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Door-to-Door for DMCA Reform

Last May, a few members of New York's Free Software community broke off from the technology-focused groups that have surrounded the GNU/Linux mania of the last few years and began to focus more on the pressing issues of fair use that the Free Software movement depends upon. Over the last decade, technophiles have focused on building free software systems and making them available to the public, giving only reactionary responses to the ongoing infringement of the public's rights with regard to digital media. We protested the DMCA, and we protested when Jon Johansen was arrested over the DeCSS hack that provided access to commercial DVDs on free OSes. It became apparent, however, when we analyzed how the Free Software community was responding to these threats and considered the results of these efforts, that something new needed to be tried. Therefore, we founded NY Fair Use in May of 2001 to pick up the slack and to be more aggressive in campaigning for fair use and sane copyright law.

The encroachment of copyright legislation has begun to impede the common uses of information needed by the public to conduct its business. This was most clearly demonstrated when the American Association of Publishers began to attack public education and libraries in the name of copyright control. The high point came when Judith Platt of the American Association of Publishers accused librarians of being like terrorists. It was cemented when the Vital Books corporation gained an exclusive contract with NYU Dental School that forced students to purchase all of their text books on DVD. As if that wasn't enough, the DVD would turn itself off at the end of the school year, requiring students to purchase the books again.

In response to the growing threat of digital rights management systems and legal extortion that threatened our public libraries, and public school system, a few of us joined together last May for the first meeting of NY Fair Use at the Killarny Rose in downtown NYC. Through that summer and through the most difficult fall anyone could ever imagine, NY Fair Use has been a beacon for freedom, individual rights and political action, and it continues on. Every week we knock on doors in targeted congressional districts, fighting to save libraries from the AAP and collecting signatures. After the destruction of the World Trade Center, we continued to hit the streets every week, even knocking on the door of Senator Schumer, himself.

Our fliers and petitions focused on a list of points relating to digital media and libraries, quoting Pat Schoeder and Judith Platt. We addressed our petitions to Congressman Anthony Weiner, who is appointed to the Intellectual Property subcommittee in the House Judiciary Committee. We set a goal for the number of doors to knock on, how many people to speak to and precisely what actions we were asking people to take. We tried to support the door-knocking with "Save the Libraries" buttons and by handing out fliers in the main business district of Park Slope, Brooklyn, the neighborhood we targeted. Every week we totaled our results so that we were armed with a summary for the Congressman when we made it down to Washington. We also brought groups of people to the community office and tracked down the Congressman at speaking engagements, putting a "Save the Libraries" button in his hand. In the end, he had his office call us to make the trip to Washington and discuss the issue.

This winter, when everyone was afraid to go to Washington, eight of us visited Washington DC (http://www2.mrbrklyn.com /appl/fairuse/bysubject.html?idno=1514) for six hours of meetings with the staff of Representative Anthony Weiner (http://www.house.gov/weiner). We noticed a TiVo system in the office and pointed it out to Representative Weiner's Chief of Staff, Kevin A. Ryan, who said, "The Congressman loves the TiVo." We underscored that TiVo is exactly the kind of fair use device threatened by proposed copyright laws and the DMCA.

There is still much more to do. Come join NY Fair Use as we plan our next phase of protecting digital property rights, as we press Congress for protection from copyright abuse in the home and in business and as we press for a new Fair Use bill (currently being written by Jean Thewell). The objectives of this bill will be to give power back to artists and writers, to prevent wiretapping our computers and to protect fair competition in the digital device market by defining copyright more tightly as an exception to free speech and fair use. The bill will be a tough fight, but if we take it to the districts of key members of congress, we will be heard. The bill will cover every important point threatening free software and a free society today.

For more information on DMCA reform, see the Legislative Agenda section of the NY for Fair Use (http://www.nyfairuse.org /legist.xhtml) web site.

Remember that, as former House Speaker Tip O'Neill said, all politics is *local*.

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