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*See Also: the University of British  
Columbia iSchool Student Journal*

Vol. 2, No. 1 (Spring 2016)

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**The Quest for Permanence and Impermanence:  
A Comparison of Traditional and Social Media Photo Albums**

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**Keywords:** archives, archivists, social media, photographs, photo albums, personal archives

**Abstract**

This article examines challenges in preserving and providing access to photo albums, both physical and digital. These formats share many similarities in that they are a branch of personal records that have not been treated with deserved seriousness by traditional archival theory, rely extensively on original order to communicate meaning, and are problematic because they both involve some degree of performance that requires recognition and interpretation. These formats differ in that, while physical albums are usually static unless the order of photos are tampered with, digital albums, specifically social media albums, accumulate valuable meaning from their dynamic nature.

**Article**

The personal photograph album has always lived on the blurry boundary between public and private. Ever since inventor Joseph Nicéphore Niépce succeeded in the first quest for permanence, creating the first known photo in 1826 in a process he called heliography, human beings have documented their lives for themselves and for posterity in photographs—from the everyday snapshot to the more formal memento of a major event. Mette Sandbye identifies four major leaps in family photography: the release of the Brownie box camera and roll film by the Eastman Kodak Company in 1888, which made reproducing photos easy for the everyday person; the desire for soldiers and their families to be photographed together during World War I; the introduction of colour film and cheap cameras in the 1960s; and, today, the sharing of personal photos

on the Internet.<sup>1</sup> These leaps span two types of personal photo albums: the physical or traditional album, evolved from the collection and grouping of *cartes de visites* in the Victorian era, and the digital photo album. The physical and the digital share many similarities in that they belong to a family of personal records that have not been treated with deserved seriousness by traditional archival theory, rely extensively on original order to communicate meaning, and are problematic because they both involve some degree of performance that requires recognition and interpretation. These formats differ in that, while physical albums are usually static unless the order of photos are tampered with, digital albums, specifically social media albums, accumulate valuable meaning from their dynamic nature.

Personal photos fall into the tricky category of personal archives, which, traditionally, have been neglected in archives in favour of government and corporate records. Catherine Hobbs laments this emphasis on public records in traditional archival theory and calls for a more nuanced understanding of personal records, which she describes as “where personality and the events of life interact in documentary form.”<sup>2</sup> She disagrees with Sue McKemmish’s straightforward definition of personal archives as “evidence of me,” or evidence of an individual.<sup>3</sup> Instead, she opts for a definition that recognizes that personal records are heavy with meaning that extend beyond a simple and singular concept of self, containing “issues of choice, forgery, self-projection, and personal memorializing.”<sup>4</sup> Personal records are evidence of an individual, but they are also the “ground for playing at self-representation.”<sup>5</sup> They are created for private use, but there is often evidence of the creator’s awareness of an audience. Sandbye, in her study of family photography, identifies the difference between personal and other photography by reiterating that the personal presents a more complex “interpretive problem.”<sup>6</sup> Deriving meaning from these records is challenging, for example, because of the role of emotion in their creation. Like life writing or diaries, photos, even when they do not explicitly document unhappy life events, often contain “something emotional” for the creator.<sup>7</sup> Like Hobbs, Sandbye argues that these “emotional, psychological, and affective qualities that reach further than the individual owner” should be allowed the same seriousness offered to other aspects of photography in the academic study of it.<sup>8</sup>

Just as the treatment of personal records should differ from that of government and corporate records, the treatment of visual records should differ from that of textual records. The untangling of a photo’s contextual information is a complex process, though, traditionally, this has not been reflected in archival practices and standards. Martha Langford, in *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums*, describes outsiders’ perception of personal photos

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<sup>1</sup> Mette Sandbye, “Looking at the Family Photo Album: A Resumed Theoretical Discussion of Why and How,” *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 6 (2014): 3.

<sup>2</sup> Catherine Hobbs, “The Character of Personal Archives: Reflections on the Value of Records of Individuals,” *Archivaria* 52 (2001): 127.

<sup>3</sup> Sue McKemmish, “Evidence of Me,” *The Australian Library Journal* 45, no. 3 (1996): 176.

<sup>4</sup> Hobbs, 129.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>6</sup> Sandbye, 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

as not unlike walking down a street in the evening and peering into the lit windows of strangers' houses, witnessing a "flash of intimacy that only lasts to the end of the block."<sup>9</sup> She also compares reading photos to the ripples that occur when a stone is dropped in a pond, with its "ever-expanding inclusions, occlusions, and allusions."<sup>10</sup> The meaning of a photo encompasses more than the subject or subjects contained within it, and often the derived meaning is more subjective than objective as the viewer is not often granted access to the complete story and must rely on available knowledge to construct meaning. Elisabeth Kaplan and Jeffrey Mifflin argue that archivists must exercise a sophisticated level of visual literacy when interacting with photos; there should be present the recognition that visual records possess a different set of "qualities and requirements" from that of textual documents.<sup>11</sup> When processing a photo, the archivist should always ask who created it, what audience it was meant to serve, and what it was meant to communicate.<sup>12</sup> The answers to these questions, however, are not always easy to ascertain. Joan M. Schwartz, too, calls for a different treatment of photos, demonstrating the inability of Canada's *Rules of Archival Description* (RAD), with its tendency to "[embrace] a textual model of recorded information," to describe photos in a way that emphasizes their informational value over their evidential value.<sup>13</sup> As a result, photos are often viewed as historical and not archival documents.<sup>14</sup> Again, the archivist providing access to the photo through archival description must consider the aforementioned questions, and sufficient attention must be paid to a photo's contextual information. Sandbye describes this need as looking at what a photograph does rather than what it is.<sup>15</sup> What photos mean to their creator should be considered alongside what they actually show.<sup>16</sup>

A collection of photos in an album is even more complex, as individual photos rely on their presentation alongside other photos in the same group in order to communicate its intended message. The Society of American Archivists, in "A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology," defines the principle of original order as the "organization and sequence of records established by the creator of the records" before transfer to the archives.<sup>17</sup> Ideally, the arrangement of the records, or photos in an album, mirrors the functions of their creator.<sup>18</sup> With regards to personal records, original order may reflect the manifestation or essence of the creator.<sup>19</sup> Traditional photo albums usually possess a straightforward order: photos placed one after the other,

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<sup>9</sup> Martha Langford, *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001): 23.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Elisabeth Kaplan and Jeffrey Mifflin, "'Mind and Sight: Visual Literacy and the Archivist,'" *Archival Issues* 21, no. 2 (1996): 118.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Joan M. Schwartz, "Coming to Terms with Photographs: Descriptive Standards, Linguistic "Othering," and the Margins of Archivy," *Archivaria* 54 (2002): 143.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>15</sup> Sandbye, 2.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>17</sup> Society of American Archivists, "Original Order," *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*, accessed August 1, 2015, <http://www2.archivists.org/glossary/terms/o/original-order>.

<sup>18</sup> Jennifer Douglas and Heather McNeil, "Arranging the Self: Literary and Archival Perspectives on Writers' Archives," *Archivaria* 67 (2009): 27.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

usually grouped chronologically or by life event such as birthday or wedding, in a discernable narrative.<sup>20</sup> Compiling a photo album, according to anthropologist Richard Chalfen, is a symbolic activity and form of communication, and this story of an individual or family relies on the inter-relatedness of the photos within that album or series of albums.<sup>21</sup> Physical photo albums often lose valuable contextual information when, upon transfer to an archives, they are dismantled for preservation purposes, the photos separated and treated as individual items.<sup>22</sup> Access to these photo albums is often changed by their presentation in an online environment, when images are organized according to their informational value. The “[Jamieson family photograph album],” a file located in the Major Matthews collection at the City of Vancouver Archives, for example, is displayed in a way that allows users to browse digitized versions of photos from the album in alphabetical order, according to the assigned title contained within the implied uncertainty of square brackets.<sup>23</sup> The numbers assigned to each photo indicate that an order was preserved, but there is no way for the average user to easily determine what this order is. Without the presentation of the album in its original format, as photos grouped together on a page and in a particular order, much of the contextual information of the album is lost. The only value left is the informational value, which is, in this example, the identification of people and places depicted in the photo.

Digital or social media photo albums are even trickier to decipher than their traditional cousins because they are always in the “process of becoming,” and this aspect of their existence contributes to the ongoing formation of these photos’ meaning.<sup>24</sup> These photos also rely on order, but there are often multiple orders to contend with. The digital photos uploaded to social media albums are resized, compressed, and stripped of their original metadata. Because of this, understanding the order of photos uploaded to an album, as well as discerning the changes made to this order, is even more crucial to understanding their overall meaning. Looking at the metadata of a Facebook photo, for example, shows that, when separated from the user profile it belongs to, the photo can be traced back to it using a particular string of numbers located in the filename assigned by Facebook. However, without this link to a user profile, additional information outside of what the viewer already knows about the photo is lost. Where photos in physical albums are usually accompanied by handwritten labels containing informative contextual information, static labels meant to accompany the photo its whole life, social media relies on the constant updating of information to apply meaning to photos. The captions accompanying photos can be edited, changed, and deleted. Likewise, the order of photos can be easily changed, and new photos added. Facebook photo albums, for example, can have multiple creators. In 2013, the platform launched a feature that allows up to fifty users to contribute images to one album, which can

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<sup>20</sup> Jessica Bushey, “Web Albums: Preserving the Contemporary Photographic Album,” in *The Photograph and the Collection*, ed. by Graeme Farnell (Edinburgh: MuseumsEtc., 2013), 116.

<sup>21</sup> Sandbye, 3.

<sup>22</sup> “Web Albums: Preserving the Contemporary Photographic Album,” 116.

<sup>23</sup> City of Vancouver Archives, “File -- [Jamieson family photograph album],” *City of Vancouver Archives*, accessed August 6, 2015. <http://searcharchives.vancouver.ca/index.php/jamieson-family-photograph-album>.

<sup>24</sup> Jessica Bushey, “Convergence, Connectivity, Ephemeral and Performed: New Characteristics of Digital Photographs,” *Archives & Manuscripts* 42, no. 1 (2014): 39.

contain up to 200 photos.<sup>25</sup> Privacy settings and permissions depend on those set by each individual user, and multiple users may experience a single collaborative album differently as a result.<sup>26</sup> Flickr, a photo sharing website, allows users to upload constant streams of photos and never becomes a “stable archive.”<sup>27</sup> While users can exercise control over the arrangement of their photos, organizing their photos into albums or sets, photos can be viewed multiple ways, such as by tags supplied by the creator as well as by the platform, alongside similar photos in search results, and through inclusion in others’ favourites albums. Like Facebook’s collaborative album, Flickr endeavours to create a collective memory, where the individual experience is ranked below that of the social, communal one.<sup>28</sup> Order, however, can still be maintained in social media platforms such as Instagram where personal photos are automatically presented chronologically by date uploaded. Users can also group photos using collage apps such as Pic Stitch, PicFrame, and Pic Joiner. These apps allow text to be superimposed on the photo, and these single “digital photo album pages” will always carry the order and caption assigned to it by their creator. If the photo is separated from the social media environment, some of its meaning is preserved. However, social media photo albums also rely on the layers of contextual information offered by the likes and comments assigned by users. Like the oral histories that accompany physical photos that enhance their meaning, the nature of social media lends itself to the albums created within it.

The photos belonging to traditional and social media photo albums are often contrived, or they contain silences that contribute to the contextual meaning of the album. Many photos contain a degree of performance that may or may not be obvious to the viewer. Although Hobbs’ article concentrates on the records of poets, novelists, and playwrights, similar observations can be made about the creation and interpretation of personal photos. Her words could be applied to personal photos, whose “wealth [...] has much to do with the ambiguity of its purpose and intention” and, echoing Kaplan, Mifflin, and Schwartz, “should not be treated as if it contained only straightforward evidence.”<sup>29</sup> Chalfen, in his study of American middle-class family photography from 1940 to 1980, addresses the many reasons people participate in what he calls “kodak culture” or “home mode communication.” He suggests that people take photos in order to “keep track of who they are and how they have lived,” for example, photos being “symbolic forms through which we express ourselves, solve problems, store information, and communicate with one another.”<sup>30</sup> During this process of “worldmaking,” people use these symbols to construct worlds or “statements.”<sup>31</sup> In this view, people’s differing perceptions of their world and the choices they make trying to communicate their points of view to others affect the meanings of the resulting photos. If we revisit Langford’s description of witnessing snapshots of people’s lives

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<sup>25</sup> Mashable, “Facebook Unveils Shared Photo Albums,” *Mashable*, accessed August 7, 2015, <http://mashable.com/2013/08/26/facebook-shared-photo-albums>.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> José van Dijck, “Flickr and the Culture of Connectivity: Sharing views, Experiences, Memories,” *Memory Studies* 4, no. 4 (2010): 401.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 402.

<sup>29</sup> Hobbs, 132.

<sup>30</sup> Richard Chalfen, *Snapshot Versions of Life* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987): 4-5.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

through windows, can the assumption be made that the people are unaware of the intrusion into their personal lives?

Social media photo albums, relying on users' continuing constructing and reconstructing of identity, are especially prone to misinterpretation. Personal photo albums containing selfies, for example, show a user's attempt to create and maintain a particular identity that adheres to standards established in "communal photographic exchanges."<sup>32</sup> Like physical photos, which are, according to Chalfen, symbolic constructions of identity, digital photos enable users to represent themselves as "interactive producers and consumers of culture."<sup>33</sup> Like writers' archives, photo albums can also be considered as a "social and collaborative text" or "an ongoing conversation between the [creator] and her various selves."<sup>34</sup> Unlike physical photos, which convey messages but are created with the purpose of preservation, social media photos often communicate messages not meant for posterity, instead meant to be "consumed" and "immediately destroyed."<sup>35</sup> While this might always be the case with photos belonging to a photo album in a social media platform, where photos are meant to be shared for an indefinite period of time and not immediately forgotten, the value attached to these photos is often seen as lesser than that of original digital photos or print photos.

The traditional and social media personal photo album have many similarities. Both belong to the family of personal records often overlooked by traditional archival theory, rely significantly on original order to reveal important contextual information about the functions that generated them, and contain various levels of identity-shaping performance essential to the overall understanding of the photos' placement within the society that produced them. Social media photo albums differ from physical photo albums in that their dynamic nature contributes to their meaning. They reflect the collaboration and connectivity of online culture, and make it easier for users to be consumers of this culture. The fingerprints of likes and comments left over time constantly reshape the meaning of each photo, and discussion about how to preserve this information is still new and ongoing. Social media albums belong more to a culture that shares in the moment and is not as concerned about preserving memories for a long time.

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<sup>32</sup> "Convergence, Connectivity, Ephemeral and Performed: New Characteristics of Digital Photographs," 36.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Douglas and McNeil, 39.

<sup>35</sup> "Convergence, Connectivity, Ephemeral and Performed: New Characteristics of Digital Photographs," 36.

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