



CCC Seeks a New Formula With Launch of Copyright Labs

by *Michael LoPresti*

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Ask a few chemists, mathematicians, or pastry chefs what problem-solving methodology they turn to when insight and theory fall short. They're likely to respond with a common answer. Trial and error, that age-old approach to puzzling out dilemmas big and small, continues to be employed in every laboratory, classroom, and kitchen on a daily basis. When Copyright Clearance Center (CCC; www.copyright.com) announced the launch of Copyright Labs (www.copyrightlabs.com) last week, it was a nod to that fact that even a nonprofit company in the knowledge industry stands to gain from publicly testing new applications to ensure that all of the wrinkles have been ironed out. CCC, the world's largest provider of copyright licensing solutions, is taking a page from the playbooks of younger, hipper web-based companies with the new Copyright Labs, which it calls a "testing ground for new services, applications, and products."

Such development projects have become the industry standard for fostering innovation in online services, as Google, Yahoo!, and other online giants have promoted the beta-testing arms of their organizations to great success. Without Google Labs, there might be no Google Maps or Google Video, two applications that have been instrumental in maintaining Google's deep penetration into every corner of the online application environment. It seems to be with this precedent in mind that CCC is making in-the-works products available to the public for beta testing.

"CCC is using Copyright Labs to drive even greater innovation," said Tom Hamilton, CCC vice president and chief information officer. "It's a place where content users and creators alike can interact with our development and product groups. We're committed to developing a steady stream of services and tools that reflect[s] the new ways customers use content, and Copyright Labs will play an important role."

At launch, three applications are already available for public use. One, called Google Scholar Firefox Extension, is a small add-on to the Firefox browser that directs users to copyright permissions at www.copyright.com. When installed, the extension appears as a Copyright.com Search link below each search result. Selecting the link allows users to access permissions information specific to the item. The extension supports four types of Google Scholar search results: a normal result, a book, a citation, and a U.S. patent.

Copyright.com OpenSearch is another web browser plug-in that was made available with the Copyright Labs launch. The application is a copyright permission utility that aids in licensing content found online. Once installed, clicking "copyright.com" in the search's drop-down menu instantly checks CCC's rights database for the appropriate permissions for a given search. [OpenSearch (www.opensearch.org), a collection of technologies for sharing search results, was developed by Amazon.com subsidiary A9. The OpenSearch specification is licensed by A9 under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.5 License. —Ed.]

The third application, called ACAP Validator, is a tool that helps publishers implement the Automated Content Access Protocol (ACAP; www.the-acap.org) standard for communicating access permission rules and rights information to search engines. ACAP is a newly developed standard for publishers to communicate access and usage permissions information to search engines. The Validator is a tool that helps create valid ACAP content access files by providing diagnostic messages for every invalid line of code in an ACAP file (similar to a spell-check for the code).

It bears noting that the ACAP copyright permissions standard has not received the warmest of receptions. Released only last month, content distributors and publishers alike are still trying to determine how ACAP will change the rules of the game. What distinguishes ACAP from the current standard for access protocol, known as "robots.txt," is that ACAP would allow publishers to instruct search engines as to how long an article can remain in a search engine's index (as opposed to the current robots.txt system, which only allows publishers to determine whether or not an automated spider can crawl a particular website). This distinction allows publishers to make their content available for only specified amounts of time. Not surprisingly, search engines have been hesitant to endorse a new standard. "They'd say robots.txt is sufficient, that a standard is out there already, and that there's no need for two," said Ned May, director and lead analyst at Outsell, Inc. "The search engines are the ones that will have to do the extra work. There's not much for them to gain, but there's not a great deal for them to lose either."

For what it's worth, CCC does not see its release of the ACAP Validator as an endorsement of ACAP one way or the other. Hamilton says that one of CCC's architects has been on the ACAP working group, and that he developed the Validator application alongside his work on the new permissions protocol. "He just thought it would be a great idea for people who are going to adopt ACAP to have a tool to make sure their syntax is correct," said Hamilton. "It's offered more as a tool and a service for people that are interested in it."

The tools available at Copyright Labs are free, and some are even being released as open source applications. CCC hopes that allowing users to test prototypes, build on them, and suggest improvements will foster a greater sense of collaboration and community among customers. May said that CCC's Copyright Labs is an acknowledgment of changes that have been taking place in the marketplace. "What they're doing is recognizing a need for agility, and being agile means putting things up before they're fully baked. We've moved beyond the old development models, and this trend is being emulated beyond just the software industry."

Michael LoPresti is the assistant editor of *EContent*, *Intranets*, and the *Enterprise Search Sourcebook*.