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[Editor's Comment](#)
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[Diary](#)

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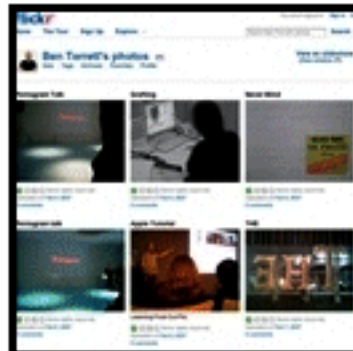
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## Free for all

- **Source:** Magazine
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- **Byline:** Oliver Bennett

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The world of photography is being shaken up by the rise of user-generated content. Agencies, libraries, design consultancies, publishers - all are taking notice, and just as blogging went overground, so amateur photographic content is seeping into the professional domain and finding mass audiences.



1 Screen grab from Flickr, showing Ben Terrett's photographs



2 Photographs created as part of the Science Museum's user-generated

Recently, the voracious mega-agency Getty Images acquired Scoopt - the British 'citizen journalist' agency set up after the 7 July 2005 tragedy. Then there's the vast photo-library Alamy, which acts as agent for amateur contributions, as well as the various photo-sharing websites, including Fotolog, Fotopic, Pbase, Photobucket, HeyPix, photoSIG, Zoomr. The most significant is Flickr, bought in 2005 by Yahoo, and now in a US deal with Reuters. 'The quality of the photographs is outstanding,' says a spokesman for Yahoo.

This flourishing of amateur imagery is gaining serious attention. Recently, the Photographer's Gallery participated in The Democratic Image Blog prior to a two-day conference in Manchester investigating the 'dawn of a digital democracy of photography'. 'The boundaries between professional photography, art and popular snapshots are blurring, just as the growth of blogging and citizen journalism makes it hard at times to distinguish between journalism, literature and a diary entry,' writes technology critic Bill Thompson on the blog.

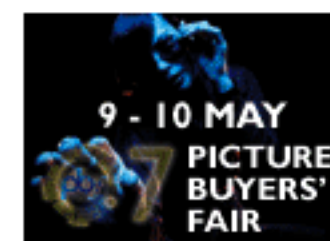
Fresh, raw and exciting, user-generated content is bringing new energy to the creative industries - at least, to the savvy Web 2.0 generation. Ben Terrett of The Design Conspiracy, for instance, is a big fan. 'We often look at it first,' he says. 'A lot of the imagery on Flickr is very good, plus it has an authentic look that's far more interesting than the cheesy stuff you get with big stock agencies.'

It's more inspiration than useable, he adds: something like a mood board. But user-generated imagery has brought a new spirit into play. Terrett felt the Flickr effect himself after putting up a photograph that was found and published by a German magazine.


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Adam Fothergill of Manchester consultancy Love is similarly enamoured. 'We're using Flickr more and more as a way of finding real photographs,' he says. 'It's similar to the YouTube phenomenon - the energy is coming from the users. It also chimes with thinking about brands as communities.' Again, Love uses Flickr as part of the creative process. 'I don't think we've ever used Flickr photographs in the public domain,' says Fothergill. Neither he nor Terrett think that it will dent the profession. 'To achieve big impact, you need professional shoots,' says Fothergill. 'Professional photography is always lit better and in focus,' adds Terrett. 'The pro market will remain.' Indeed, user-generated content is a welcome tool, reckons designer-turned-photographer Iain Crockett. 'Designers are always using images that suit their needs,' he says. 'After all, some use found postcards. You can't stop digital photography, and it has given us a whole new tier of images.'

Photosharing sites are increasingly where a search is started - particularly as there are now more copyright-free or almost-free images on the Web than copyright images. This is one of several reasons why professional photographers are nervous. 'A lot of designers are going to Flickr rather than the big agencies to get past the < copyright situation,' says photographer Sion Touhig. 'Big agencies employ legal people to trawl the Web - and some designers using watermarked pictures for dummies have been saddled with big bills after clients leaked them.' So they turn to user-generated content.

There's also concern that user-generated pictures are driving down prices. 'There are generally fewer commissions around, partly because lots of campaigns are using stock royalty-free images,' says Gwen Thomas, executive director of the Association of Photographers. 'Fine, but this means that they don't have exclusive rights - and they have boring campaigns.' Touhig agrees, citing an instance in the US where an insurance campaign used the same image as a Viagra campaign. 'Rather than commission, designers and editors will use stock images and Photoshop,' says photographer Jonathan Evans.

The muse to the Flickr newbies is the Canon 5-D camera. 'It has created a whole new pro-am sector,' says Evans. 'A cabbie the other day told me that he sold photographs on the side through Alamy.' Worse, some are happy to give away work for free.

Photographer, film-maker and writer Gareth Gardner is similarly concerned. 'Professional photography is highly skilled, and user-generated libraries help propagate the idea that anyone can do it,' he says. At present, he adds, user-generated work is driving a 'basic, immediate and raw aesthetic in photography that is actually emulated by pros for advertising campaigns. But designers buying images need to make sure that the image quality is sufficient. You can "up-res" a cameraphone image for a magazine spread, but it will lack clarity.'

There's also an issue about the sheer proliferation of photography, which makes it extremely hard to find appropriate photographs. 'The problem with Alamy, for instance, is that you spend a lot of time finding pictures,' says Touhig. 'A big part of a photographer's back-end work is captioning pictures so that it doesn't take an hour to find a picture. Otherwise, you might be looking through 100 million photographs.'

As the user-generated libraries become increasingly corporate, the industry should settle. 'It is the content of the future, and there is talk of monetising their collections,' says Touhig. 'I've got nothing against the photographers - we all start as amateurs. It's the way their photographs are used by third parties.' Amateur photographers, beware.

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