

## **Picture Research – How the Industry is Changing**

by Julian Jackson

Picture Research has changed completely with the advent of the digital age. It has got much more complex, but also simpler. Today virtually all image suppliers are online: photographic libraries like the members of BAPLA, museums, archives, as well as individual photographers.

Deadlines are short, short, and shorter. Images can come in a baffling variety of formats, though fortunately the old reliables JPEG and TIFF are the most widely used for distribution and production.

Most picture researchers, picture editors, photobuyers, art buyers (call them what you like) have to have high levels of computer search skills to obtain the correct images quickly. Researching content also can be part of the job too.

### **How do picture researchers work?**

A picture researcher usually has a brief, or picture list, which comprises the main visual information he or she is searching for. Depending on the project, and the leeway given the researcher, the picture list might be very specific and not flexible, or depend on the knowledge, skill and contacts of the researcher to produce an imaginative selection of images to enhance the visual flair of the end product.

Picture researchers are either “staff” – employed by a company, sometimes called “in-house”, or freelance, usually working from home. Because many picture researchers are female, this often suits women bringing up children, as the job flexibility means that childcare can be slotted into work schedules.

### **Picture Libraries or Agencies and Photographers**

A picture library is like a wholesale distributor: lots of photographers contribute to their stock of images, then the picture researchers can look in this central distribution point to find many suitable images. Otherwise the researcher would have to contact many photographers individually, which would be too time-consuming. Hence picture agencies, and organisations like BAPLA, which acts as a trade association for them. Many libraries are small, so they gain opportunities by banding with other libraries.

## **Giant content aggregators versus specialist sources**

Until 1995, when Gettyimages was formed, the photolibrary industry consisted mostly of small "cottage industry" image suppliers based in one country. The twin drivers: technological advance, and the globalisation of the industry by the two "majors" – Getty and Corbis - buying up collections so they were able to present very large and wide subject matter changed the face of the industry. Between them, they have about 50% of the global image market.

Below them are many medium-sized suppliers, and a myriad of smaller producers, often specialising in a particular subject, for example sport, food or military history. The more adept researchers will not just go "one-stop shopping" but look around for the most appropriate suppliers. Specialists pride themselves on their particular knowledge of their field so their greater insight may be vital to the success of the project. For example, a book on horticulture might need correct botanical names as part of the captions.

## **How to 'buy' a picture**

Actually, you don't. Really you are 'renting' them. The image actually belongs to the copyright holder – which is probably the photographer, but could be the picture library. Picture Researchers licence the use of the image in a project – for example, a book, for a fee. They don't *own the image at all*.

## **Different kinds of Rights**

Pictures are licenced in several different ways.

### 1) Rights Managed (RM)

This is the traditional way of using images – each particular use is paid for separately; for example ½ page use in a book with a UK-only print run of 10,000 would have a certain fee; if the image was also needed by the publisher's marketing department to advertise the book on the internet, then a further fee would be payable. Some end-users feel this is unnecessarily complex and time consuming. Many photographers and agencies feel it is fair because it maximises revenue as each usage must be negotiated and paid for.

### 2) Royalty Free (RF)

This is a licence which you pay once, and then have almost unlimited use of the image, with certain preconditions. The advantage of this is that the user can reuse this image many times but only pay once. The disadvantage is that not all images are licenced as RF – many are too valuable so are only

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available as RM.

### 3) Microstock

This has grown up very suddenly in the last couple of years. Microstock is really the cheap end of the RF market, supplied mostly by non-professional photographers, with fees as low as US\$1. Although it is aimed at buyers who would not be able to pay the much higher fees for RM or RF images: websites, ezines, school newspapers, etc, the pressure is on as the higher end microstock can be used by publishers more cheaply than RM or RF images. It is not clear at present how this will affect the industry but some commentators are worried that it will drive prices down across the board.

### 4) Free images

Researchers are often asked to obtain “free” images. These come in two categories: images given out by tourist boards and PR companies for promotional purposes, and “Public Domain” images which are out of copyright: all NASA’s images are free, and so are many old images whose copyright has expired.

However, you get what you pay for. Often obtaining images for free wastes more researcher time than paying for a professional service. This is where the researcher’s skill and judgement comes in, balancing fees and time to ensure the best value is incorporated into the project.

## **Orphan Works**

An orphan work is a copyrighted work where the copyright holder has not been able to be traced. This subject has raised controversy within the image industry, with some suppliers wanting to be able to use Orphan works cheaply, while others (particularly photographers) feel that this is a way of stiffing them out of their rightful fees. In digital images the copyright owner is often missing, through accident or design, and this could facilitate a form of theft. Various legislatures are trying to grapple with the dilemma of ensuring images can be used, without penalising the creative personalities who originated them.

## **The Future**

Technological developments have changed the basis of the industry. Search engines like Google can locate many different kinds of content, so a researcher could potentially search for text, images, film footage, or multimedia content (such as Flash animation files). Digital delivery has eliminated the nerve-wracking waits for couriers delivering pictures from the other side of the world. But some of the fun has disappeared now. You interact with computer screens, not the many delightful, unusual, and deeply knowledgeable people in agencies, museums and archives. Unless the project necessitates a visit to somewhere that holds conventional film materials (called “analogue images” now), picture researchers no longer have the privilege of going to fascinating places and digging up rare photographs from dusty vaults.

Advances in search engine technology have improved their capacity to find images via keywords, and they now more readily understand “natural language”. The IPTC has instituted guidelines for keywording, which is intended to offer a standardised schema to facilitate better categorisation of images. Similarly a variety of digital image guidelines (including BAPLA’s) are standardising best technical practice, although with the fragmentation of the industry, it will take some time for everyone to adopt these standards. Technology has lowered the entry barrier to both photographers and picture libraries – in the sense that anyone can set up an “online picture library”, though perhaps without the scope, professionalism and collection depth that long-established libraries can offer.

The relentless commercial focus of many libraries now has reduced the beauty of the photographic image and the skill of the photographer to a commodity to be bought and sold. Nevertheless, all kinds of great-looking cultural products are created, with the active participation of the picture researcher who finds the images.

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