

Google's Stock Photo Search?

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By Steve GibsonTue, 2009-07-14 23:42

Google [recently announced](#) [3] the launch of some new features in their Google images search tool. Google previously provided a creative commons search but not integrated into Google images. The new filter allows users of Google images to search for images licensed for free use under creative commons licenses. Google is not the first to offer a creative commons image search [everystockphoto](#) [4] has been doing it for a while (although they only seem to show me results from flickr and [sxc](#) [5]).

Is this going to "[spell the end of image libraries like iStockPhoto](#) [6]"? I doubt that very much - not everyone wants a creative commons attribution plastered on their website or printed design. From my tests the results are nothing like as correctly matched as those on a stock photo website.

At present the new search filter is buried in "[Advanced Image Search](#) [7]" so most Google users won't see it unless they go looking. I'd prefer it if Google showed icons alongside each image to show their probable license status, perhaps defaulting to "copyright / unknown").

I thought I'd put it to the test and see what I could find. My favourite test search "apples":

The screenshot shows the Google Images search interface. The search bar contains the word "apples". To the right of the search bar are buttons for "Search images", "Advanced Image Search", and "Preferences". Below the search bar, it says "SafeSearch: Moderate". There are filters for "Images", "Show: Any size", "Any type", and "All colors". The results are "1 - 20 of about 306 (0.09 seconds)". Below the filters, there are "Related searches: green apples, red apples, strawberries".

Showing only images labeled for commercial reuse with modification ([show all images](#))



green apples
500 x 375 - 85k - jpg
www.flickr.com



Apples ...
500 x 343 - 73k - jpg
www.flickr.com



Pommes pourries - Rotten apples
500 x 337 - 115k - jpg
www.flickr.com



Apples and oranges on Flickr - Photo ...
375 x 500 - 105k - jpg
www.flickr.com



Apples.jpg Cesky: Jablka jsou ...
1800 x 2700 - 932k - jpg
commons.wikimedia.org



apples by Gudlyf.
500 x 333 - 82k - jpg
www.flickr.com



this apple is not fresh
500 x 360 - 90k - jpg
www.flickr.com



Green & Red Apples
500 x 332 - 168k - jpg
www.flickr.com

Wow what a lot of flickr images! Getting a little more advanced made things very 'interesting', a search for "London" reveals that the tuning of this search is not that perfect. Far more concerning is the aerial photo showing third in the results:

The screenshot shows a Google Images search for "london". The search bar contains "london" and the "Search images" button is visible. Below the search bar, there are filters for "Any size", "Any type", and "All colors". The results are displayed in a grid of 8 images. The third image in the first row is an aerial view of London, which is highlighted in yellow. Below each image is a caption with the image title, dimensions, file size, and source URL. The first row includes: a London bus, Gherkin Stitch, the highlighted aerial photo, and a 0407-london image. The second row includes: another 0407-london image, two London boroughs maps, and a London (For Evie) image.

There is no evidence I can see that the third result is creative commons in the blog that the result links to, Infact that blog then links to a [big picture page of aerial photos on boston.com](#) [8] the photos on which are **quite clearly copyrighted**. Until more pictorial content on the web is semantically tagged ([more about rdf and photography](#) [9]) services like this will remain useful but imperfect, searching for images with text is a difficult thing to do properly. This is not something of concern for people selling to the average stock photo buyer, but more the army of amateurs looking for something free who likely do not fully understand photography licensing.

We'd all like to think that people looking on Google images will read any terms and conditions that are shown with images that are found but sadly some, perhaps quite a lot of them, won't. A lot of bloggers now think it's "fine if you include a link", and while that's better than what people previously did (just to rip it off without attribution) it's no good if you as a photographer want to keep full control over your copyrighted and not [cc](#) [10] licensed photos.

Problems aside I have no doubt some enterprising photographers will leverage this feature to their advantage, It's just another step towards 'the internet' filtering photography by popularity. Those with creative commons images on flickr already have a head start. Popularity is one thing but converting that into cash is another, It appears that popular photos on flickr are more likely to be 'noticed' for the Getty collection, but it should also be noted that offering an image as creative commons blows any chance of Getty reselling it for you as [rights managed](#) [11] or you offering it as [exclusive microstock](#) [12]

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It's quiet in here!

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[4] <http://everystockphoto.com>

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[6] <http://www.pocket-lint.com/news/news.phtml/25443/google-image-search-licence-feature.phtml>

[7] http://images.google.com/advanced_image_search

[8] http://www.boston.com/bigpicture/2008/08/london_from_above_at_night.html

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