Cases of Note-Copyright-Implied Licenses

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thing else enters the public domain. When Congress enacted term extension, it made the provision retroactive for all works still under copyright. For example, at the end of 1998, all works from 1923 should have passed into the public domain; instead, they received an additional 20 years of copyright protection.

Many foreign published works which had been within the public domain in the United States have been restored to copyright status due to treaty obligations. This amendment applies only to works that were not in the public domain in the country of publication. In other words, much of the world had a longer copyright term than did the United States, thus, foreign-published works were treated as having expired terms in this country but not in their country of publication. This amendment contains a number of protections for parties who relied on the public domain status of a work. Further, the restoration lasts only as long as the work would have been protected had it never entered the public domain (i.e., life of the author plus 50 or 70 years for most countries).

There are four large categories of works that are found within the public domain. First, the public domain is made up of works that do not meet the statutory requirements for copyright. Second, all works published in the United States on which the copyright has expired are no longer eligible for copyright protection. This represents the largest category of public domain works.

The third category is comprised of works in which the author never claimed copyright or which were dedicated to the public by being published without copyright notice prior to January 1, 1978. Prior to the current Act, publication without notice was a fatal flaw, and the author lost her rights. Since 1978, however, publication without notice does not destroy copyright protection, and the work is still protected.

United States documents comprise the fourth category. Section 105 of the Copyright Act simply states that works by the federal government are ineligible for copyright protection. This used to be an absolute, but around 1978 the National Science Foundation began to award grants to researchers that permitted them to hold personal copyright in works they would produce. These were predominantly NTIS documents. As the government has increasingly contracted with outside vendors to conduct studies, write reports, and the like, there are some government publications that appear with copyright notice— not a claim of government copyright but a claim from the private contractor that produced the work. Despite these anomalies, the huge majority of federal government publications are public domain. Because the Copyright Act is a federal statute, it is silent as to state government publications. Thus, states are free to claim copyright in their documents if they so choose.

Many publishers and other producers of copyrighted works repackage federal government information and sell it commercially. Is this a problem? No, neither for the publisher/producer nor for the librarian and user of the information. The republisher of the government work does not get a copyright work in the public domain material. Any copyright claimed by such publisher is only for any new material added such as a preface, special index, or the like. Users of these works are free to reproduce the data or text as it appeared in the government document but not to reproduce the copyrighted material added by the republisher. In fact, for works that consist predominantly of federal government works, the notice of copyright should identify those portions of the work that embody works eligible for copyright protection.

In other words, the government documents incorporated are not eligible for protection but any new material added may be, if it meets the requirements of originality and creativity.

Other publishers and producers do more than republish the work. They might prepare an adaptation from the government document. For example, if a publisher prepared a summary or condensation of a government report, that condensation is an adaptation, or if an artist took three government-produced photographs and created an artistic panel of those photographs, that is an adaptation. The adaptation would be eligible for copyright protection if it meets the requirements for copyright. However, anyone else could still take the original government work and prepare his own adaptation.

Today it is difficult to place a work within the public domain. Since copyright automatically attaches when one creates a fixed, original work of authorship, how can one dedicate a work to the public? In reality, it may not be possible to do so. What one can do, however, is to include a note that appears on the work to the effect that the author makes no claim of copyright and hereby grants all users the right to make any use of the work.

There are several sources to locate various types of public domain works. A recently published book, The Public Domain: How To Find & Use Copyright-free Writings, Music, Art & More by Stephen Fishman details many of these sources.

Endnotes
3. The government may hold copyright in works by gift, bequest or assignment, however.

Cases of Note — Copyright-Implied Licenses
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Website Wars! What happens when that friendly oral contract with the techies breaks down?


Holtzbrinck Publishing is the parent of Scientific American which in turn publishes the famous magazine as well as owning W.H. Freeman, publisher of college texts. Vyne Communications creates sites on the World Wide Web for third parties using content they provide.

Under an oral contract beginning in 1995, Vyne was hired to develop a website for Freeman. A year later, Vyne transferred the site and all files to Freeman’s computer without claiming any interest or ownership.

Also in 1995, Holtzbrinck negotiated another site for Scientific American to be serviced until it could be transferred in-house. Vyne was to do this for $65,000 plus $1,000 for the in-house transfer. The site was launched in April, 1996 on Vyne’s computer. At the prompting of Scientific American, a copyright notice in the name of SA was put on the site.

The SA site became more complicated over time, and the parties decided to reduce the oral agreement to a writing. That’s lawyer talk. As you can imagine, the oral agreement swelled rather than reduced.

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As the wrangling continued, SA downloaded the files from Vyne onto its own computer using the Vyne password. Vyne filed a certificate of copyright registration on the website. Holtzbrinck (SA) sought a declaration of its rights and Vyne counterclaimed for copyright infringement.

Evidence Requirements - Statute of Frauds

This takes you into the maze of the Statute of Frauds and its procedural requirement of written evidence of contracts. Copyright law requires a clear writing showing the terms of the contract. 17 U.S.C. §204. One of the exceptions to the writing requirement is an admission by the party being sued that it meant to transfer copyright. Vyne admitted to SA's ownership through the draft which Vyne signed. This is not, however, the result of the opinion — and as I told my students — and do not rely on the exceptions to the Statute of Frauds. This is procedural and a judge might give you far less than you could have gotten by simply putting a signature to that draft that Vyne sent twice.

The writings and conduct of the parties show that Vyne at a bare minimum gave SA a nonexclusive license in the programs and files created by Vyne and paid for by SA. Thus, SA would not be in copyright violation as to those files. As to unpaid work, the license is revocable by Vyne.

This applies to rights in the website as well.

Nonexclusive License - what is it?

The nonexclusive license is a safety-net concept used by courts when parties intend to transfer a copyright but don't do it in writing. Thus it can be done orally or implied by the conduct of the parties. See Graham v. Joves, 144 F.3d 229, 235 (2d Cir. 1998).

There is no transfer of ownership, and the license does not fall under copyright law. It merely permits use. It is granted, when (a) the licensee requests a work be created; (b) licensor does the work and delivers it; and (c) licensor intends that the work be copied and distributed.

The parties agreed on the creation of the SA website. Vyne did the work. SA paid for it. The code developed by Vyne was designed to display SA's content on the site. Without an implied right of SA to use the code developed by Vyne, it would be worthless to SA. See Design Options, Inc. v. Bellepointe, Inc., 940 F. Supp. 86, 92 (D.N.Y. 1996).

Along with the two draft contracts, continued on page 71.


Voluntary Approach to Environmental Policy: Joint Environmental Policy-Making in Europe; Ed. by Arthur Mol. Oxford Univ Press 2000 $70.00 Cloth 0199241163.

Why Europe?: Problems of Culture and Identity: v. 1: Media, Film, Gender, Youth and Education; Ed. by Joc André. St. Martin's/Scholarly 2000 $65.00 Cloth 0312227949.


European Economies in Transition: In Search of a New Growth Path; Ed. by Oliver Fabel. St. Martin's/Scholarly 2000 $79.95 Cloth 0312232241.

Constructing Europe's Identity: The External Dimension; Ed. by Lars-erik Cederman. Lynne Rienner 2001 $55.00 Cloth 1555878725.


Into the Margin: Migration and Exclusion in Southern Europe; Ed. by Floya Anthias. Ashgate 1999 $64.95 Cloth 1840141166.

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