

EMI's Offer of DRM-Free Music An Interesting Test

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EMI's [announcement](#) [2] this week that it will make its music available on iTunes in a DRM-free format is a very welcome development. Regardless of what you think about DRM -- and CDT is not opposed to it -- giving consumers a broader range of choices is crucial for creating a more vibrant online music marketplace. EMI's announcement represents a significant new choice, in two respects. First, while independent music labels have been offering online music without DRM for some time through services like eMusic, EMI becomes the first major music label to offer a DRM-free online option for a large portion of its catalog. And second, Apple's iTunes, the dominant online music store, has not previously sold tracks that could easily be transferred to non-iPod portable devices. When iTunes sells EMI music without DRM, the music won't be tied to the Apple platform. It will be interesting to see how consumers exercise this new choice. iTunes will continue to offer regular tracks with DRM for \$.99, alongside the new DRM-free tracks with higher sound quality for \$1.29. So this will be at least a partial test of how consumers feel about DRM and whether they care enough to pay extra to avoid it. I say "partial test" for two reasons. First, since the new higher priced tracks will be not just DRM-free but also higher audio quality, the motivations behind consumer purchasing decisions may not be entirely clear. For example, some audiophile consumers may choose the DRM-free version for reasons unrelated to their opinion of DRM. Other consumers might prefer DRM-free music, but not want to pay for premium audio quality they don't feel they need. Second, there remains the question of how many consumers really know what DRM does. Will mainstream consumers understand, when offered the same song at two prices, what the difference is? I think this will depend to a substantial extent on the interface iTunes develops for presenting the choice to its customers. When a person goes to buy a song, will there be a clear explanation of what "DRM-free" means in concrete terms? Will there be, for example, a link to a description of Apple's FairPlay DRM and the usage limitations it entails? If the interface offers enough context to promote informed consumer choice, it may have the side effect of increasing the public's awareness of DRM and the way DRM can affect uses of digital media.

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