

The Konomark Project

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ABSTRACT

This paper sets a scholarly foundation for a public-interest project I am pursuing – the konomark project. The idea of the project is to give owners of copyrighted content – particularly individuals – an easy way of inviting strangers to ask for permission to reuse that content for free. A konomark next to a photo, for instance, means, “If you’re interested in re-using this photo, don’t be shy, go ahead and ask me. I’m generally fine with giving people permission to re-use for free.” Although konomark bears some similarities with sharing regimes such as Creative Commons and the free-software movement, it is different in that it embraces fuzziness of legal obligations, leaning much more heavily on social norms. Konomark itself is not a license – it’s just a signal. As a signal, konomark is a mechanism to overcome the social awkwardness inherent in asking for something of value from a stranger while offering nothing in return. In terms of the project’s semiotics, “kono” is Hawaiian for “invite,” and the logo comprises a pineapple – a traditional architectural motif signifying hospitality – inside a circle. I have conducted a beta test of konomark by way of posting and konomarking thousands of photos on the photo-sharing website Flickr.com. More than 80 people have e-mailed me asking for permission to re-use one of those photos. The requests for re-use have included websites, books, blogs, presentations, and even framed art. The experience shows not only that konomark is viable, but that it also leads to some surprising outcomes. In this paper I also discuss the economic context for konomark, including how the project shows promise for mining copyright surplus that cannot be cleared by market mechanisms.