

Position paper: Licensing annotations

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Submitted by: [Puneet Kishor](#), Manager, [Science and Data Policy, Creative Commons](#)

Legal Challenge

The workshop mentions both social and technical challenges to maximizing the full potential of annotations on the connected web. While these challenges are indeed worthy of attention, an additional hurdle that needs attention is the legal interoperability of annotations. As the annotations ecosystem evolves, and both the annotations and the annotated content becomes substantive, the legality of sharing and reuse of such content will become increasingly important. To be sure, it is not clear whether or not annotations would even get copyright protection because of their brevity. The issue here is to not debate whether or not annotations are eligible for such protection. Instead, the challenge is to consider such a possibility in the design phase. What if annotations were eligible for copyright protection, would the annotation framework be able to accommodate licensing information?

This legal challenge is both a mix of non-technical and technical issues, and has to be considered right at the design stage of the annotations framework. This will ensure the future annotations infrastructure will include options for declaring, preserving, discovering and displaying the legal status, if applicable, of annotations.

Desired

Every annotation should carry the necessary information to determine its legal status. License, like other metadata, describes permissions about what may or may not be done with the object with respect to the copyright and other related rights of the annotator.

An annotation may build upon other annotations, and in that case, will carry permissions that will depend on the permissions of the precedents.

Annotations that annotate other annotations should link back to the source enabling provenance tracking. This provenance would also allow providing requisite attribution, both legal as well as normative, to prior contributors, thereby making the entire annotation ecosystem stronger.

Concrete Examples

No concrete examples yet, however, below are a few of the design choices to consider:

1. Should there be a “gateway choice” for annotation license? Choose one license or one from a simple set compatible licenses for all annotations you may make on this application.
2. What is the minimal license info easily embeddable in each annotation? For example, the CC RDFa code fragment is enough to describe the CC licenses completely, but may need to be stylized for particular annotation platform.
3. It should work on all platforms across the web.