

E-Business Conference Addresses Digital Ownership Issues



Ownership and use of digital material were primary themes of the Business School's fifth-annual E-Business conference. The February 11 event *Northwest eBusiness 2005: Capturing Value in the Information Economy* provided a forum for industry leaders and UW academics to discuss ownership and rights management in the face of business's new, high-tech landscape.

An issue at the forefront of the digital revolution is that of the so-called "open source" software movement, which mandates that software source code should be made available to users for product customization. Major arguments on both sides of the ongoing debate were featured in a conference breakout panel.

Jeff Ayars, a general manager at digital media provider RealNetworks, disputed the image of open source advocates as "zealots" who are "clouded by religious fervor." Ayars compared the potential technological advancements offered by open source to the scientific revolution sparked by Newton's discovery of his laws of motion. Ayars humorously likened corporations' "closed source" policies to a scenario in which Newton keeps the laws of motion secret, and begins selling a line of weapons that maximize on his knowledge.

Martin Taylor, general manager of platform strategy at Microsoft, supported his company's decision not to pursue an open source business model, and pointed out that keeping source code private spares individual users the burden of quality control. Taylor said the judicious use of open source can enhance free enterprise, and added that Microsoft views open source software much the same as any other competing product.

"We're not actually anti-open source," Taylor told conference participants.

Steve Davis, president and CEO of Corbis, a virtual image warehouse and intellectual property rights management company, presented a graphics-laden multimedia keynote speech on the mandate of the digital rights industry to "marry art, commerce and technology in a meaningful way."

Describing the emergence of the digital imagery property rights arena, Davis said that some critics worry that the Internet revolution has "created a monster" in the creative fields, in that widespread ease of digital product distribution leads to a belief that "copyright should simply go away."

Davis spoke of the challenges of thriving in the digital licensing field, stressing to the audience, "98 percent of what we sell, we don't own."

"We've got one of the hardest challenges in the world: how to market to marketers."

Responding to the common perception that virtual property copyright is difficult to protect, Davis cited monitoring systems such as digital watermarking of copyrighted material. "Creatives are probably better protected today than they were 10 years ago in an offline environment," he asserted.

The conference also included panel discussions on the safeguarding of digital art and consumer privacy protection in the Internet age.

Complete coverage of *Northwest eBusiness 2005: Capturing Value in the Information Economy*, including free links to a video library of all panels and talks, is available at www.ebiz.washington.edu.

— Aaron Ragan-Fore