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Cultural Capital and the Material Politics of Movie Piracy

Siva Vaidhyanathan argues that inexpensive and mobile material formats (like the cassette tape) democratize access to cultural capital by mitigating financial and geographic barriers to popular media. I investigate the applicability of this principle to the bootleg DVD economy in Montreal, Canada, considering the bootleg's pathways from Hollywood studios to corner stores in the city's economically-vulnerable immigrant neighborhoods. Montreal became the target of US industry alarm and increased law enforcement efforts after California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger labeled it the international epicenter of movie piracy in 2007. My research shows that Montreal is actually rather typical in its participation in a global network of grey labor and alternative commerce, a network based in quotidian urban spaces. The illegal status of the commonplace bootleg DVD foregrounds the disparity between existing intellectual property regimes and culturally legitimate, potentially progressive, popular practices.