have been knitted by other users, thus allowing for them to see how the pattern knits up in different yarns, sizes, colours and variations/modifications. Sometimes there are hundreds of finished versions of a particular pattern available for viewing. Comments about patterns and yarns are made, alerting people to their pitfalls or joys, there is a 'favourites' system which generates searchable popularity metrics in all available categories and so on. Much of the data available about the patterns and yarns has been previously available elsewhere on the net, but the aggregation of the data into one very user-friendly searchable database which draws on user-generated content has proved immensely popular.

Designers are able to upload their patterns to either sell or give away, with a PayPal payment system in operation within the site. They can link to their own websites if they already have an online payment mechanism available there. Advertising is also available on the site, with both commercial retailers and individual designers paying for ads on the site. *Ravelry* also has very active discussion boards about not only all things associated with yarn, knitting and crocheting, but also about politics, tv shows, special interests and just about anything else imaginable. These boards are surprisingly well populated. By June 2008, a little over a year after the public beta test began, there had been over 5 million posts to the boards.

Several of the boards maintain a reasonably concentrated focus on intellectual property – one, named 'copyright matters' has numerous threads dedicated to trying to unravel the complexity of intellectual property as it relates to knitting and patterns and cross-jurisdictional confusions. Another board for *Ravelry* 'shopkeepers' regularly deals with copyright and licensing issues confronting

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