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From analogue to digital: the skeumorphs and metaphors we use

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This paper has a twofold focus. Firstly a discussion is made on digitalisation of society as a whole, what happens to society when (parts of) it becomes digitally represented. What does digitalisation mean to society in a broad perspective? The implications are relevant to a number of important social processes and phenomena, including legislation, state politics, innovation and entrepreneurship, social and commercial foundations, social norms, people's integrity, worklife, creativity, social exclusion and education. In short, it is of fundamental importance for the social, legal, the commercial and coded in general. How should we approach the study of such a mass-embracing phenomenon?

Secondly the paper analyses the role of language and metaphors in this transition. What does it mean that concepts are metaphorically re-used in a digital context? For example, what does this mean for law? What does this mean for worklife? Concepts are constantly transferred to new phenomena that carry similar elements. The development of information and communication technologies, combined with their massive distribution and use, has created a considerable need for labels and concepts that can describe the multitude of phenomena that follow. Although the phenomena in their technical nature are brand new, concepts for pre-existing phenomena are metaphorically transferred because they share some similar elements or associations. Some features from the previous phenomenon fit well, while others do not. Not only does the digitalisation create a need for a whole new set of metaphors, on one hand, but it changes the definition of already present concepts, on the other. It is the latter process that here is lies in the concept of skeumorphs. Consider for instance the examples of transition from regular mail to e-mail and from photography to digital imagery. Metaphors can thus serve as a conceptual bridge between one technology and another (Cass & Lauer, 2004, p. 253). In line with this, it must be considered whether the social norms that regulated the former phenomenon, which has lent its name, can also colour the new phenomenon.