



INDIAN JOURNAL OF
LEGAL REVIEW

VOLUME 6 AND ISSUE 2 OF 2026

INSTITUTE OF LEGAL EDUCATION



INDIAN JOURNAL OF LEGAL REVIEW

APIS – 3920 – 0001 | ISSN – 2583-2344

(Open Access Journal)

Journal's Home Page – <https://ijlr.iledu.in/>

Journal's Editorial Page – <https://ijlr.iledu.in/editorial-board/>

Volume 6 and Issue 1 of 2026 (Access Full Issue on – <https://ijlr.iledu.in/volume-6-and-issue-1-of-2026/>)

Publisher

Prasanna S,

Chairman of Institute of Legal Education

No. 08, Arul Nagar, Seera Thoppu,

Maudhanda Kurichi, Srirangam,

Tiruchirappalli – 620102

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EVOLVING FRONTIERS OF COPYRIGHT: NAVIGATING PERFORMING, PUBLISHING AND SYNC RIGHTS IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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BEST CITATION – YUVRAJ, EVOLVING FRONTIERS OF COPYRIGHT: NAVIGATING PERFORMING, PUBLISHING AND SYNC RIGHTS IN THE DIGITAL ERA, *INDIAN JOURNAL OF LEGAL REVIEW (IJLR)*, 6 (2) OF 2026, PG. 594-602, APIS – 3920 – 0001 & ISSN – 2583-2344.

Abstract

The shift to digital technologies in the creation and distribution of cultural content has radically reshaped the practical and doctrinal aspect of copyright law. In an age where music, art, film, literature, and creative works are instantly accessible worldwide through digital networks, traditional copyright mechanisms are being tested and modified. Performing rights, publishing rights, and synchronization rights, which have historically played a key role in distributing value among creators, intermediaries, and audiences, are now central to debates shaped by technological disruption, market innovations, and changing legal frameworks

Traditionally, copyright law operated within a relatively stable context, characterized by physical copies, restricted distribution channels, and geographically limited markets. Creators such as authors, composers, and performers depended on established collecting societies, publishers, and licensing systems to earn revenue from their works. However, the rise of digital technologies, particularly streaming platforms such as Spotify, YouTube, Netflix, and TikTok, has fundamentally altered this balance. These platforms operate on a scale previously unimaginable, generating both opportunities for exposure and new challenges regarding equitable remuneration, control, and enforcement. Scholars have noted that the transition from ownership (buying CDs, DVDs, books) to access (subscription and streaming models) has led to profound outcomes for copyright's distributional logic and market structure.¹

Performing rights the rights of authors and performers to control the public performance of their works face new complexities in the online environment. Whereas performance once meant a live stage event or radio broadcast, it now includes live-streamed concerts, algorithmically curated playlists, or even background uses in user-generated content.² Courts and regulators struggle to balance these rights against platforms' defences, including safe-harbour provisions and fair-use claims. Publishing rights, which govern the reproduction and dissemination of written works or musical compositions, have likewise shifted. The dominance of digital publishing and e-books has intensified disputes over licensing models,

territorial restrictions, and revenue distribution.³ Similarly, digital music publishing has faced criticism regarding the transparency of royalty accounting and the market power of intermediaries.

Synchronization rights ("sync rights") which allow the pairing of music with visual content such as films, advertisements, or social media videos are one of the most visibly transformed in the digital era. The explosion of short-form video content on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram has fuelled unprecedented demand for sync licenses, but enforcement remains fragmented.⁴ Independent artists often find their works used virally without authorization, and tracking compensation across global platforms

is a demanding challenge.

At the same time, generative artificial intelligence (AI) has opened new frontiers. AI models trained on vast repositories of copyrighted material now produce outputs that resemble original creative works. This raises fundamental questions: Does training AI on copyrighted works constitute infringement? Who owns the rights in AI-generated outputs? How should existing doctrines like fair use, transformative use, or originality apply? Courts in the United States, European Union, and other jurisdictions are only beginning to grapple with these

questions⁵. This study situates these emerging challenges within the wider normative framework of copyright law. The issue arises not only from doctrinal ambiguities but also from the disconnect between copyright's traditional objectives providing incentives to creators, facilitating public access, and fostering cultural diversity and the realities of the digital economy. Technologies such as platform liability mechanisms and automated filtering, including YouTube's Content ID, create significant imbalances: while major rights-holders can enforce their claims effectively, smaller creators often lack the resources to safeguard their works or obtain fair compensation. Similarly, remuneration models for performers and authors are increasingly criticized as opaque and inequitable, particularly in the streaming context where revenue is dominated by a few blockbuster hits, leaving the "long tail" of creators with negligible income.

Chapter 1: Introduction Background

Copyright historically served two complementary social aims: (1) to promote creation by granting exclusive economic rights to authors and performers, and (2) to enable access and dissemination of culturally valuable works. Traditionally, rights such as performing rights (public performance and broadcast), publishing rights (mechanical reproduction and publishing control), and synchronization rights

(licensing music to visual media) were managed by a mixture of collective management organizations (CMOs), publishers, labels

and bespoke licensing negotiations. The advent of digital networks, streaming platforms, and algorithmic content generation has changed the distribution channels and commercial logic creating royalty streams that are streaming-centric, increasing the role of platforms as intermediaries, and raising hard legal questions about the use of copyrighted works to train AI.⁶ These shifts require both doctrinal calibration and policy innovation. The World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), major industry reports and national copyright offices have recognized and are actively studying these transformations.

Statement of the Problem

Three interrelated problems are the focus of this study:

Allocation and enforcement of rights in an environment dominated by platforms. How should performing, publishing and sync rights be protected and enforced when distribution is host/platform-mediated and often global in scope? EU Article 17's rules on platform liability illustrate the regulatory attempts to allocate responsibilities to platforms – producing compliance costs and operational challenges.⁷

The impact of generative AI on the creation and exploitation of copyrighted works. AI systems trained on large corpora of copyrighted material raise questions about whether training constitutes reproduction or infringement, and whether AI outputs should be copyrighted or require licensing. National offices, especially the U.S. Copyright Office⁸, have produced layered reports grappling with these topics.

Fair remuneration and the fragmentation of revenue. Streaming has become the dominant revenue model for recorded music and a growing share of other media, but creators argue that the remuneration mechanics under

current licensing and collection practices do not fairly compensate songwriters, performers and smaller rights-holders⁹. Reports by industry bodies indicate streaming's dominant role and continual growth, but also reveal distributional tensions.

Research Questions

This paper addresses the following research questions:

How have performing, publishing and sync rights adapted (or failed to adapt) to the structural changes introduced by digital platforms and streaming economies?

What legal and policy responses (statutory, regulatory, collective management) are emerging globally to address platform liability, automated content management and remuneration fairness?

In what ways does utilizing copyrighted works for training and generating AI content impact the rights and protections of original creators, and what licensing or regulatory measures could address these challenges?

What practical policy and market interventions could improve fairness, legal clarity and cultural diversity without unduly chilling innovation?

Significance of Research

This research is significant because copyright is a governance mechanism for cultural and creative economies. Decisions about enforcement, licensing and exceptions will influence creator incomes, cultural diversity, and how consumers encounter creative works. The interaction between AI and copyright is particularly consequential: outcomes there could determine whether AI becomes a value-extracting technology or a regulated collaborator that compensates creators. Policymakers, CMOs, rights managers, educators and technologists all need grounded, evidence-based analysis to craft proportionate rules.

Scope and Limitation of Research

Scope: The paper focuses on performing, publishing and sync rights as they relate to music and audiovisual content, because these areas highlight the most acute conflicts (streaming, sync placements, AI-generated music or visuals). The analysis covers developed-market regulatory experiments (EU directives, US Copyright Office work) and global industry trends (IFPI/WIPO). Case law examples and policy developments up to mid-2025 are considered.

Limitations: The digital copyright landscape develops rapidly; some litigation and regulatory outcomes may change after the research cutoff used here. The study does not provide an exhaustive jurisdiction-by-jurisdiction legal survey but instead synthesizes representative legal trends and policy instruments.¹⁰ Where specific data are cited (e.g., industry revenue figures), the most recent public reports available at the time are used.

Objectives of Research

Provide a clear, practice-oriented synthesis of how performing, publishing and sync rights operate in the digital ecosystem.

Identify legal, technological and market stress points and evaluate regulatory responses.

Propose pragmatic reforms; including licensing innovations, transparency measures, and AI-specific safeguards that balance creator rights with public interest and technological progress.

Research Methodology

This is a doctrinal-empirical interdisciplinary study combining: (a) doctrinal legal analysis of statutes, directives and policy documents (e.g., DSM Directive guidance, US Copyright Office reports), (b) industry analysis based on WIPO and IFPI reporting on market structure and revenue trends, and (c) case-driven examples from litigation and regulatory initiatives (selected major decisions and policy instruments up to 2025).¹¹ Primary sources (legislation, agency reports) and reputable

secondary sources (industry reports, peer-reviewed commentary and high-quality journalism) are used. The research follows qualitative synthesis rather than original quantitative analysis. Key documents include WIPO reports, IFPI Global Music Reports, the US Copyright Office's multipart AI study, and EU guidance on Article 17.

Chapter 2: Literature Review Classic and Recent Scholarship

Research on copyright in the digital era encompasses doctrinal legal analysis, empirical examinations of market practices, and discussions on normative policy issues. Foundational works examine the economics of copyright incentives and market structure; more recent literature addresses platform liability, algorithmic enforcement, and the effects of AI. WIPO's reports provide institutional framing and data on IP's role in innovation policy, while industry reports (IFPI) document market patterns such as streaming's dominance. Recent policy briefs and law review articles analyse Article 17's implications for platforms and creative industries, and an expanding literature grapples with AI training and derivative works.

Performing Rights and Collective Management

A strong strand of literature evaluates the role of CMOs in the digital era: how they collect, distribute and negotiate rights in a global online marketplace. Collective licensing addresses transaction costs and fragmentation, but studies highlight transparency, distributional fairness (especially to performers and small publishers), and cross-border reciprocity as recurring problems. Comparative studies point to regulatory interventions rate courts, transparency mandates and reform of distribution rules as partial remedies.

Publishing and Mechanical Rights

Academic work traces the decline of mechanical download revenue and the rise of streaming royalties. Debates focus on the

allocation between authors, publishers and labels, the nature of equitable remuneration, and statutory mechanical licensing regimes (e.g., compulsory licensing in the U.S. vs negotiated licenses in other territories). Empirical analysis criticizes per-stream micro-payment models for favouring catalogue and top-streaming artists over niche creators.

Synchronization (Sync) Licensing

Sync licensing scholarship is less voluminous but crucial: sync remains a high-value, negotiation-intensive revenue stream for music in advertising, film, TV and games. Research highlights how sync deals often bypass standard CMO channels, instead relying on direct publisher/rights-owner negotiations that reflect bargaining power and the perceived brand fit.

The digital era increased demand for music in short-form video (social platforms), but monetizing these placements consistently has been legally and commercially complex.

Platforms, Automated Content Management and Article 17

Researchers and policy reports highlight that automated content recognition tools (like fingerprinting and hashing) and automatic takedown or filtering systems (used to follow laws such as EU Article 17) increase the ability to enforce copyright but also bring risks, including over-blocking, mistakes, and discouraging legal uses like parody or quoting. The studies examine how legal responsibilities are shared, the safeguards needed, and the importance of transparency in these automated systems.

AI, Training Data and Copyright Theory

Recent scholarship grapples with whether ingesting copyrighted works to train generative models is an act of reproduction or a transformative use that falls within fair use/fair dealing. Legal commentators vary from positions emphasizing market harm and the need for licensing to views that training is sufficiently transformative to be lawful. Policy documents (e.g., the U.S. Copyright Office's

multipart study)¹² reflect an ongoing, unsettled inquiry.

Chapter 3: Scheme of Study – Body of the Paper

The Current Market Landscape: Streaming, Revenues, and the Value Chain

Streaming has become the central mode of music consumption. Industry reports show continued growth in global recorded music revenues, driven by subscription streaming and ad-supported tiers; however, the share that flows to songwriters, session performers and smaller publishers is a recurring concern. Streaming's economics pro rata models, user-centric proposals, and the bargaining positions of major labels and platforms determine how mechanical and performing royalties are collected and distributed.

Implication: Performing rights societies and publishers face pressure to modernize reporting and distribution practices. Where CMOs remain inefficient or opaque, alternative direct licensing strategies (especially for sync) gain traction.

Performing Rights: Public Performance in a Networked World

Performing rights historically covered radio broadcasts, live concerts and public performances; digital streaming and webcasting extended these to online transmissions. Key issues:

Territoriality vs Global Access: Digital transmission is borderless; licensing remains territorially fragmented. Collective mechanisms and reciprocal agreements attempt mitigation but are imperfect.

Platform Mediation: Platforms often carry, stream and host performances. Rules determining platform liability (including content-sharing platforms) shape enforcement. The EU's DSM Directive (Article 17) shifted some responsibility to platforms, requiring them to obtain licenses or be held liable for unlicensed uploads prompting adoption of upload-filtering systems and negotiations between platforms

and rights-holders.

Policy Tension: Assigning liability to platforms incentivizes licensing but can produce technical overreach (false positives) and heighten compliance costs for smaller platforms.

Publishing Rights: Mechanical Reproduction and Remuneration

Mechanical rights govern reproductions (including streams, which create mechanical royalties in many jurisdictions). The core issues:

Royalty Allocation Models: Pro rata streaming pools allocate revenue by total plays, which critics say advantages hits and legacy catalogues; user-centric models distribute revenues according to individual subscriber activity but are not widely adopted.

Transparency and Metadata: Accurate identification of rights-holders (ISRCs, ISWCs, reliable metadata) is crucial. Missing metadata creates unpaid royalties and misallocation.

Statutory vs Negotiated Licensing: Some jurisdictions retain statutory mechanical licenses with set rates; others favor market negotiations. Which approach best protects creators in the face of platform power remains contested.

Sync Rights: High Value, Low Standardization

Sync licensing granting the right to synchronize music with visual content remains high-value but is characterized by bespoke negotiations. Digital opportunities (short-form video, streaming TV, games, advertising) have expanded demand but also introduced complexities:

Micro-sync and UGC: Social platforms create demand for micro-sync (short clips, user videos). Platforms' content ID and blanket licenses sometimes attempt to capture value, but not all UGC uses are fully monetized or properly licensed.

Marketplace Frictions: Sync deals depend on publisher/label negotiation, artist approval and clearances for underlying compositions and

sound recordings. Blockchain-based metadata initiatives and marketplace platforms have been proposed to streamline sync discovery and clearing, but adoption is uneven.

The AI Challenge: Training Data, Generative Outputs and Rights AI raises three discrete but connected legal issues:

Training Uses: Does copying copyrighted works into model training datasets constitute an infringing reproduction? Courts and policy bodies weigh whether such ingestion is transformative and whether it causes market harm. The U.S. Copyright Office’s multipart study engages precisely with these questions and the potential need for licensing.

AI-Produced Works: Are outputs of generative models copyrightable, and who (if anyone) is the author? The Copyright Office has issued guidance limiting registration for purely AI-generated works absent human authorship, while allowing protection for works with sufficient human creative input.¹³

Derivative Works and Market Harm: If AI outputs are close reproductions of existing songs or styles, do they supplant markets for original creators (reducing sync or publishing revenues)? Litigation is underway and developing e.g., recent high-profile suits over model training and outputs have had mixed results in U.S. courts.

The Guardian

Emerging Industry Responses: Rights organizations and some national CMOs have begun negotiating AI-specific licenses; for example, recent national initiatives to license copyrighted works for AI training with revenue-sharing or tracking provisions.¹⁴ These experiments (e.g., collective licenses in some countries) model potential market solutions to the training question.

Platform Governance: Automated Filtering, Transparency and Appeals

Automated content recognition systems (fingerprint matching, audio-fingerprinting,

hash lists, machine learning detectors) are used to detect and monetize or block copyrighted material. The trade-offs include:

Accuracy vs Speed: Automated systems scale, but err. over blocking risks lawful uses and free expression.

Transparency and Redress: The literature and policy instruments increasingly demand transparency (audit logs, reporting, takedown/appeal rights) so creators and users can challenge erroneous removals. Article 17 guidance urged procedural safeguards in platform enforcement.

Licensing Innovation: New Commercial Models

New licensing forms include direct platform-publisher deals, “value gap” negotiations (ensuring adjacent rights remuneration), AI training licenses, and registry initiatives to partner metadata with clearinghouses. Innovations in royalty accounting and distributed ledger pilots aim to improve traceability of rights and payments but face adoption barriers (cost, interoperability, legal recognition).

Chapter 4: Findings

This study’s synthesis of doctrinal materials, industry reports and policy documents yields several findings:

Streaming is mature but unevenly distributive. Streaming dominates recorded music revenues globally, yet distribution of those revenues remains concentrated, with top catalogue and major label artists capturing significant shares. This dynamic reduces per-stream returns to many songwriters and session performers, increasing reliance on sync placements and live performance income.

Platform liability regimes have real costs and benefits. Assigning liability or heightened duties to platforms (as in the EU DSM Directive) increases licensing coverage but pushes platforms to deploy automated filtering raising accuracy and free speech trade-offs.

Regulatory guidance emphasizes procedural safeguards, transparency, and proportionate remedies.

AI training and generative models create legal uncertainty but also spur licensing innovations. National copyright offices have not reached a global consensus. The U.S. Copyright Office's multipart reports highlight complex doctrinal questions particularly around training, fair use/transformational use and registration of AI-involved works while industry actors and rights organizations experiment with licensing frameworks. Recent litigation shows mixed judicial outcomes, underscoring uncertainty.

Synchronization remains a lucrative but unequalled market. Sync deals deliver outsized revenue to creators who obtain placements, but negotiation power and the fragmentation of rights can prevent smaller creators from accessing these markets. The growth of short-form video has increased demand for micro-sync opportunities but has not fully translated into proportionate revenues for all creators.

Metadata and transparency are systemic chokepoints. Missing or inaccurate metadata causes uncollected royalties and misallocation an operational problem across performing, publishing and sync contexts. Industry reports and policy proposals repeatedly emphasize improving metadata standards and interoperable registries.

Collective management organizations remain central but must modernize. CMOs and publishers are still the primary vehicles for aggregation and collection, but they need better transparency, faster distribution, AI-specific licensing capacity, and cross-border interoperability to serve rights-holders effectively.

Policy responses are heterogeneous geographically. The EU has leaned toward stricter

platform duties and procedural safeguards (Article 17 guidance), the U.S. relies heavily on case law and agency guidance (Copyright Office's AI reports), and countries differ in

collective licensing approaches creating complexity for multinational exploitation of rights.

Chapter 5: Suggestions and Conclusion Policy and Regulatory Recommendations

"Policymakers should mandate standardized and interoperable metadata registries for musical compositions and recordings, including identifiers such as ISRC, ISWC, and accurate performer attributions. Additionally, transparency requirements should be imposed on collecting societies and digital platforms to minimize orphan works and ensure proper distribution of royalties. Create calibrated liability and procedural regimes for platforms. Liability rules should incentivize licensing while embedding strong procedural safeguards: notice and counter-notice procedures, upload-filter accuracy audits, transparent matching algorithms, and accessible appeals. Blanket immunity for platforms or unbounded liability would respectively under- or over-protect creators and intermediaries.

Support experimental AI training licenses and revenue-sharing models. Given legal uncertainty, regulated or voluntary collective AI-training licensing (with accountability and tracking) can provide interim frameworks balancing innovation and fair compensation¹⁵. Pilot programs similar to recent national licensing experiments should be encouraged, with oversight to ensure fair distribution to authors and performers.

Promote user-centric or hybrid royalty distribution pilots. To address distributional concerns, regulators and industry bodies should pilot user-centric payment models alongside pro rata, assessing effects on mid-tail and niche creators.

Strengthen CMO governance and speed of distribution. CMOs should be required to adopt faster, more transparent accounting and distribution practices, with periodic audits and rights-holder access to accounting data.

Encourage marketplace tools for sync discovery

and clearance. Public-private initiatives can facilitate marketplace platforms that streamline sync discovery, metadata verification and standardized micro-sync clearing for short-form uses.

Practical Recommendations for Rights-Holders and Platforms

Rights-Holders: Invest in accurate metadata, register works in multiple registries, and consider hybrid strategies mixing collective management for mass rights with direct licensing for sync and bespoke opportunities. Monitor AI uses of your catalogue and negotiate AI-specific terms where possible. Platforms: Invest in transparent content identification systems with human review paths and clear appeals; negotiate fair blanket or direct licenses; and cooperate with CMOs and registries to reduce orphan works.

Conclusion

Copyright's fundamental balance protecting creators while enabling social access remains a normative anchor even as technology reshapes distribution and creation. The digital era has amplified the need for legal and market adaptation: clearer and more interoperable rights infrastructure (metadata and registries), calibrated platform duties that avoid chilling lawful expression, and licensing innovations that reconcile AI development with creator remuneration. While legal uncertainty (especially around AI training and authorship) will

persist in the near term, a mix of regulatory safeguards, collective licensing experimentation, and market innovation offers a path toward an ecosystem that sustains creators, supports technological advancement, and preserves public interest.

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