THE TROLL NEXT DOOR

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ABSTRACT

The term Patent Troll is increasingly permeating news headlines. This comment explains where the term came from and how the changing landscape of patent enforcement has contributed to the evolution of the Patent Troll. Some have suggested that segregating Patent Trolls from other patent enforcers will solve many of the patent system’s woes. This comment analyzes proposed ways of distinguishing Patent Trolls and reveals them all as prejudicial and ineffective. The use of the term Patent Troll is a mask for underlying fears based on real shortcomings in the patent system, which need to be addressed.
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INTRODUCTION

An alarming problem has surfaced in the headlines lately: “Patent Troll Menace,” “Lawmakers want ‘Patent Troll’ Crackdown,” “Patent Troll Bites Google.” It sounds scary, but what does it really mean? Although it has no official definition, the label “Patent Troll” is used with increasing frequency in a vague and subjective manner.

Patent Troll is a derogatory term used to describe a unique type of patent enforcer that has emerged over the past decade. Assistant general counsel for Intel, Peter Detkin, coined the term in 2001. He defined a Patent Troll as an entity that makes money from a patent solely through litigation or licensing and not from manufacturing or developing the patented invention.

Recent definitions of the term Patent Troll have become sharply critical. Yahoo!, Inc. defined Patent Trolls as “entities whose primary purpose is to prey on innovators who actually produce societally valuable products – abuse the patent system by obtaining patents for the purpose of coercing settlements from such innovators.”

The term Patent Troll is used as a verb in some cases, but is most commonly used as a subversive and ugly label. Patent trolling, as a verb, is used to describe the action of hunting down and acquiring unused patents to enforce against any company using similar technology to...
the patent. Patent trolling is also used to describe situations where a patent holder accuses infringement and threatens injunctive action against many companies that might pay a licensing fee, then sits back and waits for a payoff. When used as a label, Patent Troll conjures images of an archaic ogre-like monster and vilifies a type of patent enforcer that threatens businesses with unfounded patent infringement litigation solely for the purpose of monetary gain.

The most disparaged type of Patent Troll is one who purchases a patent for a reduced price at a bankruptcy auction, while having no intention to manufacture a product or to innovate further with the invention. This type of Patent Troll then seeks out corporations that appear to be infringing on their newly acquired patent and sends demand letters threatening the companies with injunctions in order to extort licensing fees.

Companies are compelled to pay the fees because injunctions can have extremely severe economic consequences and can significantly damage reputations. For instance, in Polaroid Corp. v. Eastman Kodak Co., Polaroid sued Kodak for infringement on its instant camera patents and obtained an injunction. Kodak argued that the injunction would cause the loss of 4,500 jobs, $200 million in plant and equipment costs, and would injure Kodak's customers and goodwill. However, the court was not persuaded by these arguments, and it upheld the injunction against Kodak.

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11 Patent Law Reform: Injunctions and Damages: Hearing on H.R. 2795 Before the Subcomm. on Intellectual Property of the S. Comm. on the Judiciary, 109th Cong. (2005) (statement of Jonathan Band); see also Brief of Time Warner, Inc. et al. as Amici Curiae in Support of Petitioner at 2, eBay, Inc. v. MercExchange, L.L.C., 126 S. Ct. 1837 (2006) (No. 05-130). The licensing fee demanded by the troll rarely reflects the true technological value of the patent they are asserting. Id. at 7. Since the alleged infringer has already built a manufacturing process and marketable product incorporating the patent, the troll attempts to extort close to the cost that the company would incur by redesigning manufacturing of their product around the patent, not the probable cost of licensing the patent before the company had built their manufacturing process. Id. at 23.

12 Brief of Time Warner, Inc. et al., supra note 11, at 19.


14 See Jeffrey D. Sullivan, *Vanquishing the Patent Trolls*, NEWS XCHANGE, April/May 2005, at 6, http://www.bakerbotts.com/files/Publication/49e475843-6976-45da-982f-2e4f2c170f3/Presentation/PublicationAttachment/8c05320-b11b-4b7b-b1b-3663a5ed90f/LESBI%20April%202005.pdf. "[A] cottage industry has sprung up wherein opportunistic individuals form holding companies for the principal purpose of acquiring, and asserting, broadly (if vaguely) worded patents against entire industries, with the goal of extracting license fees from multiple defendants." Id.

15 See Brief of Time Warner, Inc. et al., supra note 11, at 5.


17 Id.

18 Id. at *6. "[T]he harm Kodak will suffer [by the injunction] simply mirrors the success it has enjoyed in the field of instant photography." Id.

I find that the public interest will not be disserved by issuance of an injunction . . . and that the public interest to be served by protection of the nation’s patent system outweighs any temporary inconvenience or one-time costs associated with staff training or other costs associated with change-over to another model.

Id. at *8-9 (quoting Shiley, Inc. v. Bentley Labs., Inc., 601 F.Supp. 964, 971 (C.D. Cal. 1985)). See generally ADAM B. JAFFE & JOSH LERNER, INNOVATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS 113 (Princeton University Press 2004) (noting that The Supreme Court refused to hear the appeal of this ruling and Kodak still had to endure a trial to determine damages for past infringement, which lasted ninety-six days and ended with the court assigning damages for Polaroid of $909 million in lost profits, reasonable royalties, and interest).
It can also be extraordinarily expensive to litigate a patent infringement claim.\textsuperscript{19} The American Intellectual Property Law Association estimates that litigation costs to each party range from $500,000 to over $4 million, depending on the amount of money at stake in a given case.\textsuperscript{20} The larger the damage award sought by the patent holder, the greater the chance that the litigation will be lengthy and expensive.\textsuperscript{21} For example, the Polaroid case was litigated for more than nine years, culminating in a settlement of $925 million.\textsuperscript{22} Even if the Patent Troll’s targets decide to put time and money into litigating the claim, the troll has usually acquired the patent for a nominal fee and has far less at stake than its opponent in a typical suit.\textsuperscript{23} If the court finds no infringement or even invalidates the patent, the Patent Troll may nonetheless retain licensing fees previously collected from others for the patent.\textsuperscript{24}

Commenting on the proposed Congressional patent reforms of 2005, Congressman Howard Berman of California spoke about the “unclean hands of patent trolls,” but failed to define the term Patent Troll clearly.\textsuperscript{25} Manufacturing giants that deal with numerous infringement claims from many types of patent holders contend that Patent Trolls are abusing the current patent system.\textsuperscript{26} Lawyers and politicians have suggested many types of patent reform to deal with these weaknesses, but the problem of how to distinguish a Patent Troll from a legitimate patent enforcer undermines the proposed effectiveness of the reforms aimed at stopping the Patent Trolls.\textsuperscript{27}

This comment focuses on characteristics and behaviors that are commonly attributed to entities labeled as Patent Trolls. Part I describes the current state of the U.S. patent system and focuses on shortcomings that Patent Trolls are accused of exploiting. Part II analyzes the different


\textsuperscript{20} Id. at 58. (stating that median costs to each party of a patent infringement suit are at least $500,000 when stakes are modest, and rise to four million dollars for each party when more than twenty-five million dollars is at risk).

\textsuperscript{21} Id. at 112.

\textsuperscript{22} JAFFE & LERNER, supra note 18, at 114.

\textsuperscript{23} Brief of Amicus Curiae Yahoo! Inc., supra note 8, at 2; see also ANTITRUST MODERNIZATION COMMISSION, supra note 4, at 5. Detkin gives an example of a patent troll anecdote: In one of Douglas Fuey’s early business ventures he provided phony new vehicle titles for stolen cars. His partner Larry Day is a one-time Blackjack dealer in Las Vegas. Together, the two men have found a more active line of work suing cell phone companies for patent infringement. Earlier this year their company got $128 million in damages from Boston Communications.

\textsuperscript{24} Id. at 5.

\textsuperscript{25} Roth, supra note 1.

\textsuperscript{26} 151 CONG. REC. E1160 (2005). Congressman Berman described the following motivation for change: We have learned of countless situations in which patent holders, making no effort to commercialize their inventions, lurk in the shadows until another party has invested substantial resources in a business or product that may infringe on the unutilized invention. The patent troll then steps out of the shadows and demands that the alleged infringer pay a significant licensing fee to avoid an infringement suit.

\textsuperscript{27} Id.

\textsuperscript{28} Brief of Amicus Curiae Yahoo! Inc., supra note 8, at 2.

\textsuperscript{29} Brief for Respondent at 49, eBay, Inc. v. MercExchange, L.L.C., 126 S. Ct. 1837 (2006) (No. 05-130) (arguing that granting injunctions based on whether the patent holder practices the patent or exclusively license it is not an equitable standard and cannot be used as an effective test); see also Lorraine Woelert, eBay Takes on the Patent Trolls, BUS. Wk., ONLINE, Mar. 30, 2006, at 2, available at http://www.businessweek.com/technology/content/mar2006/c20060330_581975.htm?chan=technology_technology_index+top+page internet (asserting that a change in the system will not only affect patent trolls, it will affect everyone). Philip Johnson, chief patent counsel for Johnson & Johnson, said, “If we start watering down the patent system . . . I’m worried about the future of our country . . . . Beware of what you ask for, you might get it.” Id.
proposed ways of distinguishing a Patent Troll and examines whether the courts can use these tests effectively to quiet the trolls and still leave the basic aims of the patent system intact. Part III proposes that there is no effective way to differentiate a Patent Troll, and that the attempt to do so is a poor substitute for addressing underlying concerns about the patent system.

I. BACKGROUND

The recent proliferation of Patent Trolls has been spurred on by certain features of the current patent system and has changed the landscape of patent enforcement. Some proposed reforms to the patent system would require a court to create tests in order to distinguish a Patent Troll from a non-troll. It is questionable, however, whether the courts can make such distinctions and what effect such distinctions and reforms will have on the patent system as a whole.

A. Patent System Roots and Holes for Trolls

Patent law has its roots in the Constitution, which allows Congress the power to “promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts, by securing for limited Times to Authors and Inventors the exclusive Right to their respective Writings and Discoveries.” The current law governing patents is set out in the Patent Act of 1952. Congress intended this Act to create a delicate balance that gives the public access to new ideas in exchange for the inventor’s exclusive right to the patent.

One frequent accusation associated with Patent Trolls is that there are too many patents of questionable quality that have been granted in the recent past, giving the trolls an opportunity to acquire and enforce vague patents against countless companies. Activity in the United States Patent and Trademark Office (“USPTO”), including patent applications received and patents issued, increased by 80% from 1990 to 2000 and increased by 250% from 1980 to 2000. Patent system critics commonly complain that the USPTO does not have a sufficient number of technically skilled patent examiners to effectively research and grant only truly innovative patents. A look at the statistics reveals that the number of patents granted in the United States increased dramatically over the last two decades.
was growing at approximately 1% per year from 1930 to 1982 and then jumped to a growth rate of 5.7% per year from 1983 to 2002. Currently, the USPTO receives about 350,000 patent applications per year and grants about 177,000 a year. At the same time, the increase in patent examiners has not kept up with the number of patents applied for, which some argue results in the USPTO granting too many broad or vague patents. This allows an owner of a broad or vague patent to make infringement allegations against any user of similar technology across a wide range of industries.

The explosion of new patents, coupled with the presumption that a granted patent is valid, creates an uphill battle for those wishing to challenge a patent holder that is asserting a claim of infringement. In 1982, Congress created the Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit (“CAFC”), which provides a centralized forum for patent appeals. Before the CAFC, the federal appellate courts found that a patent was valid and infringed in less than thirty percent of cases, varying widely by circuit. Between 1982 and 1986, CAFC holdings in favor of the patent holder increased to sixty-eight percent of the cases. The CAFC has created an environment where patent holders, trolls or otherwise, have a greater chance of succeeding in getting damages for an infringement claim.

As stated earlier, another common criticism of Patent Trolls is that they threaten the use of an injunction against accused patent infringers, which is an inappropriately severe remedy in some cases. With the grant of a patent from the USPTO, the patent holder obtains the “right to
exclude others from making, using, offering for sale, or selling the invention throughout the United States. The Patent Act also provides that courts may grant injunctions to prevent the violation of any right of the patent holder. The consequences of an injunction can be so grave that many companies feel coerced into paying a Patent Troll's requested licensing fee. An injunction is such an extreme remedy that some argue it should not be available to a Patent Troll. For many years, the courts granted an injunction to virtually any patent holder that prevailed in infringement litigation.

In May 2006, the standard for granting a permanent injunction in a patent case was clarified by the Supreme Court in eBay, Inc. v. MercExchange L.L.C. The Court rejected the CAFC rule that "a permanent injunction will issue once infringement and validity have been adjudged." The Supreme Court also denounced the District Court's contention in that case that any patent holder willing to license its patents and having a "lack of commercial activity in practicing the patents" categorically cannot qualify for injunctive relief. The rule is that any patent holder satisfying the four factor test for injunctive relief will be granted a permanent injunction. This case and other multimillion dollar disputes have focused a great deal of attention on the issue of whether Patent Trolls should be distinguished from other patent holders.

B. Development and Landscape of Patent Enforcement

The primary value of holding a patent is the right to exclude others from the manufacture, use, or sale of the patented article. The U.S. Supreme Court has said that exclusion is "of the very essence of the right conferred by the patent." However, in the patent system's early days, it was woefully difficult for an inventor to enforce the right to exclude others.

Some inventors, like Eli Whitney and Robert Kearns, spent the better part of their lives trying to enforce patent rights against notorious infringers. Kearns patented the intermittent windshield wiper in 1967, and he fought until 1990 to negotiate his first settlement with Ford Motor Company for infringement. The courts ignored Eli Whitney for ten years when he

49 Id. § 283. The Patent Act states: "The several courts having jurisdiction of cases under this title may grant injunctions in accordance with the principles of equity to prevent the violation of any right secured by patent, on such terms as the court deems reasonable." Id.
50 Brief for Computer & Communications Industry Association, supra note 42, at 6.
51 JAFFE & LERNER, supra note 188, at 112 (asserting that courts historically refused to grant an injunction to shut down an infringing firm when the patentee was not itself manufacturing the patented product, but the CAFC has "shown more flexibility in this regard, thereby handing individual inventors a powerful weapon"); see also Brief of Amicus Curiae Yahoo!, Inc. supra note 8, at 3.
52 eBay, Inc. v. MercExchange, L.L.C., 126 S. Ct. 1837, 1841 (2006). From at least the early 19th century, courts have granted injunctive relief upon a finding of infringement in the vast majority of patent cases." Id
53 Id.
54 Id. at 1841.
55 Id. at 1840.
56 Id. at 1839.
57 See generally Beyers, supra note 10.
61 Id. Kearns set up a business specifically to litigate his patent infringement claims, and the corporate office was located across the street from the federal courthouse in Detroit. Id. Kearns was ordered to pay sanctions after his son, Dennis, obtained confidential documents by dating a paralegal at one of the firms representing the several automakers being sued. Id. Kearns ended up winning more than thirty million dollars from Ford and Chrysler. Id.
62 Id. at 113.
accused others of infringing his cotton gin patent. In a letter to a friend in 1803, Whitney wrote, “I have a set of the most depraved villains to combat and I might almost as well go to Hell in search of Happiness as apply to a Georgia-Court for Justice.” Whitney eventually collected nearly $90,000 in patent royalties, but he only had a few thousand dollars left after paying his legal bills for the ten-year struggle.

A middle ground emerged in patent enforcement when some attorneys began to take patent infringement cases on a contingent fee basis. One such attorney was Gerald Hosier, a so-called “maverick” attorney, who represented Jerome Lemelson beginning in 1989 in a lawsuit against Mattel Toys. A jury awarded Lemelson $24.8 million and the judge adjusted the award to $71 million to include interest. Unfortunately for Lemelson, the CAFC reversed the finding of infringement and he and his attorney received nothing. Paul Ware had a more successful venture into contingent fee patent representation. Ware patented his identification card system invention in 1987, but failed to generate any revenue from it until Acacia Research Corporation called him in 2004 and offered to help. Acacia contacted Ware when they noticed that a portion of his patent covered the use of a unique number to identify each credit card transaction. Ware successfully collected millions of dollars in licensing fees from about thirty companies for Ware's patent against the alleged infringers.

The problems with the patent system coupled with the increasingly lucrative business of enforcing patents have contributed to the rise in the number of Patent Trolls. This comment discusses whether a distinction between a Patent Troll and other patent holders presents an effective solution to the patent system’s woes. To answer this question, different traits that commonly characterize Patent Trolls are considered individually to determine which ones might be useful in segregating the Patent Troll from other patent enforcers.

II. ANALYSIS

[Footnotes]

63 Stephen Yafa, The Man Who Made Cotton King, INVENTION & TECH., Winter 2005, at 50 (detailing Eli Whitney’s struggle against rampant infringement of his cotton gin patent and the frustration of being turned away from the courts).
64 Id. at 52 (emphasis in original).
65 Id. at 57.
67 Adam Goldman, A Great Inventor, or a Big Fraud, LOS ANGELES TIMES, Aug. 21, 2005, at 1 (discussing how Lemelson attorney, Hosier, gambled and took patent cases on contingency in 1989, and it was considered a new and unusual arrangement).
68 Lemelson v. Mattel, Inc., 968 F.2d 1202, 1206 (Fed. Cir. 1993).
69 Id. at 1208 (finding that “no reasonable jury” could find that Lemelson’s patent was valid and infringed); Goldman, supra note 67, at 1. Before the CAFC ruling, Mattel offered Lemelson a twenty million dollar settlement, which he and his attorney refused. Id. In June 1992, the CAFC issued a unanimous decision in favor of Mattel. Id.
70 Kirby, supra note 344, at 1 (detailing Ware’s attempts to market his identification card and transaction system, including that the patent was granted in 1987 and his attempts at marketing included contacting Donald Trump and Ted Turner’s son-in-law, but to no avail).
71 Id.
72 Id.
73 Mr. Ware calls Acacia his “saviour.” Id. He said, “Many patents have referenced my patent, but I couldn’t afford to litigate. Without Acacia, it would have been infringed on by all these big companies.” Id. Some companies that paid licensing fees include Exxon Mobil, Gap, Giorgio Armani, and RadioShack. Id.
74 Id.
75 Beyers, supra note 10.
The most heavily criticized characteristics of Patent Trolls are that they do not practice the patent they hold, and that they make frivolous allegations of infringement. Some critics argue that patents should not be enforced like traditional property rights, but should only be enforced when doing so serves the public good. Part A of this section analyzes whether isolating Patent Trolls on the basis of whether they are “practicing” the patents they hold is feasible. Part B of this section analyzes whether making frivolous allegations is a useful basis for defining who is and who is not a Patent Troll. Part C of this section examines whether enforcing patents only for the public good can help differentiate a Patent Troll from other patent holders.

A. Non-practicing Entities

A 2003 report by the Federal Trade Commission used the term “non-practicing entities” (“NPEs”) to refer to Patent Trolls. This term highlights the characteristic most frequently used to identify a Patent Troll; whether or not the patent holder practices the patent. In Continental Paper Bag Co. v. Eastern Paper Bag Co., the Supreme Court stated that a patent holder has “the privilege of any owner of property to use or not use it, without question of the motive.” Nevertheless, one of the main complaints made by defendants in infringement actions is that the patent holder is not using or “practicing” the patent.

The term “practicing” a patent can refer to product manufacture or new product development, but merely licensing or litigating is not included. The CEO of Rates Technology is the inventor of the patents the company holds, but because Rates is not making any products, their sole activity is to identify existing products or services in the marketplace against which they can assert their patents.

Id. at 2.

The United States Constitution defines the public interest goal of patent statutes as the distribution of new technology. A patentee who does not practice his or her invention within the United States is undermining the public interest which founds legal recognition of personal patent rights. Therefore, a patent holder who is neither practicing the infringed invention nor making a good-faith effort to prepare to practice the invention should be presumed to fail the public interest prong [of the test to determine whether a patent holder can obtain an injunction when their patent is infringed].

Id. at 17.

See Berman, supra note 13, at 22 (stating that the term patent troll has become synonymous with the unfair assertion of questionable IP rights).


See Brief of Malla Pollack, supra note 78, at 17.

See THE FEDERAL TRADE COMMISSION, supra note 13, at 17.
commentators still refer to the company as a Patent Troll. A contrasting example is Eastman Kodak Co., a company which recovered nine-two million dollars from Sun Microsystems for infringement on a patent that Kodak had inherited and was not using. No one has ever called Kodak a Patent Troll, even though it was not “practicing” that particular patent. Many large manufacturers create a strategic advantage by holding unused patents in their patent portfolio, and forcing competitors to come to them for licenses in order to use the patented technology. Also, many individual inventors hold patents on their inventions, but they have neither the expertise, nor the money to manufacture them. They could also be called NPEs and would be excluded from enforcing their patent rights if this characteristic were used to identify and weed out Patent Trolls.

An identifying feature of an NPE is that the majority of revenue coming into the company is from licensing patents. One example is NTP, Inc., a small Virginia corporation formed by one inventor and one lawyer, whose sole lucrative business practice has been to license the patented technology of the inventor. In March 2006, NTP negotiated a $612.5 million dollar settlement
from Research in Motion Ltd. for the Blackberry device’s infringement on NTP’s patent.\textsuperscript{91} The settlement constituted the vast majority of NTP’s income, and they were consequently labeled a Patent Troll by the media.\textsuperscript{95}

However, the revenue earned from a patent cannot reliably be used to determine who is an NPE or a Patent Troll. For instance, in 2000, IBM earned $1.7 billion solely from licensing its patents.\textsuperscript{96} Since that was only about fifteen percent of their profits, commentators do not vilify the company as they do Patent Trolls.\textsuperscript{97} With more manufacturers and technology companies generating revenue from their intellectual property holdings, any line drawn based on revenue from patents is sure to lump together legitimate and useful licensing activity along with alleged Patent Trolls.\textsuperscript{98}

From these examples, it is clear that diminishing patent enforcement rights for entities that do not practice their patent or that earn the majority of their income from patents is not an equitable solution to the Patent Troll dilemma.

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\textbf{B. Frivolous Claims}
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A common assertion by victims of Patent Trolls is the infringement claims made against them are frivolous.\textsuperscript{99} Philip Swain, a Boston lawyer who frequently defends parties in patent infringement lawsuits, believes that “[c]ompanies who do the costly grunt work of actually developing and marketing new technologies are being held ransom by tiny outfits whose only assets are ‘kooky and vague’ patents.”\textsuperscript{100} One such instance involves a travel agent turned inventor who procured two patents for browser operations.\textsuperscript{101} He claimed that his patents were infringed by any web site containing information vaguely described as being “from various textual and graphical information data sources.”\textsuperscript{102} He filed suit against eleven small companies, including a small family-owned business, selling their products online.\textsuperscript{103} Some of the defendants found the claim absurd and joined together to fight the patent holder in court, resulting in the court invalidating the patent.\textsuperscript{104}

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\item[97] Sullivan, supra note 14.
\item[99] U.S. Debates, supra note 911, at 11.
\item[100] Kirby, supra note 344, at 1.
\item[101] Roth, supra note 1; Sam Costello, \textit{Company Claims Patent On “Millions” of e-Commerce Sites}, INFOWORLD, May 15, 2002, http://www.infoworld.com/articles/hn/xml/02/05/15/020515hnpangea.html. When the president of Dickson Supply received notice that his e-commerce website infringed on Lawrence Lockwood’s patent, he thought, “If they’re going after us . . . they have to be going after everybody in the whole U.S. with a web site.” Id.; see also Paul Davidson, \textit{Patents Out of Control?}, USA TODAY, Jan. 13, 2004, at 2B (noting that Lawrence Lockwood sued fifty small e-commerce companies, many of which settled for one-time fees of less than $30,000 rather than pay the costs of litigation).
\item[102] Costello, supra note 101. The allegedly offending defendants had also infringed Lockwood’s second patent when they used an “automated financial transaction processing system” where a computer can “acquire credit rating data relating to the applicant from the credit rating service.” Id.
\item[103] Id.
\item[104] Id.
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Another much more prolific enforcer of allegedly frivolous claims was Jerome Lemelson. Lemelson received more than 500 patents in his lifetime and the foundation he created to enforce his patents has earned $1.5 billion in licensing fees. However, some say that he was more of a “science fiction writer” because most of his patents were so broad and vague they were effectively nonsense. In September 2005, the CAFC affirmed a decision in favor of the multiple defendants sued by Lemelson’s corporation for infringement on seventy-six asserted patent claims. The court ultimately found that Lemelson’s patents were invalid for lack of written description and enablement. While explaining how frivolous some claims of infringement are, David Simon, chief patent counsel of Intel, referred to an accusation of infringement Intel received from the owner of a patent for a drill used to make a hacksaw blade that he believed Intel was infringing upon. Simon resented the time he had to spend explaining to the patent holder that Intel had absolutely nothing in their products or processes that even vaguely resembled his patented hacksaw blade drill. It may be true that some Patent Troll infringement claims are frivolous, but the validity of a claim is determined in court and there is no way to distinguish in advance whether a Patent Troll or any patent holder is making a frivolous claim before the court makes its ruling.

The final determination of frivolity of the claim comes from the court. The court can impose Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 11 sanctions and Federal Rule of Appellate Procedure (“FRAP”) 38 sanctions, respectively, for bringing frivolous claims or appeals. In 1996, the CAFC imposed FRAP 38 sanctions against S. Bravo Systems (“Bravo”) and its attorneys for filing

106 Burges, supra note 105.
107 Goldman, supra note 69, at 1. Robert Shillman, chief executive of Cognex Corporation, who sued Lemelson’s foundation after they initiated litigation against many Cognex customers for infringement of Lemelson’s patent. Id. Goldman states that Lemelson’s detractors claim his patents were in fact worthless and he was one of the great frauds of the twentieth century. Id. The machine vision patent at issue was a 150 page patent application filed on Christmas Eve in 1954 by Lemelson. Id. It contained diagrams showing how a robot could perform a variety of fantastic tasks during industrial production, such as riveting, welding, and transport. Id. It also showed how a robot, armed with a camera, could serve as the quality control inspector and manage jobs that the human eye could not. Id. This is the same patent that was overturned because the court found that no one could have built current machine vision technology from the fanciful sketches in the 1954 patent, and it lacked enablement. Id.; see also Burges, supra note 105. Lemelson received more than 500 patents over his lifetime, the first for an improvement on the propeller beanie in 1953; his foundation holds more than 180 of his unexpired patents and pending claims. Id.
108 Symbol Technologies, Inc. v. Lemelson Med., Educ. & Research Found., 422 F.3d 1378, 1382 (Fed. Cir. 2005) (stating that Lemelson had waited eighteen to thirty-nine years to file the infringement claims in this case).
109 Id. at 1381–82; see also Burges, supra note 105. Lemelson and his attorney were able to collect royalties for the machine vision and bar-code scanning patents from 979 businesses in a multitude of sectors before these patents were found invalid. Id.
110 U.S. Debates, supra note 91, at 11.
111 Id.
112 Lueck et al., supra note 87. “To the extent anyone knowingly abuses the patent system, by bringing frivolous suits to obtain nuisance settlement agreements, there are already remedies in place to address such situations, including sanctions under Rule 11 and the recovery of attorneys fees under 35 U.S.C. § 285.” Id.
113 FED. R. CIV. P. 11(b)(2). An attorney or unrepresented party is certifying that “the claims, defenses, and other legal contentions therein are warranted by existing law or by a nonfrivolous argument.” Id.
114 FED. R. APP. PROC. R 38. “If a court of appeals determines that an appeal is frivolous, it may, after a separately filed motion or notice from the court and reasonable opportunity to respond, award just damages and single or double costs to the appellee.” Id.
a frivolous appeal.\textsuperscript{115} In \textit{S. Bravo Systems, Inc. v. Containment Technologies Corp.}, Bravo had filed suit against Containment Technologies Corporation (“CTC”) for infringement of a patent on a secondary containment system leak-signaling device, and the district court granted summary judgment in favor of CTC on all claims.\textsuperscript{116} The Court of Appeals noted, “[t]he infirmities of Bravo’s appeal as filed were exacerbated by representations made in Bravo’s briefs and in oral argument that lacked legal or factual support.”\textsuperscript{117} Some patent infringement claims are frivolous, but only a court can make that determination and there are existing sanctions when parties attempt to waste the court’s time in this manner.\textsuperscript{118}

Some of the most infamous Patent Trolls have had their claims of infringement validated by the courts, so they cannot be called frivolous claims.\textsuperscript{119} Notorious Patent Troll NTP had its patent infringement claim validated in court.\textsuperscript{120} Even though the media vilified NTP as a small Patent Troll trying to bring down the useful and popular Blackberry device, the judge found that the Blackberry device did infringe on NTP’s patent.\textsuperscript{121} Therefore, frivolous claims cannot be used as a useful characteristic to identify a Patent Troll in advance of litigation.

\section*{C. Are Patents Property?}

Some commentators suggest that the key to taking the bite out of Patent Trolls is to limit the rights conferred by a patent and to treat it as a different type of property.\textsuperscript{122} A patent is now treated the same as other property, so a patent holder can exclude others from using the invention no matter what the circumstances or motivation for doing so.\textsuperscript{123} One current proposal for patent system reform is to allow a patent holder to exclude others from using the patented invention only when it serves the public good.\textsuperscript{124}

According to current U.S. patent law, patents have the “attributes of personal property.”\textsuperscript{125} In \textit{Continental Paper Bag Co. v. Eastern Paper Bag Co.}, the Supreme Court stated “it was decided that patents are property, and entitled to the same rights and sanctions as other property.”\textsuperscript{126} However, in the dissent of \textit{Special Equipment Co. v. Coe}, three justices agreed that it is inconsistent with the Constitution and patent legislation to treat a patent as a form of private property.\textsuperscript{127} They went on to cite an earlier case suggesting that a patent is a privilege “conditioned by a public purpose.”\textsuperscript{128}
Reserving the privilege of enforcement only for patents that have a public purpose is a very vague standard by which to judge. Certainly Eli Whitney’s cotton gin would be considered to serve a public purpose, but what about the Blackberry communication device? It may be used by teenagers to email their friends, but it is also used by the government to communicate with contractors and private parties. Ultimately, the very basic public purpose of protecting an individual’s intellectual property is served by all patent licensing or litigation activities.

The trend toward recognition of intellectual property as a valuable asset was spurred on greatly in 2003, after many internet start-up companies went bankrupt. Many of the companies that went out of business had valuable patents that could be enforced against large corporations that had built on the technology. The treatment of patents as property is culminating in the formation of a bank that will insure, sell, appraise, and leverage intellectual property just like any other asset. The patent’s fate of being treated like traditional property appears to be sealed in the economic sector. If only certain types of patent holders could enforce their intellectual property rights, the value of a patent would change depending on who owned it. As a result, this

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129 Brief of Business Software Alliance, et al., supra note 122, at 29. The Department of Justice filed a statement of interest in the Blackberry/RIM litigation explaining that the government had a substantial interest in ensuring that any injunction entered would not interfere with government users. Id. at 30. The Justice Department further stated that “the federal government may have a further interest in this case to the extent that it is vital for it to be able to communicate in real-time with private parties, including government contractors, through Blackberry™ devices.” Id.

130 Brief of Biotechnology Industry Organization as Amicus Curiae in Support of Respondent at 8, eBay, Inc. v. MercExchange, L.L.C., 126 S. Ct. 1837 (2006) (No. 05-130). A general rule enjoining infringement of valid patents promotes the public interest. Stopping such infringement of valid patents serves as the economic incentive to create the new and non-obvious subject matter that, once publicly disclosed via the patent, permits that advance in technology to be further refined, extended and improved.

Id. Brief of Amicus Curiae Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America in Support of Respondent at 6, eBay, Inc. v. MercExchange, L.L.C., 126 S. Ct. 1837 (2006) (No. 05-130). Courts have consistently concluded that the public interest almost always receives greater benefit from a functioning and reliable patent system.” Id.; see also Brief of Rembrandt IP Management, LLC as Amicus Curiae in Support of Respondent at 5, eBay, Inc. v. MercExchange, L.L.C., 126 S. Ct. 1837 (2006) (No. 05-130) (asserting that “non-practicing entities play a key role in a system designed to promote progress by protecting invention”).

The exclusive property right created by the patent has several public benefits. It assures the inventor compensation for the work of successful invention. It allows the inventor to disclose the invention to the public and to potential investors without the fear of unlicensed imitation or appropriation. And it encourages investors — which could be the patent-holder himself, his licensee, or outside financiers — to risk capital in bringing the invention to market. Without the incentives and protections afforded by the patent grant, far fewer inventions would be disclosed to the world in the same timeframe. None of these critical functions could be performed effectively if the patent right, like any property right in a capitalist system, were not freely transferable.

Id. at 5.


132 Id. (stating the director of intellectual property law at Altera Corporation, Derek Minihane, asserted that storage and e-commerce are hot areas, so those type of patents sell for unusually high prices at bankruptcy auctions).

133 Id. (explaining the vision of Ocean Tomo, a new type of IP bank, which likens itself to a nineteenth-century merchant bank, employs fifty-five engineers, lawyers, and business people that will use intellectual property as valuable leverage for financing).

134 Kirby, supra note 344, at 1. “James Malackowski, Ocean Tomo’s president and CEO, said he sees the value of patents following the same course as home mortgages have over the past 20 years. . . . [I]ntellectual property is becoming an investable asset for the first time.” Id.
would severely limit the ability to freely trade and sell rights in patents. This law would be as ludicrous as a law that a person owning a home purely as an investment could not sell it for as much as a person who also occupied the home they were selling. It should be up to each patent holder whether to practice the invention or sell the patent rights, and that choice should not be taken from them by an arbitrary determination of whether a patent holder is serving the public good.

III. PROPOSAL

Patent Troll is a prejudicial, imprecise, and subjective label. Commentators have largely used it as a euphemism for problems with the current patent system. Rather than cowering in fear of the imagined troll, it is better to examine the actual underlying issues that the troll embodies. Part A of this section explores fears about the patent system that form the basis for discrimination against NPEs. Part B of this section discusses fears about the quality of patents granted by the USPTO, which are the basis of allegations that Patent Trolls make frivolous claims. Part C of this section examines the fear of injunction, which is the underlying motivation for a push to only allow enforcement of patents for the public good.

A. Fear About Changes in Patent Enforcement

Use of the term NPE sums up the prejudice that exists against patent holders that do not practice the patents they hold. This animosity stems from the angst of large manufacturers and high tech companies, who used to be essentially untouchable by individual patent holders accusing them of infringement. Large entities are accustomed to using their considerable resources to outlast an individual inventor in court by dragging out the litigation for decades.

With the advent of contingent fee patent representation, individual inventors can enlist the help of companies and law firms specializing in the area to match the resources of a large corporation’s intellectual property division. Also, companies with large patent portfolios traditionally could use their patent holdings as a shield against other large companies in their

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135 Brief of Rembrandt IP Management, supra note 130, at 2; see also ANTITRUST MODERNIZATION COMMISSION, supra note 4, at 8.
136 Lueck et al., supra note 87; see also Kirby, supra note 34, at 1 (quoting the chief executive of Acacia referring to the label “patent troll” as a term with no substance).
137 ANTITRUST MODERNIZATION COMMISSION, supra note 4, at 3 (asserting that the phrase “patent troll” is now used as a placeholder for all the ills perceived in the patent system).
138 Id. at 8 (asserting that it is important that proposed patent legislation is evaluated based on real data, not hyperbolic anecdotes). Detkin states that he understands the frustration of his colleagues in large technology companies, but the impact of patent troll lawsuits is exaggerated. Id.
139 Brief for Respondent, supra note 27, at 48 (stating that injunctive relief for the small entity is still appropriate even if a large-company infringer is discomfited when sued by a small-entity patentee that cannot be threatened with a patent countersuit).
140 Myhrvold, supra, note 119, at A14; see also Hofman, supra note 60 (detailing legal struggles of patent holders against large corporations).
141 Kirby, supra note 344, at 1. One industry watcher asserts that these IP representation firms are at the “forefront of an evolution of intellectual property... acting as brokers between the idea generators and the product developers.” Id.
industry, so when they are accused of infringement, they accuse the other company of infringement in return.\textsuperscript{142} However, the shield is useless against a non-practicing entity, so these large companies are refocusing their efforts on spreading Patent Troll myths and arguing to “weaken patent laws for the little guy.”\textsuperscript{145} The landscape of patent enforcement is changing and although change is scary for some, the end result is that all patent holders now have a better opportunity to enforce the intellectual property rights they are entitled to.\textsuperscript{144}

Preliminary results of a recent study indicate that of patent infringement lawsuits filed in the last five years, NPEs filed about two percent.\textsuperscript{144} This is a very small percentage to have inspired so many to cry “troll.” Rembrandt IP Management, a proudly self declared NPE, argues that NPEs “play a valuable role in a system of free enterprise in which all property rights, including intellectual property rights, are (and must remain) freely tradable.”\textsuperscript{146} Since NPEs focus solely on realizing the value of the patent through licensing and enforcement on behalf of the inventor, the inventor spends more time focusing on inventing.\textsuperscript{147}

A distinction drawn between practicing and non-practicing entities does not make sense as a basis for discrimination because almost all patent holders are non-practicing to some degree.\textsuperscript{148} This could be because the inventor lacks the resources to practice the invention or it may not be practical to do so. Also, many companies hold patents that are part of clusters of related patents.

\textsuperscript{142} Myhrvold, supra note 119, at A14.
\textsuperscript{143} Id. (asserting that big tech companies would rather campaign to weaken patent laws for the little guy than to pay out a small fraction of their huge profits to a legitimate patent holder).
\textsuperscript{144} Id.; see also ANTITRUST MODERNIZATION COMMISSION, supra note 4, at 6. Detkin coins another colorful term in his written testimony, “patent squatters:”

In sharp contrast to the anecdotal arguments about patent trolls, real data shows that ‘patent squatters’ are an actual and growing problem. A person who moves into a house or apartment without the permission of the owner is called a squatter and is not tolerated.... Yet this is precisely what happens in the intellectual property world. Witnesses for high-tech companies freely admit that they do not perform any patent clearance studies before releasing their products.... The current ‘head in the sand’ approach that is the current standard operating procedure should not be viewed as acceptable to anyone. Companies that market products without patent clearance routinely ignore the valid patent property rights of others, demanding that an inventor go to litigation rather than provide fair compensation for the invention short of litigation.

\textsuperscript{145} Id. at 6.
\textsuperscript{146} Id.; see also ANTITRUST MODERNIZATION COMMISSION, supra note 4, at 9; see also Myhrvold, supra note 119, at A14 (asserting that of the two percent of patent lawsuits brought by non-practicing entities, the vast majority are perfectly legitimate companies or universities).

Efforts of patent licensing companies, small companies, non-manufacturing companies and others have three key benefits: (1) they reward inventors; (2) they provide opportunities for small inventors; and (3) they prevent large companies from poaching innovation from small companies or individual inventors. These three benefits support the underlying goal of the U.S. Patent System – fostering innovation.\textsuperscript{147}

\textsuperscript{147} Id.

\textsuperscript{148} Brief for Respondent, supra note 27, at 14. “Virtually all patent holders are ‘non-practicing’ to a degree, and even if it were possible to distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ non-practicing entities, such distinctions not only have little, if any, basis in the facts of this case, but also involve policy judgments more appropriately left to Congress.” Id; see also Lueck et al., supra note 87. Another reason that a distinction between practicing and non-practicing entities is unnecessary is that the court already addresses this difference in the remedies available to the patent holder for infringement. Id. A patent holder who is manufacturing a patented product may receive lost profits, but a patent holder not doing so can only get a reasonable royalty, which is usually much less. Id.
and even companies practicing some patents are unlikely to be practicing all the patents that they hold.\textsuperscript{149}

The Supreme Court in the recent eBay case rejected the idea that different standards should be used for an NPE as opposed to a practicing entity.\textsuperscript{150} The Court asserted that all patent holders could be entitled to an injunction and they named NPEs, such as university researchers or self-made inventors that could meet the test set forth for an injunctive remedy.\textsuperscript{151}

Whether called non-practicing entities or Patent Trolls, every holder of a patent should be able to fully enforce all of the legal rights conferred by it.\textsuperscript{152} Simply because some large companies are not used to facing patent holders with the ability to enforce their patent rights is no reason to take rights away from all NPEs.

B. Fear of Too Many Patents and Rampant Enforcement

Allegations of frivolous claims brought by Patent Trolls against other companies are a mask for uncertainty about the quantity and quality of patents granted with the thin resources of the USPTO.\textsuperscript{153} These patent concerns should be addressed by proposed changes in the structure of the USPTO, not by taking rights away from a certain class of patent holders.\textsuperscript{154}

Some industries, like biotechnology and pharmaceuticals, are diligent about performing patent studies so that they do not lose years of research on a product that is infringing on someone else’s patent.\textsuperscript{155} However, in fast moving industries like electronics and software, being the first to market with the newest technology has often taken precedence over meticulous patent studies.\textsuperscript{156} A witness from a high-technology company before Congress freely admitted that these companies usually do not perform any patent clearance studies before releasing their products.\textsuperscript{157}

Simply because there are so many patents synthesized into high-technology products is no excuse to overlook anyone’s legitimately obtained patent rights.\textsuperscript{158} One industry insider claims that many of the largest companies in the computer industry have a policy that prevents engineers from reading patents or performing prior art searches to determine whether their work infringes on a patent.\textsuperscript{159} The reason given for this is patent studies are expensive and a “distraction” that might slow down the time to market of products.\textsuperscript{160} The CEO of Intellectual Ventures asserts, “weakening patent laws, whether in the Supreme Court or Congress, is no more than a government bailout of the infringement problems big tech companies deliberately made for themselves.”\textsuperscript{161}

\textsuperscript{149} Brief for Respondent, supra note 27, at 49.
\textsuperscript{151} Id. at 1840.
\textsuperscript{152} Myhrvold, supra note 119, at A14. “Without full [enforcement] rights there is no way for a small inventor to get a big infringer to the table to settle. Instead, they’ll stall and drown the little guy with legal fees.” \textit{Id.} at 2.
\textsuperscript{153} See \textit{Antitrust Modernization Commission, supra} note 4, at 9.
\textsuperscript{154} \textit{Id.} at 6.
\textsuperscript{155} Myhrvold, supra note 119, at A14.
\textsuperscript{156} \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{157} \textit{Antitrust Modernization Commission, supra} note 4, at 6.
\textsuperscript{158} \textit{Id.} (asserting that some high tech companies argue that full product clearance is not possible either because the products are too complex or because so many patents issue long after the technology is integrated into their products). “While these are valid criticisms, they do not excuse a complete lack of effort. The current ‘head in the sand’ approach that is the current standard operating procedure should not be viewed as acceptable to anyone.” \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{159} Myhrvold, supra note 119, at A14.
\textsuperscript{160} \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{161} \textit{Id.}
The menacing troll stories are a sign of the fear some companies have about changing their entire business model to incorporate respect for the intellectual property holdings of others. Requiring companies across all industries to perform more prior art searches before producing a product can not be called anything but a step in the right direction.

C. Fears about Being Enjoined from Production

There is an argument that patents are a property right, subject to the caveat that the courts only enforce them to protect the public good. This is a position maintained by companies who are scared that they will be enjoined from doing business by one rogue patent holder who has nothing to lose by dragging them to court. However, this distorts the actual rights conferred by a patent and is an exaggeration of the threat posed by a patent holder suing for infringement. The American patent system has rules in place to balance the public interest against enjoining a profitable company from doing business and courts should be trusted to adhere to those rules when deciding whether to grant an injunction.

From the early nineteenth century until eBay in 2006, an injunction was practically automatic upon a finding that a valid patent was being infringed. During that time, however, some courts refused to grant injunctions when doing so was not in the public interest. These exceptions included not enjoining use of an infringing railroad brake in use on 15,000 cars and not enjoining operation of a city water treatment plant. After eBay, the standard for granting an injunction in a patent case gives even more weight to the public interest than before. The common thread is that the Court has always recognized the need to balance the public interest in determining what remedies are appropriate in patent infringement cases. Any additional restrictions placed on patent enforcement related to the “public good” are unnecessary on top of these already equitable standards.

It is precisely for the promotion of the public good that we protect a patent holder with the right to exclude others from using, making, selling, or offering for sale the patented invention. So far, the American patent system has been extraordinarily successful at fostering innovation.

See id.

Myhrvold asserts that the crux of the debate about Patent Trolls is differing corporate cultures and attitudes about the patent system. In some industries, like pharmaceuticals or biotech, patents are crucial to the business model, so they support and respect patent rights. Tech companies, on the other hand, win by muscling their way to sufficient market share to become a de facto standard (some would say monopoly). Because patents don’t figure in this business model, tech companies don’t hold the patent system in high regard. Patents are simply not a priority for many tech companies. Ebay, for example, has only 11 issued patents.

Brief of Amicus Curiae Pharmaceutical Research, supra note 130, at 4.

See ANTITRUST MODERNIZATION COMMISSION, supra note 4.


id.

id. at 1841.

City of Milwaukee v. Activated Sludge, 69 F.2d 577 (7th Cir. 1934); Nerney v. New York, 83 F.2d 409 (2d Cir. 1936).


Lueck et al., supra note 87.

The patent grant, conferring intellectual property rights in an invention, provides incentives to U.S. inventors and allows the U.S. patent system to grant patents for ten times as many significant inventions as the rest of the world combined.\textsuperscript{173}

Fear over effects of the growing number of Patent Trolls has led many to jump to the conclusion that the United States must limit the right to enforce a patent only where it serves the public good.\textsuperscript{174} The existing standards to determine when an injunction will issue already take the public good into account, and it is excessive to suggest further stringent requirements on certain patent holders. All patent holders are a vital part of the successful American patent system, and they deserve to retain the full spectrum of patent rights the system has to offer.\textsuperscript{175}

IV. CONCLUSION

The Patent Troll label is an inflammatory and offensive term that has no real meaning. It is useless in defining any one type of patent holder based on behavior or characteristics.\textsuperscript{176} Large companies who have never felt so threatened by individual patent holders have simply used it as a retort.\textsuperscript{177} The term is also useless in defining a group of patent holders whose rights to enforcement should be limited. Enforcement of a patent must be available to all holders of patents, regardless of who they are or what their business goals are.\textsuperscript{178} When this right is secure, the patent system can continue to retain and even increase the incentive to invent, which has been the core aim of the system since its inception.\textsuperscript{179}