

Policy Solutions for Open Access and Digital Collaboration: Preventing Copyright Trolling in Creative Commons

Onoriode Reginald Aziza¹, Portia Oduro², Ngodoo Joy Sam-Bulya³, Ngozi Samuel Uzougbo⁴

¹ Independent Researcher, Lagos Nigeria

² Energy Law Center, Paul M. Hebert Law Center, Louisiana State University, USA

³ Independent Researcher, Abuja, Nigeria

⁴ Independent Researcher; Columbus Ohio, USA

Corresponding author: reginaldaziza@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper reviews the issue of copyright trolling within the Creative Commons framework and proposes specific policy interventions to address its harmful impact on open access and digital collaboration. Copyright trolling, where bad-faith actors exploit legal ambiguities in licenses, stifles innovation and collaboration by imposing legal risks on creators and users. The paper advocates for clearer attribution standards to reduce misunderstandings, deterrent mechanisms like fines and stricter validation processes to discourage misuse, and a reevaluation of enforcement mechanisms, including alternative dispute resolution methods. By providing actionable recommendations for policymakers, copyright agencies, and platform developers, this review highlights the urgent need for collaboration among stakeholders to protect the integrity of Creative Commons and foster a more open, collaborative digital environment.

Keywords: Copyright trolling, Creative Commons, Open access, Policy reform, Attribution standards

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I. Introduction

1.1 Context and Problem Statement

Digital platforms have revolutionized how we create, share, and access content, with Creative Commons (CC) licenses significantly promoting open access and collaborative innovation. These licenses allow creators to share their work freely while retaining certain rights, fostering a culture of sharing, innovation, and global collaboration. However, despite their intended purpose, Creative Commons licenses have also opened up new avenues for exploitation, particularly through a practice known as copyright trolling (Gasparyan, Yessirkepov, Voronov, Koroleva, & Kitas, 2019).

Copyright trolling involves the malicious abuse of copyright laws, where individuals or entities make unjustified claims to copyright infringement, often seeking to extort settlements or intimidate legitimate users (Zhang, 2023). This practice, while commonly associated with traditional copyright, has now found its way into the realm of Creative Commons. Trolling within CC licenses undermines the very purpose of these open-access agreements, stifling collaboration and innovation. The flexibility and ease of use that CC licenses offer are being exploited by bad actors who manipulate the vague boundaries of attribution and usage rights to claim infringement where none exists (Radsch, 2023).

This misuse harms individual creators and discourages others from participating in open-access projects, fearing legal repercussions from trolling. The need for clearer standards and robust enforcement mechanisms has become increasingly evident as copyright trolling continues to disrupt the balance between creator rights and user access in the digital space (Keller, 2018).

1.2 Research Focus

This paper focuses on advocating for policy reforms that address the growing issue of copyright trolling within the Creative Commons framework. It seeks to highlight the deficiencies in current licensing structures and enforcement mechanisms that allow trolls to exploit ambiguities in the system. While CC licenses aim to support collaborative innovation, the lack of clarity regarding attribution and usage rights has created loopholes that malicious actors can exploit. This paper argues that reform is urgently needed to ensure that Creative Commons remains a tool for innovation rather than a battleground for legal disputes.

By exploring various policy interventions, this paper aims to propose concrete solutions to address the weaknesses in the current system. These interventions are designed to protect both creators and users while maintaining the fundamental principles of open access and collaboration. Specifically, this paper will focus on three key areas of reform: clearer attribution standards, deterrent mechanisms to prevent trolling, and a reevaluation of enforcement mechanisms within the Creative Commons framework.

To prevent copyright trolling and preserve the integrity of Creative Commons licenses, policymakers and stakeholders must implement a series of targeted reforms that clarify attribution requirements, introduce deterrent mechanisms against malicious actors, and improve enforcement procedures. This paper proposes specific interventions that would safeguard open-access collaboration while deterring copyright trolls, ensuring a balanced and fair system for creators and users alike.

II. Overview of Copyright Trolling in Creative Commons

2.1 Definition and Mechanisms of Copyright Trolling

Copyright trolling is a form of legal abuse where individuals or organizations exploit copyright laws to seek financial gain or control over content, often through dubious claims of infringement. These claims are typically made in bad faith, aiming to threaten or coerce settlements from individuals or companies, even when no actual violation has occurred (Smith, 2021). In the traditional sense, copyright trolling targets users who unintentionally or unknowingly infringe on copyrighted material, often relying on the complexity and ambiguity of copyright laws to intimidate the accused into paying settlements to avoid costly legal battles. This exploitation extends beyond legitimate enforcement of intellectual property rights, creating a chilling effect on creativity and innovation (Shisha, 2021).

Copyright trolling has taken on new dimensions within the context of Creative Commons (CC) licenses. Creative commons licenses are designed to facilitate the sharing of creative works under specific conditions, allowing creators to retain certain rights while enabling others to use, share, and adapt their works. These licenses have been pivotal in promoting open access to content and supporting a collaborative culture of knowledge sharing. However, the very openness that makes Creative Commons attractive is also what exposes it to abuse (Tang, 2020).

Copyright trolls in the Creative Commons realm often manipulate vague or ambiguous terms within the licenses, particularly those related to attribution, usage rights, and modifications (Longan, 2021). For instance, some trolls may exploit the attribution requirements by claiming that users have not adequately credited the original creator, even when the user has followed the license's guidelines in good faith. Others may assert that the terms of the license have been violated in ways that the average user does not clearly define or understand. This manipulation creates uncertainty for content creators, researchers, and digital collaborators who rely on the flexibility of Creative Commons for their work (Fiesler & Bruckman, 2019).

One notable example is when a troll falsely claims that a user has violated a Creative Commons license's "non-commercial" clause. This clause is often subject to broad interpretation, and copyright trolls take advantage of this ambiguity by accusing users of commercial infringement in cases that may fall within a gray area—such as using content on a monetized platform like YouTube, even if the user is not directly profiting from the work. These tactics force users into a position where defending themselves against such claims is expensive and time-consuming, prompting many to settle the dispute to avoid litigation, even if they are not at fault (Stewart, 2021).

2.2 Impact on Open Access and Collaboration

Copyright trolling in Creative Commons undermines the very principles of open access and collaboration, which are fundamental to the license's purpose. Open access aims to make knowledge and creative works freely available to the public, removing barriers to information sharing, innovation, and cultural development (Nagaraj, 2018). Creative commons licenses embody this philosophy by enabling creators to distribute their work with the confidence that others can build upon it without facing legal obstacles, provided they comply with the specific terms of the license. However, copyright trolling erodes this trust, exploiting the framework designed to support openness (Willinsky, 2022).

One of the most damaging effects of copyright trolling in the context of Creative Commons is the legal uncertainty it creates for both creators and users. The fear of legal retaliation discourages individuals and organizations from using content under CC licenses, even when they have done everything to comply with the terms (Land, 2019). This is especially problematic for non-profit organizations, educational institutions, independent artists, and small creators who may not have the legal resources to defend themselves against frivolous claims. The potential for abuse stifles creativity and collaboration, as users become wary of participating in the open access ecosystem out of fear of being targeted by trolls (Posetti, Shabbir, Maynard, Bontcheva, & Aboulez, 2021).

Moreover, copyright trolling diminishes the spirit of innovation that Creative Commons was designed to promote. Innovation, particularly in digital spaces, often relies on the ability to reuse, remix, and repurpose

content. For example, creators and researchers might adapt digital media, datasets, or open-source code to create new works or develop innovative solutions. However, the specter of copyright trolling creates a chilling effect, where users are reluctant to engage with open-access content, fearing they may unintentionally infringe on ambiguous or poorly understood license terms. This leads to a reduction in the flow of ideas and limits the potential for collaborative innovation (Drazewski, 2024).

In addition to stifling creativity and collaboration, copyright trolling can also lead to a broader public distrust of open-access frameworks. The more cases of trolling that emerge, the more hesitant creators and users become about participating in these systems. This is particularly damaging for the broader movement advocating for open access to information, knowledge, and cultural works, as it undermines the credibility and reliability of the Creative Commons licenses. When trust in these licenses erodes, the incentives for creators to share their work freely also diminish, threatening the viability of the open-access movement as a whole (Willinsky, 2022).

Finally, copyright trolling also has significant implications for education and research, where open access is critical to knowledge dissemination (Gumb & Cross, 2022). Many academic and research institutions rely on Creative Commons licenses to access scholarly articles, data sets, and educational resources, particularly in developing countries or underfunded institutions with limited access to proprietary content. The threat of legal challenges stemming from copyright trolling can deter these institutions from using open-access materials, depriving students and researchers of vital resources. This exacerbates inequalities in access to knowledge and hinders academic collaboration across borders (Cruz, Seo, & Rex, 2018).

III. Proposed Policy Interventions

3.1 Clearer Attribution Standards

One of the primary vulnerabilities in the Creative Commons (CC) framework, which copyright trolls exploit, is the ambiguity surrounding attribution standards. Attribution—the requirement to credit the original creator—lies at the heart of most CC licenses, but its broad interpretation allows bad actors to take advantage of creators and users alike. In many cases, copyright trolls argue that a user has failed to provide proper attribution, even when the user has acted in good faith. This creates a situation in which users are reluctant to use Creative Commons material for fear of unintentionally infringing on the terms, thus stifling creativity and collaboration. Therefore, one of the most crucial policy interventions is the establishment of clearer, more precise attribution guidelines to prevent trolling abuses.

To address this, reforms must focus on standardizing attribution requirements across different Creative Commons licenses. Currently, the general guideline requires users to give credit in a manner "reasonable to the medium or means" of the work. This flexibility can be interpreted in various ways, leading to confusion and potential misuse by trolls. Policymakers could create a more uniform framework that outlines specific requirements based on the type of content, platform, and medium used. For example, digital content could have standardized formats for attribution, such as a specific location for the credit within a website or a predefined template for attributions in videos. This would reduce ambiguity and create a consistent understanding for all users, minimizing the chances of accidental infringement and subsequent trolling claims.

Moreover, Creative Commons could develop tools that assist users in automatically generating correct attribution formats based on the type of license. A tool that provides users with a downloadable or copy-paste-ready attribution credit would streamline the process, making it easier for users to comply with the license's terms and harder for trolls to claim that attribution was incorrect. This technical solution would complement legal reforms, ensuring both clarity and user-friendliness.

3.2 Deterrent Mechanisms

Along with clearer attribution standards, there must be mechanisms in place to deter bad-faith actors from exploiting Creative Commons licenses through copyright trolling. Currently, copyright trolls can engage in this practice with little to no repercussions, as many cases do not make it to court, and settlements are often sought to avoid lengthy legal battles. By introducing deterrent mechanisms, the legal landscape can shift to protect creators and users from such predatory behavior (Latilo, Uzougbo, Ugwu, & Oduro, 2024a).

One proposed mechanism is the introduction of fines or penalties for entities that are proven to engage in bad-faith copyright enforcement. If a user or organization is found to be intentionally misusing the system for profit or malicious purposes, they should face legal consequences. This could be implemented through copyright reform legislation that specifically addresses Creative Commons or open-access content, requiring trolls to bear the financial burden of their actions. A financial penalty system would discourage copyright trolling, as the risk of incurring substantial fines would outweigh the potential benefits of extorting settlements.

Another deterrent mechanism could involve stricter validation processes before a copyright claim can be made. In the current system, trolls often rely on the lack of oversight to push fraudulent claims. Reforms could introduce mandatory steps that require claimants to provide substantial proof of ownership and detailed evidence of the alleged infringement before a claim can proceed. This could be monitored by independent copyright agencies or

by platforms hosting the content, ensuring that only legitimate claims are filed. Such measures would create a barrier to frivolous claims, reducing the number of trolling attempts (Ekpe, 2022).

In addition to these legal and procedural mechanisms, education and awareness campaigns targeting both creators and users would play a key role in deterring trolls. Many users are unaware of their rights under Creative Commons licenses and fall prey to misleading claims. Policymakers and Creative Commons administrators should invest in resources that educate users on proper attribution, navigating disputes, and recognizing and challenging bad-faith claims. Empowering users with knowledge would significantly diminish the space for trolls to operate.

3.3 Enforcement Mechanisms

Finally, a reevaluation of the current enforcement mechanisms surrounding copyright disputes within the Creative Commons framework is necessary. The existing mechanisms tend to favor those who can afford lengthy legal battles, leaving small creators, individual users, and non-profit organizations vulnerable. Alternative dispute resolution (ADR) processes and digital tools could provide a more accessible and equitable system for resolving disputes.

One recommendation is to implement a formalized mediation process for copyright disputes within Creative Commons. Mediation, a key form of ADR, allows both parties to resolve their issues through negotiation facilitated by a neutral third party. This process is less costly and less time-consuming than going through the court system, making it particularly beneficial for users who may not have the resources to fight a legal battle. Establishing an independent board or commission to oversee Creative Commons mediation would ensure that disputes are resolved fairly and efficiently, protecting creators and users from litigation's financial and emotional toll (Latilo, Uzougbo, Ugwu, & Oduro, 2024b).

Additionally, digital tools could be developed to automate certain aspects of dispute resolution. For example, platforms that host Creative Commons content could implement algorithms that detect potential violations early and automatically notify users if they are at risk of infringing on a license. These tools could also facilitate communication between the content creator and the user, allowing disputes to be resolved informally before escalating to legal claims. By leveraging technology to streamline the resolution process, Creative Commons could create a user-friendly enforcement system that both deters trolls and supports legitimate claims.

Moreover, policymakers could consider introducing a "safe harbor" provision for users of Creative Commons content. Similar to existing provisions for internet service providers, a safe harbor would protect users who have made a reasonable effort to comply with a CC license from legal liability, even if a minor or unintentional violation occurs. This would give users greater confidence in using Creative Commons content, knowing they are protected from unjustified legal action (Reid, 2019).

IV. Policy Advocacy: Recommendations

4.1 For Policymakers

Policymakers play a critical role in ensuring that copyright laws and open-access frameworks like Creative Commons licenses are balanced and effective in promoting creativity, collaboration, and innovation. One of the most important steps they can take is to reform legislation to address the gaps that allow copyright trolling to thrive. This begins with introducing clearer definitions and boundaries for Creative Commons license terms, such as refining the language around attribution, "non-commercial" use, and "share alike" requirements. Ambiguities in these terms often provide loopholes that trolls exploit. By creating well-defined legal standards, policymakers can reduce the potential for abuse and foster a safer environment for creators and users (Ekpe, 2022).

Additionally, policymakers should consider implementing penalties for individuals and organizations found to be engaging in bad-faith copyright enforcement. Introducing fines or sanctions against copyright trolls would act as a deterrent, discouraging predatory behavior. These penalties should be proportionate to the damages caused by trolling activities, ensuring that those who seek to manipulate the system for profit are held accountable. Furthermore, policymakers could create specific provisions that support the protection of open-access content, including a "good faith" clause that shields users who unintentionally violate minor terms of a Creative Commons license but have otherwise acted in compliance (Kiss, 2024).

To further protect content creators and users, policymakers should advocate for the establishment of an independent body or commission tasked with overseeing Creative Commons disputes. Such a body would ensure that legal claims related to Creative Commons licenses are handled with fairness and transparency. This body could provide alternative dispute resolution (ADR) services, such as mediation, to resolve conflicts without resorting to lengthy and expensive legal processes. ADR mechanisms would be particularly beneficial for small creators and non-profit organizations who may lack the resources to defend themselves in court (Araujo, Safradin, & Brito, 2019).

4.2 For Copyright Agencies

Copyright agencies are integral to the oversight and enforcement of intellectual property laws, and their role in curbing copyright trolling can be strengthened through proactive engagement in the open-access ecosystem. One of the primary responsibilities of these agencies should be to oversee the implementation of updated Creative Commons standards, ensuring that they are applied consistently across different platforms and jurisdictions. Agencies should work closely with policymakers to develop guidelines for Creative Commons licensing that leave less room for misinterpretation or manipulation (Rustambekov, Gulyamov, & Ubaydullaeva, 2024).

Copyright agencies should also be empowered to investigate and penalize bad-faith actors who misuse Creative Commons licenses. Establishing a formal complaint system where creators and users can report instances of copyright trolling would allow agencies to identify trends and take action against repeat offenders. These agencies should have the authority to enforce financial penalties and corrective measures for those found to be exploiting Creative Commons, providing a strong deterrent to trolling activities (Marsden, Meyer, & Brown, 2020).

In addition, copyright agencies can take on an educational role by providing resources and training for creators and users on how to properly navigate Creative Commons licenses. Many instances of copyright trolling stem from users' lack of understanding of the license terms or how to correctly attribute content (Cohen, Loren, Okediji, & O'Rourke, 2019). Copyright agencies can collaborate with platforms to disseminate this information and ensure that users have easy access to the knowledge they need to comply with the licenses. Educational initiatives could include webinars, online tutorials, and clear documentation that simplifies the complexities of copyright law for non-experts (Crews, 2020).

4.3 For Platform Developers

Platform developers, especially those who host Creative Commons content, play a pivotal role in mitigating the risks of copyright trolling. By integrating better attribution and anti-trolling tools into their systems, platforms can help prevent abuse and protect their users. One key recommendation is for developers to implement automated attribution systems that generate appropriate credits based on the content's license. This could be achieved through a tool that analyzes the type of Creative Commons license attached to a work and provides a standardized, ready-to-use attribution template that users can copy and paste into their own work. This feature would eliminate confusion over attribution and reduce the chances of accidental infringement, giving users more confidence when working with Creative Commons content (Radsch, 2023).

In addition to attribution tools, platforms should consider incorporating built-in systems for monitoring potential misuse of Creative Commons licenses. For instance, platforms could use machine learning algorithms to scan for patterns of trolling behavior, such as repeated or questionable copyright claims from the same source. If suspicious activity is detected, the platform could flag the user or content for review before any claims are filed, thus preventing bad-faith actors from exploiting users through spurious claims (Golf-Papez & Veer, 2022). Furthermore, platforms should establish transparent dispute resolution processes that allow users to challenge copyright claims without immediately resorting to legal action. Platforms could offer mediation services or internal review boards that resolve disputes over Creative Commons content. These systems would provide an accessible avenue for users to defend themselves against copyright trolls without the financial burden of going to court. By adopting these protective measures, platforms can contribute to a healthier, more collaborative digital environment where the principles of open access are upheld, and users are shielded from exploitation (Savelyev, 2018).

V. Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the growing issue of copyright trolling within the Creative Commons framework and proposed actionable solutions to mitigate its impact on open access and digital collaboration. One of the core problems lies in the ambiguity of attribution standards, which allows bad-faith actors to exploit creators and users alike. The proposal to implement clearer, standardized attribution guidelines would significantly reduce the risk of unintentional infringements and prevent trolls from capitalizing on the confusion. Additionally, deterrent mechanisms, such as financial penalties and stricter validation processes for copyright claims, would discourage bad-faith actors from exploiting the system for personal gain. Finally, a reevaluation of enforcement mechanisms, including the introduction of alternative dispute resolution processes and digital tools for monitoring and resolving potential violations, is critical for protecting users from frivolous claims while promoting a fair and accessible system.

These policy interventions, aimed at reforming the Creative Commons framework, emphasize the need for a more transparent and secure environment for both content creators and users. The focus on clearer rules, stronger deterrents, and accessible enforcement methods aligns with the goal of fostering collaboration and innovation in the digital space, where open access is critical.

The urgency of policy reform in Creative Commons cannot be overstated. Copyright trolling is not just a legal inconvenience; it poses a fundamental threat to the principles of open access, stifling creativity and innovation. Therefore, policymakers, copyright agencies, and platform developers must collaborate to create a robust legal and technical framework that addresses the vulnerabilities in the current system. Policymakers must prioritize legislative reforms that protect users and creators from exploitation, while copyright agencies need to take a proactive role in overseeing the fair implementation of these reforms. Meanwhile, platform developers should integrate user-friendly attribution and anti-trolling tools into their systems, ensuring that users can confidently engage with Creative Commons content.

Ultimately, the protection of open access requires a collective effort from all stakeholders. Only through collaboration can we ensure that the digital environment remains a space of creativity, innovation, and fairness, safeguarding the rights of all involved while fostering the growth of shared knowledge and creative works. The time for action is now, and these reforms are essential to ensuring that the Creative Commons framework can continue to thrive.

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