

A tool to catch Internet photo thieves

PicScout is aimed at commercial users who steal images for use in ads, commercial campaigns and the like



• By DAVID SHAMAH

They call it the "digital worker's paradise" – where you can get just about anything you need from the generous Powers That Be. Money is almost never an issue, and everything that you could possibly need is freely available. What's mine is yours, and what's yours is mine.

Yep, the Internet often resembles one of those places where they try to level out the playing field, with "the strong" – in this case, the talented, knowledgeable and productive – subsidizing the layabouts. If you're the creative type, be prepared to "share," in the Socialist sense of the word, your creations, whether they be music, video, text or photos.

Take me, for example; I've certainly had my share of being ripped off by a certain class of blogger, who feels that, just because they can Google it, they can use it, without attributing the text to its author. Same goes for music and movies. On the Internet, it's "all for one and one for all" – whether you like it or not!

Into this socialist morass comes riding on its white horse a champion of capitalism – Israel's PicScout (picscout.com), a company that over the last eight years has become the most important resource that photographic agencies including Getty, Corbis and iStockPhoto use to prevent websites from unauthorized use of copyrighted images.

And there is a great deal of championing to do, says PicScout cofounder and CEO, Offir Gutelzon.

"According to our estimates, about 85 percent of images used on the Web are violating someone's copyrights," he says. "We track down those purloined images and inform the copyright holder, who



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To do this, PicScout crawls the Web, Google-like, and searches for images that it compares to the ones in a customer's database, using a "fingerprinting" technique that searches for specific features in a photo, as opposed to the watermarking technique used by other services that can, with a little Photoshop savvy, be edited out.

"As a result, we can even tell when an image has been manipulated, altered, colorized, edited,

cropped, rotated or even embedded into another image," Gutelzon says. "Our ImageTracker product uses our ImageIRC – index, registry and connection – technology to identify and track down photos across the Web that are questionable."

When it does find one, ImageTracker alerts the owner of the image, who can then decide how to deal with the unauthorized usage. Over the last eight years, PicScout has gathered information on some 50 million images (Gutelzon hopes to make it to 80 million soon), making it, far and away, the

expert on who owns what image. PicScout, with offices in Herzliya and San Francisco, has clients in dozens of countries.

But PicScout isn't just about catching malfeasants; it also uses its knowledge for positive purposes: to enable website owners to comply with copyright law – which, of course, they really want to. To that end, the company introduced ImageExchange, which lets users buy an unauthorized image they may have been accidentally using.

The application, in the form of

an add-on for Firefox and Internet Explorer (Chrome and Safari will soon follow) shows the user the image's provenance, based on the information in PicScout's database. The user can then purchase the appropriate rights to use the image, making the owner happy and giving peace of mind to the website owner.

As a sort of "vice principal" in charge of Internet image copyright enforcement, Gutelzon understands there might be some grumbling among the blogger community, which often makes liberal use



of resources such as Google Images to find the appropriate image. But it's not the bloggers who are the main problem, he says, adding, "Our product is aimed at commercial users who steal images for use in ads, commercial campaigns and the like."

Hobbyist bloggers often inadvertently use copyrighted images, Gutelzon says. Google Images is surprisingly vague on who owns what, and even when an image is, in theory, available under a "Creative Commons" sharing license, which means it can be used by others (with limitations), many of those licenses are also inaccurate, so they can't be relied upon, he says.

Not that not-for-profit blogs necessarily have a right to use copyrighted images; the notion of Internet "Fair Use," a legal standard that allows the use of copyrighted images under certain conditions, has been considerably muddled since the implementation of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (always check carefully before using an image, lawyers advise).

But the people who run commercial sites and campaigns know exactly what they are doing – and those are the people Gutelzon is aiming PicScout's arrows at. A good example of PicScout in action can be seen at <http://goo.gl/FOy3v>, which tells the story of a commercial website that used eight copyrighted images for several years. The infringement was identified by PicScout – and ended up costing the site \$47,000!

Unlike illicit music and movie downloading, which is usually done for personal entertainment purposes, the Internet is rife with this kind of copyright abuse, Gutelzon says. Meanwhile, the company keeps growing. Each year, there are some 50 million new sites, and they all need images. And PicScout will be on guard to ensure that they get their images the good, old capitalist way – by working (or paying) for them.

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