

How Do Expert Users Judge Archival Qualities in Digitized Photographs?

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Abstract: In two decades, the digitization of visual archives has transitioned from rarified experiment to nearly ubiquitous activity across the spectrum of archival institutions. The digitization of photographs endows the resulting images with archival qualities that are derived in part from the original sources and in part from the accumulated effect of many small technical decisions. The research issues associated with the use of large-scale collections of digital images are profound and as yet largely unexplored. This platform presentation summarizes a portion of the findings of a study on how visually expert users perceive the archival qualities of digitized photographs. Seven in-depth case studies represent the spectrum of factors motivating the sophisticated, project-based use of digitized photographs, ranging from scholars to serious avocational users to people whose livelihood depends on finding and using high quality representations of historical photographs. The research adapts “thinking out loud” protocols to explore the significance of various dimensions of archival quality, based on the decisions to use digitized photographs for particular visually-based research projects. The presentation briefly defines archival quality and summarizes the research methodology, including the selection of interview subjects, then develops a set of scenarios to demonstrate the significance of archival quality factors for expert users. The findings have important implications for the creation of “one size fits all” collections of digitized photographs, as well as deeper implications regarding the archival nature of digital objects. The research is supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation.

About the author:

Paul Conway is associate professor in the School of Information. His research interests include the challenges of representing and interpreting visual and textual resources in digital form and modeling the use of archives in interdisciplinary scholarship in the humanities. Conway has extensive teaching and administrative experience in the archives and preservation professions. Before joining the Michigan faculty in 2006, he held administrative positions at Duke University, Yale University, the National Archives and Records Administration, and the Society of American Archivists. Conway has made major contributions over the past 30 years to the literature on archival users and use, preservation management, and digital imaging technologies. In 2005, he received the American Library Association's Paul Banks and Carolyn Harris Preservation Award for his contributions to the preservation field. He currently serves on the Editorial Board of *American Archivist* and is a Fellow of the Society of American Archivists.