Grappling with the culture of free

By Clyde Haberman, New York Times

Once upon a time, a new technology happened along. It was called radio. Soon enough, some people began plucking wireless transmissions out of the air for their own purposes.

One clever young man in Washington figured out how to intercept messages that Navy units sent to one another.

“He has represented himself to be at distant naval stations or at sea on warships equipped with wireless apparatus,” a magazine called *Electrical World* reported in 1907. Back then, this fellow’s actions were not unlawful. They amounted nonetheless to a form of piracy.

As radio grew more sophisticated, so did those intent on beating the system. In 1960s Britain, radio pirates flourished on unlicensed stations that broadcast from ships anchored beyond territorial limits. They found eager audiences in young people who tuned in for the latest from the Rolling Stones, the Kinks and the Who. (Talkin’ ′bout my generation.)

Then the world went digital. Naturally, pirates tagged along. One of them, the online sharing service Napster, forms the core of this Retro Report offering, the final installment in the current series of video documentaries examining the consequences of major news stories from the past.

Napster did not last long, two years. But for a while at the dawn of this century it claimed to have 70 million registered users. It spawned a host of Internet music-swapping providers, more than a few of them falling on the dubious side of the law. Most important, it irrevocably altered not only the way in which Americans absorbed music but also their belief system

in what they should pay.

The conviction theologically held by many boiled down to a single word: nothing.

“You have a generation of people now who expect their music for free,” Greg Hammer, managing director of Red Bull Records, a branch of the energy-drink company, told *Retro Report*. “It’s very difficult to change.”

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