On PLUS
By David Hoffman, Photographer
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I’ve never been more widely published than I am today. My work appears across the world, in news sites, in magazine features and in every kind of online publication from tiny blogs, social media to world class sites such as the Mail Online and the Guardian.

With the honourable exception of The Guardian almost none of those publications have paid me a penny. I have a vague idea as to how much I am losing. From the consultancy work that I do I know that very few of the picture licensing agencies in the market have any idea at all.

If we were paid for every use of our work we could cut our prices by a factor of ten, maybe more, and still earn more than we do now. PLUS is the essential starting point for a structure that not only allows a beneficial mutual co-operation involving creators, licensors and publishers but by streamlining and automating the process of licensing will open up an evolution of registries and hubs that in the long term will, I believe, make this unpaid use a rarity.

Many of the large publishers are right now in deep trouble over their use of images outside of the agreed licences. I know one small library that has recently recovered sums well into six figures from publishers who have produced extra editions, printed more than the agreed run and sold in unlicensed territories. Many other libraries will be following in these footsteps.

Very few of these publishers set out to break the law or to swindle us. They have simply been unable to keep up with the administrative load of rights management involved in producing more and more books where almost every image has a different set of terms – many of which are written on bits of mashed tree and stored in a thousand different files. Even when they have been transcribed to databases these are often mutually incompatible, error prone and out of date.

For publishers PLUS offers a massive streamlining of their administration. For image makers and those who licence our work the advantage of PLUS in leading potential users back to us is obvious. If we can be found we can be paid. If we can be paid easily, preferably automatically, then we are far more likely to get to see that money.

We simply can’t continue as we are now. As Tony Sleep put it: “We must reinvent an environment that no longer works for anyone.”

As an individual photographer I’ve always understood that my isolation weakened my professional ability. It’s that thought that has led me to become so deeply involved in building and strengthening the organisations that support us and bring us together – EPUK, the BPC and NUJ at present, previously BAPLA of course, and AOP and BPPA and others. PLUS’s net sweeps wider, bringing in publishers, agencies, academic institutions and more. Any organisation that is involved in licensing images stands to gain from the co-operative presence of every other organisation involved in the use of images.

The beauty of PLUS is in its central concept of a sustainable ecosystem that works for each because it works for all. PLUS can only work for one if it works for all.
We are not going to see 1990 again. The simple, paper based, ways we worked then made us good money. We’ve converted those working methods into their digital equivalents. We’re all digital and computerised now – but it’s still the same fragmented, itemised business that it always has been, it’s just that we are doing it with a keyboard instead of a biro and carbon paper and couriers. It won’t do. It’s time for a completely new, integrated ecosystem and PLUS offers the conceptual structure that we can build out from.

We are already seeing registries – Hargreaves’ hub, CEPIC’s interesting new venture. There are many others building their own parts of our brave new world. PLUS, and PLUS IDs for images, owners, licences, agents and buyers are the atoms and molecules that we’ll build our sustainable future from.

Look at history. Look at the hundreds of small libraries, agents and individual photographers that stood still as the digital avalanche swept through our world a decade ago. Where are they now? Off communing with the dodo and the passenger pigeon and the great auk.

PLUS is building an island in our flooded world. Join PLUS. Or drown.