The SNO Report: What are the rules for using photos you find online?

The Super Bowl just ended. Your staff is writing a little story about it and want a photo. Knowing what they've been taught about copyright laws, your staff is cautious. What can they do?

For a photo from Sunday's big game, the options are extremely limited.

— If you subscribe to a wire service (AP, Getty, Reuters, USA Today), you're probably set. But those services are seriously expensive.

— Getty Images offers free access to its entire library via embeds, which is nice but isn't as perfect as it sounds. This allows you to embed a photo into the text of your article, but that's not a Featured Image and you have no control over the size that photo displays at in the story.

— Email is a long shot but if you're a local school in Kansas City or the Bay Area reaching out to a local photographer employed by the local paper, it's worth a shot.

— A Google search for images from the game (images specifically labeled for reuse) will turn up only a few images of a football field from this decade, and none of this year's game.

The point is, it's hard to get your hands on those photos. But that's not the case for everything.

Chances are, the photos you're using come from one of three sources: a member of your staff, a submission, or an internet search. Let's focus on that last one: the internet. What are the rules for using photos you find online?

Saving images from Google searches or other websites and republishing them on your website is illegal. Potentially, your publication would be liable to pay compensatory damages to the copyright holder; in fact, there are companies with the sole mission of finding these illegal uses and threatening lawsuits. You don't want that. Just because you see a photo in a Google image search doesn't mean it's the world's to use, so don't tempt yourself.

Specify rules for your Google image search so that the only images it turns up are ones you can use. From the image search results page, click on "Tools," then "Usage Rights," then "Labeled for Reuse." These are the photos you're allowed to use.

If those searches don't give you enough options, we'd suggest visiting the Creative Commons or Wikipedia Commons, both large databases of free and legal photos you can republish.

One big exception to these rules is photos for reviews of movies, music or TV. Under copyright law, these on-screen stills and promotional posters are free to use. Websites for those movies, musicians and TV shows may also have press kits — images from those are also free.

No matter what, writing a photo credit for each one you're putting on your site is the next step. You still need to identify your source. So, if it's a musician's album cover, credit the record label. Be clear that you're using it with permission from the local photographer or the Commons.

Exercise caution during your image searches. Take the appropriate steps to avoid legal trouble. If you don't know, ask, but always credit where credit is due.