Transcript: Anatomy of a CC License

[upbeat music featuring a mandolin]

This is Learning About Creative Commons. I’m Rachael Nevins.

[music fades out]

In previous podcasts, I’ve discussed the origins and purposes of Creative Commons and explained copyright law and how Creative Commons licenses work with copyright.

In this podcast, let’s go into the details of Creative Commons licenses themselves.

There are six different Creative Commons licenses, each giving a different range of permissions. A real aha moment for me was when I understood the licenses as communication tools. Each of the six licenses tells potential users of a work upfront how that work can be used.

The licenses are more than communication tools; in fact, they are tools with many layers. But I’ll get into that later. First, let’s look at what Creative Commons licenses communicate.

The six Creative Commons licenses are composed of different combinations of four elements. Each of these is represented by an icon, which I’ll describe in the podcast. I also urge you to take a look at the show notes, where you can see these icons.

One license element is attribution. Its abbreviation is “BY.” This license element is represented by an icon showing a generic human figure. The attribution license element requires users of a work to give credit to the creator. All Creative Commons licenses include this element.

Another license element is share alike. Its abbreviation is “SA.” This license element is represented by an icon with an arrow in the shape of a loop. The shape of the loop might look familiar to those who know the backward *C* of the copyleft symbol. The share-alike license element (depending on whether or not it is combined with the non-commercial license element) is similar to copyleft. This license element requires users of a work to share any adaptations of the work with the same or a compatible license.

As I just mentioned, another license element is non-commercial. Its abbreviation is “NC.” This license element is represented by an icon with a crossed-out currency symbol. For example, in the U.S., this license element is represented by a crossed-out dollar sign, and in Europe, it is represented by a crossed-out Euro sign. The non-commercial license element prohibits others from using a work or adaptations of a work for commercial purposes.

Legally, a noncommercial purpose one that is (quote) “not primarily intended for or directed towards commercial advantage or monetary compensation” (unquote). Additionally, non-commercial use is defined by the use, not the user. A commercial entity such as a business could use work licensed CC BY-NC for internal training, from which the entity is not directly profiting. Alternatively, a non-profit business cannot use work licensed CC BY-NC in items sold for a fundraiser.

The fourth license element is no derivatives. Its abbreviation is “ND.” This license element is represented by an icon with an equal sign. The no derivatives license element prohibits others from adapting a work.

What is an adaptation? You are likely familiar with adaptations, such as novels adapted for film, or works translated from one language to another. Cropping an image, adding text to an image, or changing an image from full color to black and white are also examples of adaptations. Changing an image from a digital to a print format is not an adaptation, however.

So those four elements—BY, SA, NC, and ND—are combined in different ways in the six Creative Commons licenses.

The CC BY license is the most permissive, allowing people to use or adapt a work for any purpose, including commercial purposes. It requires only attribution.

The CC BY-NC-ND is the most restrictive, prohibiting adaptations and allowing only noncommercial uses of a work.

The other four licenses are CC BY-SA, CC BY-NC, CC BY-NC-SA, and CC BY-ND. Again, I urge you to take a look at the show notes, where you can see how each of these licenses is represented. Notice that the SA element and ND element are never included in the same license because they are incompatible with each other. Whereas the SA element asks that adaptations be shared with the same or a compatible license, the ND element prohibits adaptations altogether.

You can see how Creative Commons licenses are communication tools. They tell potential users not only *that* a copyrighted work can be used, but also *how* that copyrighted work can be used. But, as I said before, these licenses are more than communication tools. These licenses are tools with several layers.

The foundational layer of a Creative Commons license is the legal code. The legal code is what makes the terms of a Creative Commons license legally enforceable.

The next layer of a Creative Commons license is the commons deed. This deed explains the terms of the license in a way that is understandable to regular, non-lawyer people. When work has a Creative Commons license, a link is usually provided to the commons deed.

And the third layer of a Creative Commons license is the machine-readable version of the license. Basically, this layer provides metadata that enables search engines to discover works with Creative Commons licenses.

Now, before I go, I want to make two last points about Creative Commons licenses.

First, remember what I said last time: *A Creative Commons license doesn’t replace copyright. Instead, it works with copyright.* So a Creative Commons license can’t be used to grant permissions that copyright already gives anyway. For example, a Creative Commons license can’t be used to give people permission to watch a copyrighted video or listen to a copyrighted podcast, like this one. Those uses are already permitted by copyright. Inversely, a Creative Commons license can’t be used to place restrictions on work that is already unrestricted anyway, such as works in the public domain.

Second, you’ll see in the show notes that I’ve included information about two public domain tools that Creative Commons provides. These aren’t licenses, because works in the public domain can’t be licensed. Instead, these are tools that can be used to communicate the status of works in the public domain.

One of these tools is the public domain mark. The public domain mark actually is purely a communications tool! It can be used to label work in the public domain. The mark is an icon with a crossed-out *C*.

The other tool is the Universal Public Domain Dedication, or CC0. This tool is represented by an icon with a zero. This tool provides a mechanism for creators to dedicate their works to the public domain insofar as it is possible to do so. Unlike the public domain mark, and like Creative Commons licenses, the Universal Public Domain Dedication has three layers, including legal code with a license that (quote) “allows anyone in the world to do anything with a work unconditionally” (unquote) ensuring that the work can be used as if it were in the public domain even in countries where waiving or abandoning copyright is not allowed.

[upbeat music fades in]

We covered a lot in this podcast! I discussed the four Creative Commons license elements and how they are combined in the six Creative Commons licenses. I explained the three layers of Creative Commons licenses, each designed to communicate to a different type of reader—lawyers, other humans, and machines. Finally, I reminded you how Creative Commons licenses work with copyright and also gave an overview of two public domain tools provided by Creative Commons.

Check out the show notes for more information, including examples of Creative Commons iconography, and until next time, take care!

[music concludes]