Picdar in the news

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PrintMedia Management looks at how Picdar's Media Mogul digital asset management system is helping The Economist find the ideal pictures and graphics

The Economist's picture desk has very specific image needs. Where most daily newspapers focus on the immediate and the eye-catching, The Economist looks for pictures that convey precise information.

At 3 o'clock each Monday afternoon, a small group of people gather to decide the cover picture for The Economist, the newspaper known to reach and influence world thinking. As well as researching pictures for the cover, Celina Dunlop, Picture Editor, and her staff review a variety of images to accompany stories written for that week's issue. But it has not always been that simple.

The Economist has had to respond to changes in what is happening in the picture world. High-speed wire services and modern newsgathering techniques mean that Dunlop has significantly more incoming information to handle than in the past.

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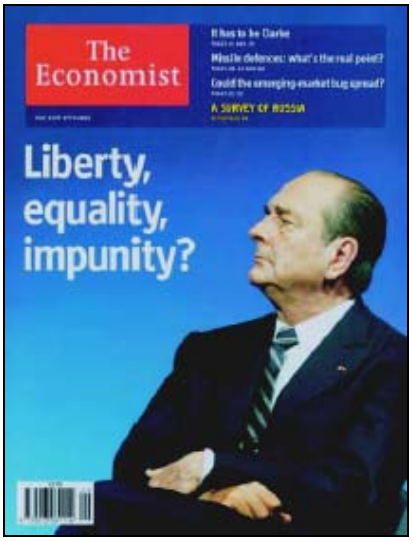
To help manage and work with the volume and variety of images, The Economist uses a suite of solutions from Picdar, comprising Picdar's Media Mogul® DAM and Media Mogul Picture Desk products. Together, these provide a digital asset management (DAM) solution for managing, archiving and re-purposing media files in and out of print and web media at high speed and in high volume from multiple sources.

The Economist gave up staff photographers many years ago. "We are too broad and sometimes a little esoteric," says Penny Garrett, Head of Graphics. Instead, The Economist receives a constant feed of pictures via satellite from three news wire photo services. It also obtains photographs from most of the main picture agencies as well as from many smaller, specialist sources.



Building the brand

In the 1960s, The Economist group bought a plot of land in the centre of St James's, London, and commissioned a purpose-built office to house its centre of operations. At that time, the newspaper had a small, mainly British, circulation. Today, the editorial team at 25 St James's Street wires its pages to seven print plants across five continents; its news and opinions cover world issues; and it is available in every major city. In the days before high-speed, relatively cheap computing, this could never have been achieved.

Each edition is meticulously put together along with pertinent images, graphics and maps in a room no larger than a small London restaurant. Pockets of activity separate page make-up and the picture desk at one edge of the 11th floor. On top of a map chest in Garrett's office is a colourful cartoon original of Bill Clinton standing between Israeli and Palestinian rocket launchers. "We rarely own the copyright. That belongs to the artist, and the original must be returned," says Garrett.

Testing times

The search for a suitable picture system to manage the growing variety and volume of images and all their associated copyrights began 10 years ago when The Economist agreed to trial a new analogue device being developed by one of the leading newspaper groups of the day. However, "waiting seven minutes for a single picture to download only to find it had corrupted wasn't much fun", remembers Dunlop.

The people behind the analogue system eventually stopped developing it, so it was time to look again. Garrett had heard of Picdar, but it had something of a "haute couture" reputation and was used by seriously big media owners such as the Daily Telegraph. "We didn't even think that it was in our league. We assumed it was going to be fantastically expensive," comments Garrett.

However, she was proved pleasantly wrong on a trip to Ifra in 1999, and returned to St James's with the news that Picdar could do something for The Economist at a price it could

afford. Finding an asset management solution that was able to support all the variations of file formats in the market was becoming an urgent requirement, and Media Mogul could handle this.

It also addressed Dunlop's major concern, "...does it work?", and the picture desk was satisfied that it would interface with both the Apple Macintosh and PC platforms.

Making systems work together at the Economist is important, but fixed standards are impractical as every department has its own needs. Moreover, the building has now reached its capacity, so supporting technologies have to be effective at helping people to be successful in their jobs. Nothing, however, is bought in complete isolation. "Our IT department is in the next office, so we do benefit from being able to talk regularly about the technology issues and our ideas about how to make things better," says Garrett.

IT is involved right from the start of any technology review process, and the fact that the new asset management system would fit within the technologies already installed on site was a major plus. There had been substantial investment in new editorial systems, and a revamp of the production systems, so it was important that the new technology was able to complement existing systems.

To make absolutely sure that they were making the right choice, Garrett and her team carried out vigorous testing and Q&A this

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