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Social and cultural practices with free cultural works. Case study of the Flickr web service.

Abstract.

The pool of cultural works forming what Lawrence Lessig (2004) calls "free culture" has been rapidly growing in the last 10 years and has formed alternative ecosystems in diverse cultural fields, such as science, education, art or popular culture. In particular in the last 5 years, a significant part of this pool is formally licensed with a Creative Commons license.

The phenomenon of free culture, or a pool of works functioning as a cultural commons, has by now been described with multiple theoretical models, coming from various research perspectives. A legal perspective offered by James Boyle (1997) and his concept of "cultural environmentalism"; Yochai Benkler's (2006) concept of commons-based peer production, rooted in political economy; or the works of Lawrence Liang, based in the tradition of critical theory, are just some examples.

At the same time, free culture does not attract yet sufficient attention as a subject of empirical research. Firstly, we lack quantitative data. For example, calculations conducted by Mike Linksvayer or the study by Giorgos Cheliotis et al. (2007) show that there are tens of millions of works licensed under Creative Commons license – but the figures are only rough estimates. More importantly, we do not understand the new social and cultural patterns developing around freely available works, and their significance. The issue has been addressed for example by a survey-based study by Minjeong Kim (2007) or with the use of social network analysis by Giorgos Cheliotis et al. (2008). Nevertheless there is still much to learn both about patterns and practices of use and reuse of free culture, and about attitudes towards this phenomenon.

My research is a case study of Flickr as an environment for distribution, use and remixing of free cultural works. Flickr (flickr.com) is an image hosting website around which a community of users has developed, who uploaded 2 billion photos by mid November 2007 and an estimated 2.5 billion by April

2007. The site has made Creative Commons licensing available to its users in June 2004 and by now over 60 million photos (or about 2-3%) have been licensed under Creative Commons licenses. There are several advantages to studying the uses of Creative Commons works at Flickr site:

- Flickr's API allows precise measurement of the growth of the Creative Commons licensed pool and exact analysis of licensed works
- the site can provide data on not just licensed works, but also the number of people using Creative Commons licenses
- data from Flickr provides an estimate of the percentage of people willing to freely license their works (provided that the data can be generalized)
- unlike many sites with free cultural works, Flickr attracts also users with no knowledge of Creative Commons – providing an opportunity to study awareness and attitudes among the general population.

The case study will consist of both a quantitative analysis of CC licensed works and a qualitative study of site's users.

The goal of the first part is to provide exact data on the pool of CC-licensed works. It is also an exploratory analysis of the types of data that can be gathered and knowledge that can be extracted from the data based on the limited set of available variables, which furthermore are not the traditional variables used in sociological studies. While this data cannot be extrapolated in order to estimate the size of free culture as a whole, it provides an estimate of the percentage of works licensed freely when necessary conditions are provided. Based on site's API, we can estimate the growth rate of particular license pools; geographical dispersion of CC-licensed works (that have been geotagged) or variables that correlate with the use of CC licenses (such as, possibly, camera used – based on EXIF data). To give one example of research results, a preliminary study of the growth rate of Creative Commons licensed works at Flickr over a period of 2.5 months shows that the particular pools have grown at a differing rate, from 8.5% for CC BY NC SA to 13% for CC BY ND.

Secondly, the study will involve a survey of Flickr users, reached through the site's messaging system. The goal of the survey is to investigate attitudes towards Creative Commons based on the assumption that it is a novel, but still marginal model for distributing and sharing culture, and in particular photography. The survey will also present general attitudes towards copyright and cultural practices centered around digital works.

The case study is mainly meant as an exploratory one – investigating the types of knowledge that can be collected through triangulation of different research approaches, focused on a single website. As an outcome, precise data on the pool of free cultural works at Flickr website will be collected – which is both a significant snapshot of free culture in general, as well as data that can possibly be generalized. We assume as a hypothesis that while the pool of free cultural works at Flickr web site is constantly growing, it still remains a marginal phenomenon. Geographic distribution of freely licensed works is expected to show the dominance of the United States, due to the greatest awareness of free culture in this country. While only a small group of Flickr users is expected to know of the concept of free culture and understand or use Creative Commons licensing, related cultural practices are expected to be present among the whole population of users. This suggests both that there is potential for greater growth for this model, and that there is a parallel informal system with similar norms of sharing and reuse, but functioning with formal mechanisms such as Creative Commons licenses.

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Alek Tarkowski is a sociologist working at the Interdisciplinary Center for Computational and Mathematical Modelling, University of Warsaw as coordinator of Creative Commons Poland. He will soon defend his doctoral thesis, a theoretical study of the internet from the perspective of Science, Technology and Society (STS) theory. He is a member of the “Culture 2.0” project, which is an investigation into the cultural and social role of new media; and a member of the Board of Strategic Advisers to the Prime Minister of Poland.