

Is AI Stealing Your Voice? Take It to Court

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Dutch artists expressed their concerns last week about their music being stolen by providers of artificial intelligence (AI). With apps like Udio and Suno, anyone can quickly and easily produce music. However, this involves the large-scale commercial use of music without the artists' permission.

The AI law recently adopted by the European Parliament is supposed to offer protection to authors, but it is questionable whether this law provides sufficient protection. Dutch artists should follow the example of their American colleagues and take legal action now.

Ready-Made Songs

Generative AI music models work like ChatGPT, but in addition to generating lyrics, they also create the accompanying music, including vocals. With Suno and Udio, it's astonishingly easy to produce ready-made songs that are often surprisingly good.

Previously, Jasper Claus and Jochem de Groot (Opinie, April 10) observed that AI applications lack the human touch and will eventually lead to mediocrity. Claus and De Groot trust that we will continue to recognize creativity, but the quality of AI music has now become so good that musicians are massively worried. In April, about two hundred international artists—including big names like Billie Eilish and Pearl Jam—signed an open letter. They demand that providers of generative music applications stop stealing their music. In the Netherlands, artists and organizations like the Kunstenbond, Stichting Brein, and copyright organizations Sena and Buma/Stemra are also concerned.

These concerns are not so much about generative AI per se. It's about the fact that these AI models are trained with copyrighted material. This constitutes a violation of the copyright of the rights holders: the lyricists, composers, performing musicians, music publishers, and record companies. Unlike in Europe, dozens of legal proceedings against AI providers are already underway in the US.

A Historical Echo

The uproar is partly reminiscent of earlier moments in the history of the music industry. Think about home taping on music cassettes, the introduction of sampling, and downloading music via peer-to-peer networks like Napster, Kazaa, and The Pirate Bay. There were certainly severe economic consequences, but the introduction of these new technologies did not lead to less music or creativity—on the contrary. The mixtape was part of the 'cassette culture' and a precursor of sampling and remixes, which were important in the emerging hip-hop scene. Sampling was essential in the creation of house and dance music, which is now, like hip-hop, globally one of the most important forms of pop music. Illegal downloading eventually led to the creation of music streaming services, currently the primary source of revenue for the music industry.

Democratizing Music?

The availability of a lot of music and low-threshold, inexpensive ways to be creative can actually promote a flourishing music culture. This argument is used by the AI platform Suno in an interview with Rolling Stone, where they say they do not want to replace musicians but to democratize music-making. These are of course beautiful words, but in developing their AI model, this company massively uses copyrighted content without prior permission from the rights holders.

Whatever one might think of this development, clarity must be provided on how rights holders receive fair compensation, as was eventually the case with music cassettes, sampling, and downloading. The AI providers use music from real people to train AI models and then exploit these to make a profit.

European legislation will eventually require transparency from providers about their training data. Only when a clear and fair arrangement for authors is in place, for now and in the future, can this new technology genuinely have a positive impact on the music culture. It's about time for authors to go to court.

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