

# Protecting your images in a digital world.



The "Champion of Chinese Checkers" from the book on the oil workers in Mexico. Pedro Meyer © 1986.

by Pedro Meyer

When I first started to publish the ZoneZero website nine years ago, one of the primordial questions that I was asked, was: "will my photographs be safe on the Internet"?

Since that time, all photographers who have asked me that question, have received the same candid response: there is only one way, I know of, to protect yourself 100% against someone misusing any image, do not publish at all and that includes all media, not only electronic.

From my personal experience, it turns out that the only images that have been used without my permission have been taken from printed pages (books or magazines), not electronic media. In a bit of peculiar irony, it has been thanks to the Internet that people who saw them published somewhere "out of place", informed me of what was going on. The electronic medium has made it possible for a larger audience, world wide, to be aware of whose images belong to whom.

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Scanning images from books or magazines is something that has been done with certain regularity with absolutely no possible control on the part of the photographer. I was amused when recently one of our readers in Japan wrote to inform us, that he would solely continue to use film as a way of protecting himself against misuse of his images, since he could then prove that he held the "original" (negative), while those of us who use digital cameras could not. Probably he is not alone in coming to such an ill-conceived conclusion.

The reason I question the premise, is that it is possible to take a digital image and copy it on to film (positive or negative), if that is what is needed. Sure, there are issues such as pixelation vs. grain, but someone with the desire to do so, could probably fool most of us with such negatives made from original pixels.

You can observe below, two images, copied from one of my books, the one on the oil workers in Mexico, these images were published on the same day in one of Mexico's major dailies (La Jornada), just last week, and without my permission.

**In exhibit A** - you will see that the credit for the picture is given to me, but not the source from where it was taken.



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**In exhibit B** - the issue is actually the reverse, the credit is given to Reuters, and the caption explains (in utter contradiction) that the image was taken from my book.



This is not the first time this has happened to me, nor is this the only newspaper with this sort of practice. Of course, one has legal recourse, and one can collect a fee for such an unauthorized publication. However, the main issue I wanted to bring up was not a legal one (some times the effort in collecting is not worth the potential waste of time in doing so), as much as getting at least some benefit, albeit indirectly.

By publishing one's images and running the risks involved, there is a trade off. More people around the world get to identify your images as part of the work you have made, what is the point of taking pictures not to be shown to anyone, out of fear of some potential misuse?

The entire music industry has not been able to come up with a working formula to discourage unauthorized copying, and the movie and television industry is about to see a similar break down as higher bandwidth and MPG4 technology become more ubiquitous, allowing entire films (and TV programs) to be reproduced at will. All of this will obviously transform traditional notions regarding intellectual property and the economics of the systems of distribution used at present.

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Already the music industry is rethinking its price strategy and delivery methods. The film business is taking a serious look at what has and has not worked for the music labels. You will probably see music being sold in totally new ways, and at very reduced prices.

In the world of still photography, we shall see similar transformations. Powerful robots will be able to scan the entire Internet, much as Google.com does for its very successful indexing of pages, with images being fingerprinted just as, well, our fingers are today. This is a matter of computing power, networks, and some technologies, which still need to be fine-tuned. However, all of this is just about locating images and potential piracy, not about rethinking their legal use. Much like the music and film industry itself, photographers will have to reconsider their personal strategies of how their work will be sold and distributed.

Not to be overlooked, there is a realm beyond the Internet, such as the printed page in traditional forms of publications (think of the newspaper example), which will always be beyond such future potential technologies to locate piracy. Thus having your work be known by, as many people as possible, will still be your best protection against possible abuse. The public display of your photographs will always accrue to your benefit notwithstanding the risks involved.

**Pedro Meyer**  
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