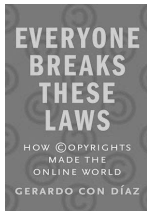


Everyone Breaks These Laws: How Copyrights Made the Online World

By Gerardo Con Díaz. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2025. Pp. 280.



Any history of technology could also be written as a history of the self, and Gerardo Con Díaz's new book embraces that possibility, both in its content and its method. Moving back and forth through lawsuits, *Everyone Breaks These Laws* is an engaging work that not only traces practices, scuffles, and implications of digital copyright but also demonstrates how digital media has already changed our ways of writing, citing, and thinking about the law.

This book is remarkable because it goes beyond the court documents and press releases cited in the links in the notes. While much has been written over the last two decades about the impact of digital technology and copyright, the broader significance of Con Díaz's book lies in the way he browses, researches, and reads controversies in and beyond the courtroom to try to make sense of himself and copyright. In doing so, he connects several copyright controversies while recalling his life as a teenager in Costa Rica, remembering his time as a fellow at Stanford, and preparing to lecture on “digital law” and “digital lawsuits” at UC Davis. His experiences as a teenage collector, doctoral student, amateur photographer, and classical baritone connect him to copyright issues, proprietary technologies, and litigation strategies followed by digital platforms such as Napster, YouTube, or Google.

Precisely because this search for identity links law and self, one might say that *Everyone Breaks These Laws* stands out as a kind of memoir, a biography of digital copyright in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries that documents how “the web has become an archive of our human experience,” as the author suggests in the conclusion (p. 205). This reinforces the notion that the internet has indeed changed the archival function and has generated a new kind of memory that collapses the past and the present. Is it possible, then, to write a history of digital copyright and the internet when the past folds into its present? *Everyone Breaks These Laws* attempts to do so by making explicit the research process in which the writing took place.

The way it is structured is a key feature of the book. Con Díaz sees the entanglements of digital copyright and technology through activities where legal controversies in the construction of the social have become visible. The central insight, therefore, is that technologies for sharing, breaking, and transforming information have faced and continue to face legal troubles. As such, copyright has emerged as a contested terrain where normative and digital expectations compete to codify and control our everyday activities and desires. If we agree on that image of law as a terrain of struggle, the book can usefully be read alongside Lawrence D. Graham's *Legal Battles That Shaped*

the Computer Industry (1999), Adrian Johns's *Piracy* (2009), and Con Díaz's previous work, *Software Rights* (2019).

But the immersion and personal engagement with the law that runs through *Everyone Breaks These Laws* is what makes it different and singular. Con Díaz raises personal and collective concerns about the effect of copyright in our contemporary digital existence while meditating about the connection between law and technology. It seems as if his writing is imbued with a documentary impulse that forces it toward the Wayback Machine digital archive and other traditional archives such as family photographs and drawings. It is no accident that the book offers an intimate portrait of someone reading legal materials at different times of his life. Given how the censorial function haunts copyright history, *Everyone Breaks These Laws* alerts us to digital copyright configurations at the edge of censorship, placing on record the need to track them down before these are ultimately erased, normalized, or canceled.

Although no doubt augmented by the experience of writing (and living) during the pandemic, it is true that much unexplored ground lies between copyright law and change in all its contradictions. This is especially true of the way digital copyright has undergone constant shifts, or rather auto-poietic processes involving attempts not only to define what it means to be online but also the way readers (and authors) were transformed into users. Artificial intelligence, mentioned at the end of the book, does seem to mark some kind of culmination of this process. Although this may not be as novel or glamorous as many contemporary commentators suggest, it nonetheless challenges traditional assumptions that some hold about copyright. But maybe it is through writing the history of copyright in a different way that creativity might be reclaimed or, at least, understood differently.

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