GLOBE EDITORIAL

Let iTunes be iTunes

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HAZMAT-SUITED protesters descended on the Apple store in Cambridge recently, part of a nationwide series of demonstrations against restrictions that Apple places on music sold through its iTunes online store. The green-suited protesters were colorful but misguided. Apple has every right to sell music this way as long as copyright holders agree and consumers are informed beforehand.

The protests are part of a movement in the United States and Europe to get Apple to allow its songs to be put on any portable device. The consumer ombudsman in Norway thinks Apple is in violation of that nation’s laws. After all, shouldn’t consumers, once they purchase a song, do with it as they like?

The answer was “yes” when music was sold only on records and tapes, and for the first few years of the compact-disc era. Importing songs to portable devices usually meant making a single cassette tape.

All that changed when the compact disc was mated to the personal computer. With the help of Napster and other file-sharing programs, millions of digital copies were traded across cyberspace, to the delight of consumers and the rage of music companies and the other copyright holders. If copyright means anything in the age of the Internet, there have to be technical limits on the way music is swapped and played.

Apple does it this way. Every song on iTunes is encoded in the proprietary AAC format. It can be played on the Apple iPod and any other Apple-approved music device. A consumer can burn the song onto a compact disc, and from there it can be switched into formats used by other music devices. Microsoft has a competing format called WMA, with similar restrictions, but because Apple dominates the business, it gets most of the attention.

John Sullivan, organizer of the Cambridge protest, said by telephone that six participants wore green hazmat suits to suggest that Apple is selling defective products dangerous to consumers. But the iTunes-iPod system works superbly together, and the songs play exactly as Apple says they will. Its biggest defect, if the London Mail on Sunday is to be believed, is that iPod players are made under sweatshop conditions in China.

A federal court ordered Napster shut in 2001, but it re-emerged two years later as a service that charges a monthly fee. Rogue websites around the world still make it easy to download songs at no cost. Apple succeeded by creating well-designed players and persuading music companies to allow the sale of copy-protected songs for 99 cents each. If the copyright holders decide that they want songs to be moved freely between different brands of players, then so be it. Otherwise the protesters should focus on the sweatshop and leave the Apple music system alone.

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