

Digitizing Photographs: Exploring the Relationship Between Building and Using Image Digital Archives

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Abstract: Image digital archives (IDA) are emerging as ubiquitous components of archival programs of all types and sizes. IDAs are mechanisms for delivering digital surrogates of archival holdings. They might also be considered archival collections in their own right—representing the archival characteristics of original source materials, but also reflecting the decisions that archivists make throughout the digitization process. In presenting a European research agenda for preserving digital libraries, Seamus Ross (2007) notes that “if we think more carefully about digital libraries we easily observe that they may be libraries by name, but they are archives by nature.” The first of five important questions raised by a recent seminar on mass digitization and the humanities (CLIR 2007) reiterates this point. “How do traditional archival values migrate into the computationally intensive environment made possible by copious digital data and digital tools?” In the past fifteen years of increasing digitization activity, virtually no research has explored the relationship between building and using digital archives of images. Use studies conducted at Penn State (Pisciotta 2001) and Berkeley (Harley 2006) provide important demographic insights but reach no conclusions about the processes and procedures behind the digital image collections used. Saracevic (2004) reviewed a decade of evaluation studies in the broader environment of digital libraries and found that “more often than not, digital library users and digital libraries are in an adversarial position.”

The research paper supporting this presentation presents a model that describes the mechanisms at play in the digital collection building process that potentially influence the way that end users judge the archival values of the product. Specifically, the research focuses on the extent to which technical decisions regarding selection, digitization, quality control, rendering, and metadata generation capture, add, or diminish archival values of photographic materials. Workflow processes are derived from the structure and content of 18 digitization guidelines published over a twelve-year period. The research project identifies critical decision points at which options and outcomes shape the archival qualities of a digital product in ways that may be detectable and important to users. The presentation itself will describe the general decision model, the research design for an application of the model with users and with archivists who manage digital projects, and a preliminary validation of the model with three expert digital image researchers.

About the author:

Paul Conway is associate professor in the School of Information at the University of Michigan. His research interests include the challenges of representing and interpreting visual and textual resources in digital form, extracting knowledge from large-scale image

databases, and modeling incentive systems for digital preservation and access, particularly in the context of emerging interdisciplinary scholarship in the humanities.

Conway teaches courses on digital libraries, understanding archives, preserving sound and motion resources, and digitization for preservation. He has extensive administrative experience in archives and preservation fields and has made major contributions over the past 30 years to the literature on archival users and use, preservation management, and digital imaging technologies. He has held positions at the National Archives and Records Administration, the Society of American Archivists, Yale University, and Duke University.

In 2005, Conway received the American Library Association's Paul Banks and Carolyn Harris Preservation Award for his contributions to the preservation field. He is a Fellow of the Society of American Archivists and has been active in SAA for 25 years.