Can Neil Young's studio-quality audio format curtail music piracy?

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Just one day after the Internet blackout protest [1] against SOPA [2] and PIPA [3], the Justice Department made new legislation seem superfluous when it swiftly shut down Megaupload [4], one of the web's most popular file-sharing sites. The Recording Industry Association of America applauded the move [5], charging that the site had been used "predominantly for trading unauthorized content." Though it may be true that legal methods of acquiring music have steadily increased in popularity, peer-to-peer sharing isn't going away – not anytime soon – and the closing of Megaupload (like the closing of the original Napster at the turn of the century) will likely inspire other young developers to create new online sharing mechanisms.

So legendary singer-songwriter Neil Young thinks it's time his industry accepts the challenges of the digital age and starts adapting to the 21st century. "Piracy is the new radio," he told [6] Walt Mossberg at the D: Dive Into Media [7] conference in late January. "That's how music gets around."

Young, who has been releasing albums since the 1960s, has his own ideas about innovating the way we consume music. In June, he filed six trademarks [8] with the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office for names involving a new high-fidelity audio format. It appears the 66-year-old is on a crusade to bring the full sonic capacity of studio master recordings to the digital frontier. The patents, first reported by Rolling Stone *[9]* in early April, describe different ways of selling high-resolution music via the Internet and on discs. The trademarked names include Ivanhoe, 21st Century Record Player, Earth Storage, Storage Shed, Thanks for Listening, and SQS (Studio Quality Sound).

At this point, no details have been confirmed and it remains unclear if new offerings would employ digital rights management (DRM), the technology that enables content providers to control access to media they sell and which makes sharing more difficult.

Like many of his contemporaries, Young is unsatisfied with the music distribution model and the uncontested standard of digitized audio—the MP3. The format's distinguishing characteristic is its small size, which allows it to be conveniently stored on devices and quickly shared online. But to become neatly encoded MP3s, audio tracks must be compressed, and in the process, they lose much of their original data. Young has estimated that downloaded MP3s retain five percent of the information found in original analog master recordings.

So while the age of the iPod has made the MP3 king, Young thinks new equipment might be necessary for future playback of high-definition audio. This need for new hardware, the lack of industry-approval, and the long download times for large files create some major hurdles for any new audio format that comes to the market.

If accepted and adopted by the greater music community, a new format could have a big impact on business by allowing record companies or artists to give away low-quality MP3s and charge premiums for high-fidelity tracks. As John Langlois astutely points out [10], Young's plans are important because they offer a response to online piracy that looks forward to technological advances and isn't dependant on litigation and enforcement of old copyright law.

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