**Notes on the informal contract for provision of a magazine to the members of the MPA, and the request made to tender for the same by April 5th 2017**

My apologies for the length of this.

In the past, the Association has only briefly owned title to its magazine. It did not do so under Dr Roger Saunders (the magazine until 1990 was the property of TMT Co. Ltd). It may have done so between 1990 and 1995 when edited by Darron Hartas. After 1995, MPA owned the title but licensed (for a £1 annual consideration) the publishing right to Icon Publications Ltd. The title was The Master Photographer, and the contract included provision for per member payment and annual increases determined by the membership subscription.

MPA stands to risk financial loss unless a reasonable proportion of expenditure is allocated to zero rated publications (in print, not electronic, as these carry VAT).

A key aspect of the magazine budget has always been the agreement between MPA and HM VAT office, which fixes the proportion of VAT paid for membership subscriptions. This is not determined by the actual charges or costs, but by the value of the supplies made to members as publications. Up to the early 2000s these included some priced publications, and a Yearbook with directory of members. The Yearbook contract was entirely separate from the magazine and depended for viability on high pressure advertising sales by a specialist Yearbook publisher. It had a high nominal cover price but did not cost the association anything, the publisher being able to secure high fees from the members themselves for bold entries and advertising pages.

When MPA started to lose membership from 2002 onwards, the formal contract with Icon Publications Ltd was broken by the MPA’s failure to increase the payment in line with subscriptions. This was acknowledged and understood and the last written contract, in 2005, set out a floor below which payments would not fall. This floor was based on 1600 UK full members and that is the basis on which we still work. At that time ten issues a year were produced and the cover price was set to ensure that approximately £50 in value was zero rated for VAT. It is this figure of £49.50 (or thereabouts) which enabled MPA to continue with the VAT split for subscriptions. It is now 20 years or more since Icon Publications Ltd had a visit from the VAT office. The split is probably incorrect now, and MPA could be liable to repay a significant sum of VAT if the books were audited for zero and VATable supplies to members over the usual six year back period. It has become more complicated as all internet services to members are a VATable supply, while most printed communications are zero rated.

European members receiving only a digital magazine should be invoiced with a full 20% VAT component. Similarly, any student or provisional members who do not get the printed magazine should have their subs treated as including 20% VAT. I have said repeatedly that our pricing for MPA allows up to 1600 members in the UK, and there is no reason at all for any UK provisional or student member not to be given the printed magazine. It will cost MPA nothing, and ensures that the VAT split currently applied for subs can not be challenged. World members, outside Europe, attract zero VAT anyway regardless of the supply made.

This calls for careful management. At Icon, we have done our part by ensuring that the cover price of the magazine supported the MPA’s VAT split claim. At £7.95 for six issues it is £47.70 and any shortfall between this and the actual figure claimed by MPA as zero rated supply must be allocated to other zero rated publications provided by the MPA to members, such as the annual report and accounts in printed form, the Awards prospectus, printed guides to qualifications, services etc (members’ handbook). It may be that all such printed material is no longer issued, and has been replaced by on-line information.

However MPA is now allowing more promotional subscription pricing. This may lower the averaged UK subscription figure, as used for the VAT split calculation. I do not have the figures, but it could perhaps enable the magazine to have a more attractive cover price.

Icon no longer works with a formal contract, and from the time of the change of the title to be Master Photography, also owns the title to the magazine. Icon has the legal responsibility as publisher, rather than MPA. We are also financially responsible for all costs of staff, fees, production, and delivery to the membership and also not subject to any increase until the membership is once again higher than 1600. Finally, we do not claim any costs or expenses. The fee charged to MPA is essentially a magazine subscription, and it accounted for as such. This also means that we do not have to charge MPA VAT, which we would have to if for example we charged to provide an editor, to attend events, to re-charge fees paid for articles or advertising commission. This ensures MPA is genuinely paying for zero VAT content to support the subscription split agreement.

As the owner of the title, Icon is also able to place the magazine on public sale, which at present we only do with the the Masters of Photography special annual edition. It has been the view of MPA in the past that some content needed to be confidential or limited to professional photographers – not seen by the public.

I feel that now so much confidential, professional training, marketing advice and so on can be delivered by controlled web or email that it is not necessary to have this ‘for our eyes only’ content in the magazine at all. It could be used more to showcase the value of MPA photography, and every issue could be made available through WHSmith major branches. However, the cover price makes this inefficient (too many unsold copies).

It’s a problem – public visibility would benefit MPA and our advertisers, increase membership and give publicity to members featured in the magazine. But we might need to limit the cover price to £5.95, and this would have VAT split implications for MPA. It is this aspect, the VAT split, which has most limited our options for the magazine. We could produced more editions, as we once did at 10 a year and £4.95 cover price. However, the trade might not support this level of advertising frequency for a small circulation professional organisation magazine.

As the board will be aware, we have promoted digital versions of the magazine, which allow any member featured to share on social media from the first page of ‘their’ article, and also open up free readership worldwide on some platforms. We currently publish on YUDU, ISSUU and Pocketmags which covers iOS, Android, Kindle, PC and Mac apps, page-turn readers and downloadable PDFs. Though readership varies greatly depending on the edition, it’s generally many times the MPA core readership, the recent annual has reached 3,400 readers with its highest readership in Spain. The September/October edition last year has been exceptionally popular, with over 13,600 readers so far (473,000 page impressions) and its highest popularity in France. The reach of these versions is worldwide and they will continue to be read for years to come.

Any new publisher tendering for a contract to produce a successor magazine under contract to MPA would need to be aware of this background.

It’s also worth considering that a new publisher for The Master Photographer would have to negotiate to acquire forward advertising bookings (as we have done ourselves, as when we took over f2 Freelance Photographer in February 2014) and to honour over 170 UK subscriptions, 60 overseas. In the event of the order for Master Photography from MPA ending, Icon Publications Ltd will consider the costs and revenue implications of continuing to publish the title without the involvement of MPA, which we are able to do. It is a perfectly good title for an instructional magazine aimed at aspiring professionals.

I will submit a tender – in the absence of formal tender documents – before the April 5th board meeting. I have been given the following points to address:

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We are looking to deliver a membership communication that performs for the organisation and its members.

Share content on all channels that a member wants to engage

Increase membership retention and acquisition

Provide value offerings to our trade partners

A redesign and content refresh to embody the MPA’s values

A comprehensive time line and flat plan for the magazine

Any added value on offer to the MPA

Keep within our £36k budget

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I will provide responses to these ranging from ‘what do you think we have been doing for the last twenty-two years?’ to ‘that’s your job not ours’ and ‘we can only do this if MPA management provides timely and full access to information’. My responses may not be in corporate meetingspeak, and if you find me using terms like ‘acquisition’, ‘engage’ or ‘embody’ it will only be because I’m getting old and my brain is easily infected by such viruses.

I would point out that a request to ‘tender’ for the magazine with a two-week (roughly) deadline is unusual and has not been preceded by any discussion. In fact, under the present management of MPA our regular meetings have simply not happened and all involvement with head office and advance planning has been ended. I have not been expected to visit Darlington in the past year except on my own initiative to catch up with judgings and I have not had a single dedicated editorial meeting, or been asked to present any information to the board, or take any guidance from the board, since the departure of the previous management.

I would expect that if changes were required or the present situation was deemed to be unsatisfactory the first step would be to meet and talk. However, since the appointment of Clare Louise as CEO I have worked almost without any useful dialogue – and this is not relative to the previous administration, it is relative to all and any clients or organisations I have worked with or for over the past forty years. I have never felt less involved or more excluded.

If the position is simply that I am not considered to be a friend and colleague any more, producing the magazine for MPA would become uncomfortable and life is too short for that.

With the IIP/BIIP in 1976-77 and again in 1990-94 I was required to attend quarterly full meetings of the editorial board and to work on a day-to-day basis, with monthly meetings, with their editorial director Ron Taylor. With the MPA in 1984-88 arrangements were more informal but involved contact on a daily basis. With MPA from 1995 to 2013 our proximity to head office was about the same (Kelso to Darlington is a 2 hour drive, and Tuxford to Uxbridge was similar). I was regularly called in for meetings, to make proposals to brand and promote events (such as Ten-2-One, True Colours, MPA Academy which we helped shape from first conception onwards and were therefore able to integrate into the magazine’s plans). I did also produce or co-produce the awards prospectus both for entries and for the event, and produce the artwork for MPA’s exhibition presence (at Focus) including the text panels and the sponsored image displays. Usually working with Paul Cooper, this whole process meant being involved and familiar with all plans and content from the very start and had many benefits including early involvement with multiple trade sponsors. This was mutually beneficial, as it ensured co-ordination of magazine advertising and sponsorship direct to MPA.

Since our memorandum to the new directors of March 2nd 2013 (which I guess really marked the point of change) all of this long-term co-operation, which cost MPA either nothing or very little and in many cases secured real benefits such as my negotiation of the £1000 Wedding Fellowship Bursaries from Loxley Colour, has been ended. For three years MPA appears to have been run on telepathy and impulse, and last-minute planning and production. This is something I’m used to as newspapers and magazines work that way for part of their content; also, I accept that web and email communication, on-line entry and judging (etc) greatly reduce lead times. Being able to do things at the last minute does not mean that is the best way to manage an association. I am pleased to note that Ray Lowe as Chairman has restored timely communication and forward planning from regional to national level, and that Kate Teesdale-Ward has taken on some PR and social media projects.

The Photography Show, and Photovision contra deal

Both these developments made me hopeful that the lack of interface between MPA and Icon would be corrected, though I remain disappointed by the failure of MPA to acknowledge the £2,400 contra value given towards The Photography Show in the form of space provided to Future in Cameracraft – or to accept that I had indeed requested a desk space on the MPA stand in return for this, having giving up our own small stand in 2016 on this basis but been let down then. We were let down again in 2017, with denial of any arrangement being made, but fortunately I was informed of this before the show. For 2018 MPA is free to offer space in the magazine, as our old terms clearly say that MPA will be given some pages (2 per issue, but we could stretch to 3 with only six issues a year) to use as they wish provided they are not sold, or given to sponsors in lieu of any advertising in the magazine. Since The Photography Show did not budget for advertising (Focus on Imaging did) but also did not charge for stand space if advertising was given in contra (Focus on Imaging always charged for the space) we consider this acceptable. We will, as in 2015, negotiate our own contra for Icon’s small stand.

I did load the car with Master Photography back issue stocks, including some of the 2017 annual (we still hold about 100 which actually belong to MPA, Richard agreed to store them in Leicestershire for the specific purpose of bringing to the show). Apart from one box I was carrying when I first came to the stand, these were not needed and I simply had to take them back. I have instructed Richard to recycle of all back issue stocks he holds, except the 2017 annual, and apart from keeping some file copies we will do the same here as we have an entire stock room devoted to them – in the past, my regular visits to HQ always included bringing whatever back issue stocks we held, free of charge, and this ensured they got out to prospective members.

We have also provided, in Master Photography and in Cameracraft, advertising spaces which have secured ourselves and MPA stand space and involvement in the Photovision Roadshows in Edinburgh, Dublin, Epsom and Kent during 2017. I have been asked to end the Master Photography contra as MPA does not want to be present at these events. We will try to represent MPA as well as our ourselves at Edinburgh and Dublin, as although we get few sales from these events – it is more than valuable to be there alongside our trade friends and to be able to greet and chat with our readers and with MPA members. Epsom and Kent are not practical because of the expensive and congested locations, but would seem to be an ideal opportunity for MPA regions to use a facility which has been secured at no cost, and we would be happy to let Forward Events know that Icon’s space is instead to be given to the appropriate MPA regions.

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