OPEN-SOURCE AND ROYALTY-FREE IMAGES FOR INSTRUCTION: Compfight and Wylio

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As student audiences become ever more sophisticated, they yearn for increasing amounts of visual stimulation alongside the traditional text-based approach of content delivery. The first step in a sequence of learning and memory events is for the learner to attend to a viable stimulus (Gagne, 1973; Keele, 1973; & Bransford, 1979). Following successful attention to viable stimuli, the Information Processing Theory (Atkinson & Shiffrin, 1971) holds that the learner relates new knowledge to existing information in the short term memory.

If the information is determined to be of subsequent value, the learner transfers the information into the long-term memory, where knowledge is permanently stored. Following this logic, it seems apparent that significant effort should be expended to make sure that the first step -viable stimuli- is provided to the viewer. Students already want stimulation to be ever more visual in nature, and if the predictions of Martin Van der Werf and Grant Sabatier (2009) come true, students in the near future will expect an educational menu from which they can select, assemble, and remix their academic brew of choice; a choice, one assumes, to be guided at least partly by the visual attractiveness of the material.

At a minimum, teachers and college instructors should consider becoming versed in embedding imagery into their digital texts and presentations, ranging from HTML-based modules to PowerPoint presentations used directly in class.

Many educators search Google Images by default to locate pictures for such purposes, but it is not clear that even such educational uses are protected under the Fair Use doctrine in the United States and many other countries' copyright law. To be safe, we should be using images that have been uploaded and shared under the Creative Commons license. Such works have been deemed by their creators as explicitly safe from copyright issues to use in educational contexts, provided that certain conventions are followed. Typically, these conventions include citing the creator's name or username, the name of the Creative Commons license, and sometimes providing a link back to the web-link where the work was originally uploaded (Creative Commons, 2010).Thus, a typical Creative Commons attribution might read like this: "Image from flickr user ucumari, shared under the Creative Commons license." The attribution might come as a visible caption to an image, or as ALT text if displayed on an HTML page.

While Google Images does many functions extremely well, this search Web site does not offer a way on its main page to restrict searches only to Creative Commons licenses. There is a setting on the Advanced Search page for "reuse" licenses (not precisely the same concept as Creative Commons), provided users remember to check this before performing any search. Before restricting the setting, a search for the term "tiger" yielded 48 million results. After restricting Google Images just to "reuse" results, only 14,000 webpages were identified for the term "tiger".

Relatively new web sites such as www.compfight.com and www.wylio.com make the searching of Creative Commons images simpler. However, the trade-off is that both search only the smaller archives of flickr.com images rather than the larger Google database. Still, a Creative Commons search for "tiger" at compfight.com generated 52,000 results, easily surpassing the "safe for reuse" results at Google Images. Compfight.com is ideal for users seeking to download images for use in educational slideshows provided to or shown in class. At times, the quality may be lower in resolution than we would find ideal. However, as educators, we may need to focus on the priority of merely using the graphic as a visual reinforcement, regardless of quality, and ensure that the visual increases the opportunity for attention.

Wylio.com performs much the same service as compfight.com, but with one additional component in the form of packaging the results for HTML pages. Using the same search term, wylio.com finds 55,000 results for "tiger" in the flickr database--a number that should be, but for some reason is not, identical to the compfight.com results. Wylio.com requires a one-time free registration and login for each user. Once signed in, users can click the search results to open a window for configuring the image. It can be centered, aligned to one side or the other (with text wrapping on it), or the size can be adjusted. When finished, users click the button labeled "Get the Code" at the top, and a textbox opens with a pre-made embed code that can be dropped without any editing into an HTML page or document.

This code takes care of not only aligning and adjusting the image, but more importantly, also creating the caption and providing the attribution links as required by the Creative Commons license. To download the images, users must upgrade to the paid Pro account, but this will be unnecessary for HTML pages that can simply link to the existing image hosted on flickr.

This approach renders the entire process of image acquisition simple for the user, so they can focus on the content.

Most importantly, these sites offer the educator the ability to enhance the visual identity of their presentations significantly, and does so within the copyright law of most countries.

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