

Kopimism is a “Swedish religion whose dogma centers on the belief that people should be free to copy and distribute all information—regardless of any copyright or trademarks.” One joins the religion by saying the sacred words: “copied and seeded.” This seems a religion one would expect from a deconstructed world in which language means only what we say it does; nothing is sacred, but anything can be sacralized by language we deem religious. They even suffer from “society’s vicious legislative and litigious persecution.”

<http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2012/04/20/kopimism-swedens-pirate-religion-begins-to-plunder-america>

Aside from all that, this does however stir thoughts about the phenomenology of digital information. Information has classically been transferred by instantiating it in a medium; depending on the medium, it could then be transferred (paintings on cave walls or chapel ceilings are not transferable.) The information is encoded in the pattern of the ink, paint, or what-have-you on the medium; the information “supervenes” on the patterns on the medium.

Copying the information, or the work, is a matter of reproducing the same pattern on a different medium so as to encode the same information in it. Copying a book, while always possible, was and is not very practical; historically it was an expense that few could make. With high speed copiers, while a book can be copied with relatively greater ease than in the 13th century, a typical copy is in an awkward format and difficult to manage; it is easier, and probably cheaper, to buy the book. Paintings can be copied by photographing them, but without skill in lighting and photo processing the results will never exactly—much less satisfyingly—reproduce the original. LPs and cassette and 8 track tapes could be copied, but the copy generally lost quality with respect to the original, and it could be tedious and time consuming.

In other words, in the classic sense information is integrally bound to the medium which transfers it; to transfer the information one must generally transfer the medium that carries it. Information thus became bound up in a phenomenology of the medium; the medium is what we handle, read, gift, put in the DVD player, or plug into a computer. The medium became inextricably linked to the information (as McLuhan understood) it carried, influencing the message as well.

Digital information changed all that. Digital information must be instantiated in a medium, or it ceases to exist. Digital data, however, can be easily and *exactly* copied to another medium; the copy is as good as the original, because the 0/1 pattern is copied without alteration. Simply by the ease and precision of its copying, digital information becomes detached from its instantiating medium. Information thus becomes abstract in the extreme, disembodied, taking form in whatever medium instantiates it. It belongs to no one, because it is independent of its instantiating medium—and the medium is what we still think of as owning.

It seems to me that this detachment of information from its medium underlies the reductive dichotomy of Kopimism. Yet, how is the arrangement of a pattern of 0s and 1s, created by human activity, fundamentally different than the arrangement of the material that constitutes the media they own, created by human activity? I suggest there is no difference, but because almost without exception (in some cases electron microscopes can be used to see the data on magnetic

media) the digital pattern itself cannot be seen, we easily abstract it from the medium we do see.

We are still working out how we think about digital data as having value in and of itself, at least partly due to the fact that we cannot see it. [Luciano Floridi](#) is proposing a philosophy of information; he argues that data can have moral value, and perhaps over time that sort of theoretical work will sift into common thought.

Then again, maybe the Kopimists need to create digital content that costs them time and capital, on which they hope to make a living, and then have it ripped off by others; perhaps that would change their sacralized parasitism.

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