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Orphan Works: A Look at the Issue...

In another article, Eugene Mopsik and Victor Perlman of the American Society of Media Photographers delve into the problem at one of its most consistently challenging points: securing permission to use photographs.

“A fundamental fact is that most images are published without attribution attached to the image...,” they write. While the problem in the print world of newspapers, magazines and books is challenging, “the situation in the virtual world is even worse. Most Websites provide no credit or attribution whatsoever. Multiplying the problem exponentially is the fact that, according to industry service providers, as much as 90 percent of the visual images appearing on the Web are posted without authorization or knowledge of the copyright owner.”

In a third article, Dan Duncan, a senior government affairs manager at The McGraw-Hill Companies, will give an update on proposed orphan works legislation under consideration by the U.S. Congress. He’ll review the debates, discuss the major players and constituencies involved and look ahead to the prospects for legislation being passed into law in the next session of Congress, including the possibility of an omnibus copyright bill.

Orphan works also is a global issue. This is because it’s the creation of the preeminent copyright treaty — the Berne Convention — with its requirement that copyright exists from the moment a work is created even if the creator makes no effort to protect it. Canada and the E.U., including the U.K., are also looking for ways to reduce the number of orphan works limit the legal consequences of using an orphan work without authorization.

Another approach has been developed by Copyright Clearance Center. In early December, the not-for-profit copyright licensing company launched a beta version of DiscoverWorks.org — a global hub for rights data that allows people to freely exchange information on a full range of copyrighted works as part of a worldwide, online community. Content users, creators and others can contribute to this open resource where anyone can find or share rights information and other useful details on books, photos, graphic art, music, videos, textile designs and any other type of copyrighted material.

CCC’s goal is for rightsholders and content users to create a community of those who respect copyright and contribute rights information on an ongoing basis. Developed as a wiki, DiscoverWorks.org will serve as a resource that helps users find rightsholders and helps rightsholders avoid the assumption that their works have become orphaned. CCC has posted information about millions of copyrighted works and is continually adding more. The goal: given the nature of the wiki approach, participation will increase and DiscoverWorks.org will grow and evolve in the hands of the community.

“The consensus seems to be that we need practical change concerning orphan works,” writes Oye, “that matches our practical actions in today’s digital age, yet continues our principles of copyright balance of protection and encouragement.”

In this issue of Against the Grain, we hope to provide greater insight into the orphan works issue from a variety of viewpoints, potential legislation and possible solutions that address the needs of both users and creators of copyrighted works. 

Orphan Works — Bringing the Past Into the Present?

It’s probably easier to adopt a human orphan than it is to determine whether or not you can find one — an orphan work, that is. At least the adoption process, although fraught with its own uncertainties, attorneys, filings, and lengthy processes, has a proscribed workflow and the expectation of a predictable result. But if you are an archivist trying to find the original photographer from a 1940s image, or an author trying to locate an architect from a now-defunct firm so you can use a measured drawing, or an author trying to locate another author without benefit of any publisher’s trail, you may never reach your desired result. More than likely, driven by fear of a later infringement claim, or the daunting task of detective work and high research fees, you’ll give up entirely on your quest. If you do pursue it, you’re likely to find more questions than answers. Welcome to copyright reform efforts.

A recent review of 2006 legislative efforts and responses may lead you to a surprising position on the topic of reform, and of orphan works. With the Library of Congress Copyright Office’s Strategic Plan to address issues of technology, practice, and legislation for access and preservation of materials, the Section 108 Study Group, plus 2005 legislation for orphan works, you’ll find many comments, controversies, and opinions.

The term “orphan works” is often unclear, even to information professionals. We know copyrights are protected for defined terms of continued on page 18