

STATEMENT OF REP. JOHN CONYERS, JR. Introduction of the "Freelance Writers and Artists Protection Act of 2002" May 2, 2002

The advent of the Internet has created an entirely new market for the distribution of creative content, such as music, movies, news articles, and photographs. The desire for instant information has made it more important than ever to get that work out to millions of people quickly and to have the rights to the distribution of articles and graphics cleared immediately.

As we saw from last year's New York Times v. Tasini case, however, the creators of information – freelance writers, illustrators, cartoonists, graphic designers, and photographers – often have not shared in the benefits of this new market. In some cases, large media conglomerates often force creators to sign away the rights to their works through "take it or leave it" – or adhesion – contracts if they wish to have them published and distributed.

Individual writers and artists don't stand a chance of negotiating favorable terms and fees when they must go up against media giants. And because many creators are not "employees" of the publishers, the antitrust laws forbid them from bargaining as a unit or even sharing information about the pricing of their work. Each freelancer must, therefore, go it alone and negotiate individually with the publishers who control the media outlets.

I believe that copyright protection should benefit individual creators – not only media corporations. To remedy the imbalances between the media giants and freelance creators, Congressman Cannon and I are introducing the "Freelance Writers and Artists Protection Act of 2002."

First, this legislation gives freelance writers and artists an antitrust exemption so they can present a united front against the big media companies who have been forcing them to sign non-negotiable contracts that surrender all their rights. In doing so, the bill makes it easier for freelancers to bargain fairly for their rights as a collective.

In addition, because of the speed and nature of the publishing industry, these same freelance writers and artists often do not have time to have their works protected under the copyright laws before the publications they go into are printed. As a result, the creators may not receive relief under the copyright laws if their works are stolen. The bill remedies this by automatically protecting the individual works when the publication receives copyright protection.

Finally, this bill addresses the problem of the theft of creative works that have not been released. There are creators who decide not to release an article, book, movie, or song, but others steal them and infringe on the creators' rights. The criminal copyright law penalizes those who infringe works having a retail value of \$1,000 or more, but works that have not been released are not protected because they have no retail value. They are,

however, valuable to their creators, and we need to close the loophole in the law that allows the theft of these unreleased or unpublished works. For that reason, the bill amends the law to say that the theft of unpublished works also can be a criminal offense.

I hope this bill can be the start of productive discussions in the House and particularly in the Judiciary Committee about how we can enhance the power of freelance writers and artists and how we can protect their work.



Representative John Conyers (center) discusses his legislation with NWU President Jonathan Tasini (left) and Graphic Artists Guild representative Sherrill Medberry (right). Photo by Rick Reinhard