DISPLAYING DIVERSITY ONLINE - THE COPYRIGHT REGISTRATION PHOTOGRAPHS IN THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES, LONDON

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Abstract

The Copyright records in The National Archives offer an opportunity to put online a very rich and varied collection of photographs. The large number of photographs raise problems of providing users with adequate information of the type of visual resources available and the context in which they can best be understood. This paper looks at the practical problems involved in building the online resource and examines the ways in which they can be solved. Proposals are made whereby academic researchers can help to provide public access and contextual guidance linked to full cataloguing of archive records.

Keywords: Photographs, Public Access, Archives, Copyright, Interpretation

Photography was the first of the modern mass media and it transformed the way in which modern society saw itself and envisioned the world. This was evident from the very earliest years of its development in the nineteenth century. In 1857 the writer and critic Lady Eastlake wrote that photography provided 'facts which are neither the province of art nor of description, but of that new form of communication between man and man – neither letter, message, nor picture – which now happily fills up the space between them.' (Eastlake,1857) As the technology developed in the mid–century enormous numbers of photographs were taken. It has been estimated that in England alone in the 1860s about four hundred million portrait photographs were sold each year. (Gernsheim, 1969)

A century and a half later millions of photographs from this period are preserved in collections and in archives. It is the very large numbers of photographs which have survived and the very varied types of subjects which they cover which raise a whole set of questions on how to present and to interpret them, particularly in the digital age.

This paper describes an ongoing research project initially funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board which enabled me to be seconded to The National Archives in London from my academic post at De Montfort University in Leicester for the first part of 2003.

The National Archives houses one of the largest photographic collections in the United Kingdom - but a most unusual one which has its origins in an Act of Parliament. The 1862 Copyright Act led to the registration of hundreds of thousands of photographs as copyright at Stationers Hall in the City of London. This collection of photographs and the legal registration papers associated with them are now in the care of the National Archives at Kew, London.

The 1862 Act was framed to protect the commercial interests of photographers. COPY 1 is the record class which consists of the legal registration forms which were usually accompanied by a copy of the photograph described. Most of these photographs are unique and represent a cross-section of British photography at a key moment in its evolution which is of international importance. During this crucial period in the development of the medium between 1862 and 1912, every photograph which a cameraman or editor considered important in Britain and its Empire was registered in London. So photographs of life in the South Seas or in the Arctic or in China were registered by British citizens in London.   And of course all the British–based photographers intent on making money from photographs of the British royal family, or of politicians, or of famous actresses, or of shipwrecks or of a thousand other subjects made sure that they registered their work at Stationers Hall.

For historians of the modern media this archive is uniquely valuable because in effect it is the photographers who have selected the contents of this archive themselves by the very act of registration. Anybody could register their photographs provided that they were covered by the Act and paid a small fee. No cultural curators or archive directors decided what went in and what stayed out. Nobody was employed to decide if this stuff was art, or important (whatever that might mean), or 'significant'. So the subject matter and nature of the photographs is of almost unimaginable breadth.

For example:

A portrait of Queen Victoria with her family

A photograph of a lamb – 'A Freak of Nature' with two heads and six legs – stuffed and ready for display

The actress Sarah Bernhardt on a beach with friends

A flying tackle catching a rugby football player in mid–air

Bodies brought ashore from a shipwreck in Cornwall

The Whipping Post at Wormwood Scrubs Prison

A plump baby sat on a barrel which has painted on it the text Fed on Nestlé's Food, Aged 5 months

And so on through tens of thousands of examples.

I first researched this archive twenty years ago which meant spending two months living in a tent near the storage depôt in the countryside where it was then housed. The archives in all must weigh several tons and to view all the material – as I did at that time – meant having to unfold paper forms which were tied up into bundles. Attached to these forms with glue are fragile original photographs, many of them folded, which need very careful handling. Indeed they have now become so fragile that public access to them is very restricted.

The current project is to ensure that these precious and fragile records are preserved and made accessible to the public through making them available in digital form online. In the digital world researchers will no longer have to live under canvas and will not have to untie bundles. However the process of creating a digital archive from such rich resources is by no means easy.

UK Universities are becoming much more aware of the importance of visual resources in supporting programmes of teaching and research. Accordingly they are placing emphasis on the creation of significant image collections available to scholars in digital form. I acted as national co–ordinating editor on the HELIX project (Higher Education Library Image eXchange). This was part of the Electronic Libraries Programme (eLib) running on software originally developed by the European ELISE project (Electronic Library Image Service for Europe, 1993-99). Each of these projects was set up to develop the possibility of searching sets of image databases, both across the United Kingdom and across Europe. My rôle was as a media historian in researching and selecting images from the collection of Getty Images, London for the section of HELIX covering the Social and Political History of Britain from 1859. This project led to fifty thousand images being placed online.

A recent development has been the decision of UK Universities to commission the design and development of Pixus – an image portal which will provide access to collections of images which have been licensed for use in higher education. For the very first time we are seeing the emergence of the possibility of creating very large and significant digital resources funded by national bodies. The downside is that we are getting into unknown territory where the sheer numbers of photographs are threatening to overwhelm the users and to make digital archives of photography unusable.

Most of the methods traditionally used by researchers and scholars to disseminate their findings involve processes of selection. The production of illustrated books, for example, involves working alongside specialist editors who help to transform academic research into viable publications. Their format and size are determined in part by practical printing restrictions and by financial constraints. The process involved is one of selection and focus. The author compresses, interprets and channels information for the reader. Books are about defined subjects, and their illustrations are restricted in number.

The book which I produced on the Copyright archives Seeing Through Photographs (Hiley, 1983) was able to reproduce only a hundred or so images and could only act as an introduction and sampler. The development of the technology which makes possible the digitisation of archives in their entirety transforms the situation. Firstly it raises underlying questions of the inherent bias which is going to be present however well–meant or scholarly a preselection of material is.

Kim Veltman was one of the first people to realise that electronic access to the holdings of galleries and archives was going to have a profound impact on how we would perceive and understand those collections:

In the past the public part of a museum traditionally included only one to five percent of the full collection. This fraction typically reflected the particular fashions of the day. A majority of the holdings of great galleries is in storage. Electronic versions potentially allow public access to all these works presently in storage and thereby imply a transformation of what gallery and museum materials are public. To put it differently: we are all accustomed to making claims about styles of art, about cultural periods, about

works in a given province or city, but very often these claims are based on acquaintance with only a very small sample of the materials that are extant. Electronic media offer an enormous opportunity of increasing the sample on which our claims are based. (Veltman, 1995)

His comments are equally relevant to the questions raised and – potentially – the attitudes changed by the process of making very large amounts of material available from archives.

Because many subject researchers – certainly in the Humanities – are often ignorant of major developments in the digital world there are serious issues which have yet to be properly addressed. Archivists usually take the view that ideally they would like to have all of an archive available for study – all the records in their entirety. Scholars are still trained to select out and to interpret small parts of the historical record. Members of the public who are online users of archive material and undergraduate students searching for useful information are in danger of being overwhelmed by an excess of information.

Seamus Ross, who has given a great deal of thought to both the generation and use of digital archives, is aware that the creation of large quantities of digitised archival material presents scholars with problems:

On current evidence, historians of the future will be left with a large number of d–facts that will prove difficult to use. … Confronted with the realisation, that faced with the vast quantities of surviving paper documents few researchers can be comprehensive, scholars often suggest that as we increase the quantities of digital documents they will be even less able to investigate the material in a comprehensive way. This is a spurious analogy. Archives of the future will be different and researchers will adopt new, and more technology dependent, ways of working. With an array of analysis tools they will work more exhaustively with the surviving digital resources than they have so far been able to work with analogue ones. (Ross, 2000)

This is an optimistic view, but one which is looking some way into the future. One important point he makes is that the accessibility of raw information is not necessarily going to do a great deal of good. As he says: 'Any future scholarship depends upon the

survival of the digital resources in accessible and intelligible contexts.' Let us see what impact these issues have in the development of digital access to the Copyright records in The National Archives.

Given the experience gained over the past few years of digitisation projects carried out both in the United Kingdom and elsewhere it is clear that the physical process of scanning and preparing material for display online is fairly well understood. However the real problem will be to create a system which can lead researchers to photographs which will be useful to them. They may be subject specialists concerned with relatively narrow topics or they may be more general users with a wider range of interests. My experience working on previous large-scale image projects leads me to believe that we have a long way to go to find the most effective way to provide usable search systems.

The first stage is relatively straightforward – though expensive and time-consuming – and that is to enter details of the COPY 1 records into the online catalogue of The National Archives. This is known as PROCAT (Public Record Office Online Catalogue) and it will eventually provide on–line references and descriptions of the vast amount of material in The National Archives. The intention is to make it easy to find and to order up the original documents at Kew from storage to the Reading Room. Programmes are currently under way to digitise from original material to make digital facsimiles and transcriptions available but much of this work is at an early stage.

PROCAT at present carries descriptions of sets documents held in the archives. For example the archive class WO 1/2 (WO stands for War Office) contains Letters from Commanders-in-Chief, North America: Mainly of 1775-1776. This description is of a set of documents, called a piece. In PROCAT the Copyright records piece details for COPY 1/364 reads:

Photographs registered at the Stationer's Company. Bundle of forms applying for registration for copyright. Each form provides a description of the photograph(s), together with the names and addresses of authors and copyright owners.
1883 Apr - June

There are often hundreds of individual items within a piece. It takes a great deal more work to put the descriptions of individual items on PROCAT. Some have already been entered, for example Item details for COPY 1/364/201 reads:

(1)"A photograph of Miss Florence St John as 'Belle Lurette'. Standing, hat and feathers, right hand on parrots head, left hand holding a biscuit". (2)"A photograph of Miss Florence St John as 'Belle Lurette'. Standing, hat and feathers, right hand finger to parrots bill, biscuit in left hand".
1883 May 7

No other details are included of these two photographs or their subject. Who is Florence St John? Who is this Belle Lurette character, and why is she feeding a parrot? A search on the Web indicates that it may be a British version of the Opéra-comique en 3 actes staged at the Théâtre de La Renaissance on October 30 1880. Another web site tells us that Florence St. John (1855-1912), English actress and singer, was London's undisputed 'queen of comic opera.'

Eager to find out more, we read on in the PROCAT record:

Neither photograph has been attached to the registration form. Copyright owner and author: Samuel Alexander Walker, 230 Regent Street, London. Form completed 7 May 1883. Registration stamp: 7 May 1883.

How disappointing. It is fortunate that the great majority of registration forms have original photographs attached.

From this brief glimpse into the fascinating details of Copyright records I think that we can set down three key elements which we require of COPY 1 records online:

We need to be able to look at the photographs which are described in PROCAT whenever possible.
Users need to be able to find relevant materials from among over a hundred thousand photographs spanning half a century (1862 – 1912).

In order to place the photographs in their proper context and to promote fuller understanding of them it would be useful to provide links from the catalogue records. These could take the form of background information and enable the users to be aware of other photographs of the same subject within COPY 1 records and other web sites which may enlighten us about the subject matter.

Let me take the points one by one.

Technically it will not be difficult to place digital copies of photographs within PROCAT. More problematic may be decisions on the resolution of the images allowed free into the public domain and the possibility of watermarking. The process of completing textual descriptions for COPY 1 and linking them with images within PROCAT will take until 2007 at the earliest, because of the numbers involved.

On the second point there is no doubt that users will need help to find what they are looking for. Because the structure of PROCAT is by necessity standardised there is no provision for allowing additional description of photographs. Indeed, to minimise any unwanted interpretation of material within the catalogue all that is permitted is a transcription of the description of the photograph approved by the Registration Clerk at Stationers Hall, followed by a bare–bones additional sentence to provide any helpful amplification thought necessary. This arrangement will therefore only be able to provide text searches within the catalogue records.

Other collections have decided to develop keyword systems to open up their visual resources. Getty Images have spent millions of pounds in recent years on a huge programme of digitising images in their collections. They saw this as a commercial necessity to provide access to the collection numbering over 16 million items which had evolved during the twentieth century from what once was the BBC Radio Times Hulton Picture Library. When I was the national editor on the HELIX project working with what was then Hulton Deutsch we were able to work from a very advanced starting point as the photographs from which I was selecting had not only been digitised already, they had also been associated with their original textual descriptions, date of publication and, in most

cases, photographer. We knew which company archive or picture magazine they came from and we could see the keyword descriptions.

This process of keywording is at least as expensive – if it is to work efficiently – as the digitisation of the photographs. Caroline Arms, writing about similar problems which the Library of Congress has faced in America, comments: "Describing pictorial materials accurately is time-consuming and expensive. Unlike a book, which usually has a title page on which basic information is recorded, an image does not describe itself." (Arms, 1999) The Getty keyword system is built upon over one thousand five hundred keyword descriptions, and as the picture library is much used for feature and advertising purposes it includes descriptions of moods and emotions – something which is not to be found in most academically oriented image collections.

In fact most online collections of images are very poorly provided with search systems. It is hugely expensive to keyword or otherwise index tens of thousands of individual items. And in addition the lack of general agreement as to how the subject should be approached means that archivists and curators are reluctant – for the present at least – to commit huge resources of time and money to this task.

It is the commercial picture libraries which are the organisations putting practical systems into place to enable their potential clients to see which images they are able to offer for reproduction. Some of the images available to publishers from The National Archives are available from Heritage Image Partnership who also act as agents for pictures from other national institutions such as The British Library and the British Museum. Their task is made easier than that of archives wishing to place all their images online as they are only dealing with a selection of images which they judge to have commercial value.

They provide a quick way into their collections by using subject headings. The top level of subjects offered for a user to browse consists of the following headings:

> Artistic Representations
> History & Politics
> Lifestyle & Leisure

Locations & Buildings

People

Religion & Belief

Science & Nature

Society & Culture

Trade & Industry

The categories then break down into subsections. For example Society & Culture divides into:

Art & Literature

Death & Burial

Education

Family Life

Issues and Causes

Law & Crime

Music

Performing Arts

Romance & Love

Sickness & Disease

Wealth & Poverty

These are pretty rough and ready divisions, but they are designed to suit the users expected to visit the website and they do offer a way to understand just what subjects the pictures offered cover.

Subject categories are not an ideal solution for the COPY 1 records at The National Archives but they provide a better opportunity for the general user to find what they are looking for than relying only on the PROCAT catalogue entries. This links with the third problem – how to provide the user with contextual material which will give a better understanding and appreciation of the material being researched online.

What we propose to do is build another website to be called the Research Galleries alongside the PROCAT entries. These will gradually be built up to serve user needs. In

total they may eventually provide an alternative route of access to perhaps ten thousand images from COPY 1 records using Subject Categories as the user's way in. There will be a general introduction available giving a history of the Copyright Records and the groupings of photographs will enable contextual and historical material to be provided on subjects such as news photographs, sports photographs, photographs of actresses and so on. Links will be provided to enable users to purchase prints from the Image Library – the commercial arm of The National Archives.

UK Universities will be able to bring their subject specialisms to bear in developing material in the Research Galleries and they will form an ongoing project under development alongside the implementation of PROCAT.

Opening up the Copyright Records will enable scholars to carry out research in detail on the way in which photography as the first of the modern mass media has had an impact on modern society. The English author John Plunkett has recently produced a book on the way in which Queen Victoria was portrayed and made popular by the illustrated mass media. As he describes, the records held by The National Archives were a great help in this: 'The Stationer's Hall records are significant because they demonstrate the way photographs helped to forge a national identity around the royal family. The copyright records provide a quantitative index to the commercial photographs in circulation after 1862.' (Plunkett, 2003)   He has been able to provide a statistical breakdown of the publication of photographs year by year showing the relatively popularity of the members of the British Royal Family, of politicians such as the Prime Minister William Gladstone, and of stage actresses such as Ellen Terry. This type of interesting and innovative approach to the records will be made much easier once they are freely available online.

In traditional paper publishing there has always been a very wide variation in the depth of information provided by books and an understanding of the diversity in the requirements of readers. Scholars may consult a catalogue raisonné – in several volumes perhaps – of a key Impressionist painter. The general public may prefer to get key facts from a Bluffer's Guide to Impressionist Painting. Monet may have painted many haystacks in his time but not every reader or user wishes to see every haystack.

It's the same with any large collection of material such as the COPY 1 records in The National Archives. Some online users will appreciate being able to see every variant of every photograph taken for example during a publicity shoot of Ellen Terry. Others will prefer to look at a gallery containing portraits of famous Victorian stage actresses.

By linking precise catalogue records to more user–friendly guidance using subject headings and contextual material we hope to provide a visual resource which is attractive and useful to a wide variety of users.

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Web Resources:

The web site of The National Archives (formerly The Public Record Office) can be found at http://www.pro.gov.uk. The catalogue of holdings can be viewed in PROCAT (Public Record Office Online Catalogue) at http://catalogue.pro.gov.uk. To see examples of current entries on the Copyright Records go – as an example – to reference COPY 1/364 which will give details of forms and photographs registered between April and June 1883. Material from COPY 1 is incorporated into their Learning Curve site providing on–line teaching resources at http://learningcurve.pro.gov.uk/.

Details of the HELIX project can be found at http://www.helix.dmu.ac.uk/ . Under the present agreement the photographs from Getty Images can only be accessed from computers with a UK University web address. The plan is to move this large collection of photographs over to the Pixus portal.