**Is It Wrong to Share Your Music? (Discuss)**

By KATIE HAFNER

**WALNUT CREEK, Calif.—** ''IT shouldn't be illegal,'' said 14-year-old Sonya Arndt. ''It's not like I'm selling it.''

''Isn't it like recording movies?'' asked Korbi Blanchard, 13. ''They're making a big thing out of nothing.''

''It's wrong to be downloading hundreds of songs, but if you only want one or two, it's not that big a deal,'' said 13-year-old Kristina Lee.

When the record industry's campaign against digital file-sharing yielded lawsuits on Sept. 8 against 261 people -- at least one as young as 12 -- it struck home with students at Foothill Middle School as news events seldom do.

Almost all of the 1,100 students at the school, in this suburb 25 miles east of San Francisco, have Internet-connected computers at home. And their musical tastes, like those of teenagers before them, are strongly held -- Linkin Park, 50 Cent, Good Charlotte -- as are their views of right, wrong and fairness.

So Valerie Kriger, a Foothill teacher, chose music downloading as her Friday current events topic.

Later that day, two of Ms. Kriger's classes -- her yearbook class, with seventh and eighth graders, and her social studies and English students, all eighth graders -- spent their class time sharing their thoughts on the subject with a reporter. In all, nearly 50 students wanted to weigh in with their opinions.

And those opinions came out in a flood. Virtually everyone wanted to express some indignation at the recording industry, mixed with no small amount of confusion over the legal issues.

Theirs is a downloading culture. A few clicks of a mouse bring them not just music, but movies, games, and instant communication as well. Legality seems beside the point as they click their way through licensing agreements, impatient for the software at the other end.

Although happy to give their views, Ms. Kriger's students were decidedly more guarded when asked about their own downloading practices.

Reluctantly, more than half said they had downloaded music. Several said they did not want their parents to know. And only half of those who downloaded music said they knew that they were violating copyrights.

Sonya Arndt, an energetic eighth grader known in class for speaking out, had the most to say. The record industry is simply greedy, she said. The industry should not be going after a bunch of kids. And how were her friends supposed to afford the high cost of CD's?

Individual musicians are not necessarily suffering, either, she said. ''They're not losing money, because we still buy the T-shirts and go to their concerts,'' Sonya said. ''They're still famous.''

Her friend Korbi Blanchard, a 13-year-old whom Ms. Kriger identified as one of her brightest students, chimed in. ''If you're not selling it, why is it wrong?'' Korbi asked. ''If it's something for personal use, as long as you're not redistributing it, it should be O.K.''

At the same time, many of the students are thinking harder about their downloading habits now that they know they could be singled out for what they do.

''It makes me nervous,'' said Korbi, whose Internet use usually involves shopping and communicating with a small circle of friends. ''They're intimidating people.''

Sonya, Korbi and others in the class complained about the mixed signals they get from those who are supposedly responsible for informing them what is right and wrong.

That includes the PC makers (''Why do they sell PC's with CD burners if it's illegal?'' Sonya asked) and the purveyors of such programs as KaZaA, which allow the downloading to take place. (''Why isn't there a warning that says that what we're doing is illegal?'' Kristina Lee asked.)

Sonya's tone veered toward anger when the subject turned to drugs. She told of a friend at the school who was using ecstasy and other drugs, her life a mess. Music downloading, Sonya said, was innocuous by comparison. ''Five hours in front of a computer is five hours away from drugs,'' she said.

The subject moved to the class's understanding of right and wrong, which turned mostly on questions of degree. That is, if they download a little bit of music, not a lot, then it's less wrong. Or so the logic went.

Paring down volume was the strategy for Scott Perham, 13. After the news about the lawsuits, ''I deleted a lot of my songs,'' he said. ''We read the article and my mom was concerned.''

Scott reduced his song collection to 700, from 900. The disclosure of such a large stash elicited a few gasps of disbelief from his classmates.

Marissa Bertucci, a seventh grader, said she thought that downloading was ''sort of wrong'' and that she tried to download music only if she really liked it.

Marissa's comment led others to volunteer that if they downloaded a song and liked it, they would often then buy the CD.

Ms. Kriger said that in speaking to the students earlier about downloading, she had been careful not to try to impart lessons of right and wrong, a job she cedes to parents.

Still, she said, she was struck by the students' belief that if they downloaded just a little, it was less wrong, perhaps not wrong at all.

''What I told them was, 'This is still the law, and if you break the rules, there are consequences. If I choose to go speeding down the freeway at 80 miles an hour, I have to suffer the consequences,''' she said. ''My point was, 'Now we've read this article, now you know it's not right.'''

It was a distinction that they grasped but did not necessarily believe they should comply with, at least in this case.

Partly, said some, they were drawn by the thrill of doing something forbidden.

Casey Hultin, 13, was a notable exception. She sat patiently with her hand raised, and when her turn to speak came, she bravely ventured to disagree with her classmates.

''They're right to be suing all the little people,'' she said.

Casey said that she had a computer in her room, and that while ''usually I hide what I'm doing'' on it, her parents kept an eye on things nonetheless. ''They're always sending me articles about the downloaders,'' she said. (And she had recently been ''Internet grounded'' for two days because she was caught instant messaging after 9 p.m.)

Casey said she used to download music but stopped after her parents had a talk with her. ''They told me to really think about it, and I stopped,'' she said.

Several parents contacted after the class were, like their children, eager to talk.

Unlike the stereotypical adult who is clueless about what the children might be up to on the Internet, many of the parents of Ms. Kriger's students seemed highly aware.

Sonya's mother, Jill Arndt, said she could understand the children's confusion. ''When we bought our computer, all the downloading was part of the sales pitch,'' she said. ''Not for a minute did they say, 'Be careful because some of this stuff is illegal.'''

Ms. Arndt said she would prefer not to say whether her daughter had ever downloaded music.

Korbi's mother, Kristi Blanchard, said she and her husband set limits on Korbi's Internet activity and that of his 15-year-old brother, Tym, mostly by forbidding instant messaging on school nights. When the children are instant messaging, they are also not allowed to flip their screens to something else when their parents enter the room.

The Blanchard family has discussed the issue of music downloading in view of the recent crackdowns. Although Ms. Blanchard's husband, Sym, told his children he was opposed to the illicit file-sharing, explaining that musicians derived part of their income from selling their music. Korbi and her brother wondered in return why the music was made so readily accessible if downloading it was illegal.

''People don't know what they're getting into when they buy a computer,'' said Korbi in a conversation after Ms. Kriger's class. ''I think Dell should send out a contract for parents to sign, saying you agree not to use it for illegal purposes. I don't know how else they're supposed to get people to stop.''

Ms. Blanchard said she saw little wrong with her children's burning a couple of CD's a month and that she openly disagreed with her husband. ''He sort of walked off,'' she recalled. ''I said, 'Gee, could you make me a CD I could use at the gym?'''

Max Alonso, 13, was eager to talk about the excitement he felt when skirting the edges of the law by riding his skateboard where it was explicitly forbidden to do so. At shopping centers, Max and his friends skate where they should not, and race in the other direction when they spot a police officer. He has been issued a few warnings, which shook him up a bit but did not stop him, Max said.

Downloading music does not interest him.

And that is a relief for his mother, Susan Alonso. Ms. Alonso recounted a difficult experience with her daughter, now 19, whose activity on the Internet a few years ago -- which included a lot of lewdness and bullying back and forth -- brought nothing but trouble.

Ms. Alonso is pleased that Max's preoccupations begin and end with four little wheels under his feet.

She is far stricter about what Max can do on the Internet. When all the ''hullabaloo'' with Napster started a couple of years ago, Ms. Alonso said, Max came to her for advice. ''He asked, 'Do you think I should do this?' and then he just kind of stayed away from it.''

Photos: FORUM -- Sonya Arndt, left, argues that online sharing of music files does not hurt recording artists. Casey Hultin, right, says the recording industry is right to sue the sharers. Max Alonso, center, would rather skateboard than download. (Photographs by Thor Swift for The New York Times)(pg. G7); (Photographs by Thor Swift for The New York Times)(pg. G1)