

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF
CALIFORNIA

Strike 3 Holdings, LLC v. John Doe Subscriber Assigned IP Address
98.51.14.109

No. 2:25-cv-01587-WBS-CKD (E.D. Cal. July 15, 2025) · No. No. 2:25-cv-01587-WBS-CKD · Decided July 15, 2025

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Eastern District of California grants Strike 3 Holdings, LLC's ex parte application to serve a third-party subpoena on the internet service provider associated with IP address 98.51.14.109. The order limits discovery to the subscriber's name and address, imposes notice and confidentiality protections, permits an informal conference concerning any motion to quash, and bars formal service absent further court order.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Eastern District of California
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Carolyn K. Delaney
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Eastern District of California
DECIDED	July 15, 2025
DOCKET	No. 2:25-cv-01587-WBS-CKD
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Plaintiff sought ex parte leave to conduct expedited discovery and serve a third-party subpoena on its internet service provider before the Rule 26(f) conference to identify an anonymous copyright-infringement defendant.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Good cause governs requests for expedited discovery before the Rule 26(f) conference. The court also considered the five factors identified in Arista Records, LLC v. Doe 3 for discovery seeking identification of an anonymous defendant.

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

- Whether plaintiff showed good cause to obtain expedited discovery before the Rule 26(f) conference.
- Whether the court should authorize a subpoena to the ISP to identify the person or entity associated with the subject IP address.

3. What safeguards were required to protect the potential defendant's privacy and provide an opportunity to challenge the subpoena.

HOLDINGS

1. A court may authorize expedited discovery before the Rule 26(f) conference when good cause exists, meaning that the need for expedited discovery, considered in light of the administration of justice, outweighs prejudice to the responding party.
2. Plaintiff established sufficient grounds for limited discovery because it presented a prima facie copyright claim, narrowly sought the subscriber's name and contact information, lacked an alternative means of identifying the defendant, and required the information to proceed with the action.
3. Because an IP-address subscriber may not be the actual infringer and disclosure of an alleged pornographic-film download could cause embarrassment or reputational harm, expedited discovery could be granted only with safeguards protecting privacy and permitting the potential defendant to challenge the subpoena.

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Plaintiff alleged that it owns copyrights in adult films and that an unidentified person used BitTorrent to download and distribute the films through IP address 98.51.14.109. Plaintiff submitted a list of downloads associated with the IP address and asserted that it could not identify or serve the defendant without subpoenaing the ISP. The court recognized that the subscriber associated with an IP address may not be the person who used a particular device to download a film and that disclosure could cause embarrassment or reputational harm if the person were wrongly identified.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Strike 3 Holdings filed a copyright-infringement action against an unidentified subscriber associated with IP address 98.51.14.109. Before the defendant was identified or served, plaintiff applied for expedited discovery from the defendant's ISP. The court granted the application subject to limits on the subpoena, notice, service, confidentiality, and an opportunity for the potential defendant to challenge the subpoena.

OPINION

Strike 3 Holdings, LLC v. John Doe subscriber assigned IP address 98.51.14.109

PER CURIAM.

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8 UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT

9 FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

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11 STRIKE 3 HOLDINGS, LLC, No. 2:25-cv-01587-WBS-CKD

12 Plaintiff, 13 v. ORDER 14 JOHN DOE subscriber assigned IP address 98.51.14.109, 15
Defendant. 16 17

18 I. INTRODUCTION

19 Plaintiff filed this matter on June 6, 2025, alleging it holds the copyright on various adult 20 films, and that defendant is infringing on those copyrights by anonymously downloading and 21 distributing Strike 3's films to others, using the BitTorrent protocol. (ECF No. 1.) Plaintiff can 22 only identify defendant by his or her IP address, through which defendant downloads and 23 distributes the films. (Id.) To acquire the true name and address of defendant, plaintiff brings an 24 ex parte application to engage in expedited discovery and serve a third-party subpoena, prior to a 25 Rule 26(f) conference, on defendant's internet service provider ("ISP"). (ECF No. 3-1.) Plaintiff

26 asserts that without the subpoena it will be unable to serve the complaint on defendant and will, 27 therefore, be prevented from vindicating its copyright. (Id.) 28 ///

1 II. DISCUSSION

2 A. Federal Rules of Civil Procedure 26(d) and (f)

3 Rule 26(d) states "[a] party may not seek discovery from any source before the parties 4 have conferred as required by Rule 26(f), except in a proceeding excepted from initial disclosure 5 under Rule 26(a)(1)(B), or when authorized by these rules, by stipulation, or by court order."

6 Rule 26(f) contemplates a pre-discovery conference between the parties to facilitate the 7 development of a discovery plan that will control throughout the litigation. Obviously, in the 8 absence of knowledge of the actual party being sued, no discovery conference can be held. Thus, 9 plaintiff seeks relief from that requirement from the court. 10 Courts in the Ninth Circuit apply the "good cause" standard in deciding whether to permit 11 early discovery. See *Semitool, Inc. v. Tokyo Electron America, Inc.*, 208 F.R.D. 273, 276 (N.D.

12 Cal. 2002). "Good cause exists 'where the need for expedited discovery, in consideration of the 13 administration of justice, outweighs the prejudice to the responding party.'" Id. Good cause for 14 expedited discovery has been found in cases involving claims of infringement and unfair 15 competition. Id. In infringement cases, expedited discovery is frequently limited to allowing 16 plaintiffs to identify Doe defendants. See *UMG Recordings, Inc. v. Doe*, 2008 WL 4104207, at 17 *3 (N.D. Cal. Sept. 4, 2008). 18 B. Standard for Determining Whether to Issue the Requested Subpoena 19 In *Arista Records, LLC v. Doe 3*, the Second Circuit articulated five principal factors to 20 consider when a defendant seeks to quash a subpoena in a situation like this: (1) the concreteness 21 of plaintiff's showing of a prima facie claim of actionable harm; (2) the specificity of the 22 discovery requests; (3) the absence of alternative means to obtain the subpoenaed information; (4) 23 the need for subpoenaed information to advance the claim; and (5) defendant's expectation of 24 privacy. 604 F.3d 110, 119 (2nd Cir. 2010) (citing *Sony Music Entm't Inc. v. Does 1-40*, 326 25 F.Supp.2d 556, 564-65 (S.D.N.Y. 2004)). While no defendant has appeared in this matter and 26 there is no pending motion to quash, the factors enunciated by the Second Circuit in *Arista* are 27 useful in determining whether to grant plaintiff's ex parte application. 28 ///

1 Here, the first four factors weigh in plaintiff's favor: (1) plaintiff has stated a prima facie 2 claim by providing a list of downloads of its copyrighted films that had been downloaded to the 3

subject IP address; (2) plaintiff specifically seeks to discover only the name and contact information for the individual using that IP address; (3) plaintiff is unable to identify this individual other than by subpoenaing the ISP; and (4) without identifying defendant, plaintiff will be unable to proceed with the instant copyright action. At the same time, the last factor weighs against granting plaintiff's request, without additional safeguards. To simply issue an order for expedited discovery as requested here, raises a serious constitutional question of the IP address owner's reasonable expectation of privacy.

C. The Need for Privacy Protection

As the United States Supreme Court made clear in *Griswold v. Connecticut*, "specific guarantees in the Bill of Rights have penumbras formed by emanations from those guarantees that give them life and substance." 381 U.S. 479, 485 (1965). The Supreme Court found a right to privacy emanating from several Amendments, notably the First, Third, Fourth, Fifth, and Fourteenth. *Id.* Privacy can encompass fundamental and traditional activities such as marriage, medical records, or more recently found rights such as commercial privacy. Still, the right to privacy is not absolute, and is balanced against other societal interests, especially in the litigation context. See *Soto v. City of Concord*, 162 F.R.D. 603, 618 (N.D. Cal. 1995). Here, the limited privacy protection afforded under the Constitution must be considered for the person who will be identified by the procedure of serving a subpoena on an ISP. Indeed, the assumption that the person who pays for Internet access at a given location is the same individual who allegedly downloaded a single sexually explicit film is tenuous, and one that has grown more so over time. An IP address provides only the location at which one of any number of computer devices may be deployed, much like a telephone number can be used for any number of telephones. As one introductory guide states: If you only connect one computer to the Internet, that computer can use the address from your ISP. Many homes today, though, use routers to share a single Internet connection between multiple computers. Wireless routers have become especially popular in recent years, avoiding the need to run network cables between rooms. If you use a router to share an Internet connection, the router gets the IP address issued directly from the ISP. Then, it creates and manages a subnet for all the computers connected to that router. Thus, it is no more likely that the subscriber to an IP address carried out a particular computer function—here the purported illegal downloading of a single pornographic film—than to say an individual who pays the telephone bill made a specific telephone call.

In *re BitTorrent Adult Film Copyright Infringement Cases*, 296 F.R.D. 80, 84 (E.D.N.Y. 2012). As such, "[e]stablishing that the person identified by discovery is the person who infringed upon the copyright will likely require additional proofs beyond the fact that the individual is listed as the subscriber on the account from which the infringing activity originated." *Manny Film LLC v. Doe Subscriber Assigned IP Address 50.166-88-98*, 98 F.Supp.3d 693, 695 (D.N.J. 2015) (citing *Malibu Media, LLC v. John Does 1-18*, No. 12-7643(NLH/AMD), 2013 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 155911, at *8-9 (D.N.J. Mar. 22, 2013)). Finally, consideration must be given to the fact that this particular case—focused on the alleged theft of pornographic films—would have a

different effect on an individual wrongly identified as a defendant than would a run-of-the-mill copyright infringement case. Such a wrongly named defendant would likely feel exposed to embarrassment and reputational damage, even before he or she could engage counsel and litigate the issue of mistaken identity through a motion to quash. Moreover, the possibility exists of being forced into a settlement to avoid the effects of such “exposure.” See *In re BitTorrent*, supra, 296 F.R.D. at 90.

III. CONCLUSION

Accordingly, IT IS HEREBY ORDERED: 1. Plaintiff’s Ex Parte Application for Leave to Serve a Third-Party Subpoena Prior to a Rule 26(f) Conference (ECF No. 3) is GRANTED on the terms of this order. 2. Plaintiff may engage in limited expedited discovery to establish the identity of the owner of the IP address identified in the complaint by serving a subpoena on the ISP provider of the subject IP address. 3. The ISP shall be served with a subpoena seeking only the true name and address of the person or entity to whom the subject IP address is assigned. 4. Within ten (10) days after plaintiff has obtained the actual identity of the person or entity associated with the subject IP address, plaintiff shall serve a copy of this order on that person or entity. Plaintiff need not mail such a copy if the action is dismissed prior to the expiration of that ten-day period. 5. No formal service of process shall be permitted absent further order of this court. 6. The parties—both plaintiff and the potential defendant—are hereby invited to attend an informal conference before the undersigned for the following purposes: a. To set a schedule that will allow the defendant an opportunity to file a motion to quash the subpoena, if there are true and adequate grounds therefor; and b. To establish procedures for service of process or waiver thereof. 7. This informal conference may take place via telephone or Zoom. The parties should contact the courtroom deputy, Lisa Kennison, at lkennison@caed.uscourts.gov to arrange an informal conference if they wish to schedule one. 8. The parties are advised that attendance at such a conference is voluntary and will not itself constitute a waiver of service of the complaint, or result in a finding of “appearance” in the litigation, unless the potential defendant agrees to waive service, or the case is resolved and a settlement is placed on the record. 9. Not later than 60 days from the date of this order, plaintiff shall file a status report including the following: a. Whether service of this order has been effectuated as directed; b. Whether defendant has agreed to attend an informal conference; and c. If applicable, whether the parties seek a telephonic or in person conference. d. The status report shall continue to identify the defendant by John or Jane Doe at the subject IP address. 10. —‘XIf plaintiff makes any routine requests in the status report, including but not limited to a request for the court to order that a further status report be filed, then plaintiff shall electronically submit a pdf version of a proposed order and shall email a separate proposed order in Word format to the Magistrate Judge’s email box listed on the court’s website. See Local Rule 5 | 137. 11. = After receipt of the status report, the court will schedule an informal conference, if necessary. 12. A decision by the person identified as the owner of

the subject IP address not to 9 || attend an informal conference will lead to an order substituting the identified defendant by name, 10 || permitting ordinary service of process, and commencement of the litigation. 11 13. _—— Plaintiff is cautioned that, until permission is given by the court, it is not to reveal 12 || the identity of the defendant in or out of court. 13 14. _— Nothing in this order precludes plaintiff and defendant from reaching a settlement 14 | without court participation before any informal conference is held or formal service of process is 15 | effectuated. 16 | Dated: July 15, 2025 / ae □□ / a Ly a

"7 CAROLYNK.DELANEY

18 UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE

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