HOW TO DO THINGS WITH IMAGES: THE SEPIA PROJECT 1999–2003

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Introduction

SEPIA (Safeguarding European Photographic Images for Access)[1] was an EU funded project that started in 1999 and ran until the end of 2003. It was set up as a programme of activities to explore the relationship between, on the one hand, the preservation of historical photographic collections, and on the other, the role of digitization in the management of these collections. At that time, the digital was encroaching on the photographic domain on all sides, also in the heritage sector. Not only were institutions pushed onto the digital highway by the increasing pressure to convert analogue holdings into digital collections, but at the same time, digitally born images and digital prints began to enter collections. Meanwhile, the popularity of photography had soared. There were numerous exhibitions, of older photographs as well as brand new work, in every European city. New museums and galleries specializing in photography were opening everywhere, and photographs had become collectors' items.

The SEPIA programme thus started at a time when photography was at the centre of attention and institutions were re-orienting their management of the photographic heritage. In this context, for some, digitization seemed to offer boundless opportunities to open up collections for which there was more and more interest; others tended to see the uncertainties associated with the rapid introduction of a new technology. SEPIA originated from the idea that a programme of training, publications and expert meetings could help to define risks and opportunities, and to bridge the gap between the old and the new.

Digitization Issues

From a survey carried out by the European Commission on Preservation and Access (ECPA) in 1998–1999, in the framework of the EVA project,[2] we had learned that management of historical photographic collections was far from optimal. The collections are huge, especially in archives, and the preservation of originals, also because of the variety of processes and carriers used since the discovery of photography, is problematical. Photographs have in many cases not been properly catalogued, and many institutions for which the photographic collection is not the core of their collections do not have the specialist staff or the resources to do what they would like to do.[3]

Whether digitization in this situation should be considered a blessing or a burden is not immediately obvious. There is the undeniable potential of digitization for opening up collections, but there is also the risk that resources

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are diverted to new technology and preservation of original materials suffers as a consequence. There is hope that digitization will renew interest in materials long hidden from view, but also fear that the creation of new digital collections, in addition to original materials, will prove to be beyond the capacity of a cash-strapped sector. There is also the as yet unknown investment needed for keeping digital collections accessible over time.

The discussion about preservation and access to photographic collections is related to concerns about integrity and authenticity in the digital world. Paradoxically, the rising popularity of photography coincides with an erosion of its validity as a medium to record reality-as-it-was. Particularly through the immediacy of television, photojournalism and documentary photography have in recent decades lost much of their prominent position in newspapers and weeklies. This shift in the role of photography for the direct documentation of the world around us is further complicated by the advent of digital photography and image processing, which has raised new questions as to the truth value of 'photographs' presented to us in newspapers and magazines. Recent instances of manipulated photographs, such as the one published in 2003 in the *Los Angeles Times* of a scene from the Iraq war, and that of John Kerry and Jane Fonda together at a peace rally,[4] have fuelled the debate on this issue.

That photography cannot offer a neutral registration of the world has been stressed by its practitioners and critics from its earliest days, and some would say every photograph is to some extent manipulated anyway, though perhaps not with the express purpose to deceive. What is new is the ease with which images can be changed, a little or a lot, while at the same time the nature of the photographic image tempts us to believe what we see. In 1909 Hine wrote:

> The photograph has an added realism of its own; it has an inherent attraction not found in other forms of illustration. For this reason the average person believes implicitly that the photograph cannot falsify. Of course, you and I know that this unbounded faith in the integrity of the photograph is often rudely shaken, for, while photographs may not lie, liars may photograph. It becomes necessary, then, in our revelation of the truth, to see to it that the camera we depend upon contracts no bad habits (p.111).

Whatever may have changed since the days Hine wrote this, the tension between, on the one hand, the potential of the photographic image for making us believe what we see by its direct reference to reality, and on the other, the possibilities for manipulating an image, is more than ever before at the heart of photography, digital or not. This tension is precisely the strength of the medium as it is used in much of fine art photography and advertising. However, in documentary photography and news reporting, images need to be trusted. Whereas Hine stresses the responsibility of photographers in using tools judiciously, with digital files taking the place of negatives and 'image makers' that of photographers, there is now a whole chain of production and

presentation that has to be reliable if photography wants to be believed. Precisely because we all have an idea of what image processing can do, we need to be reassured that the images presented to us are what they claim to be. This responsibility of protecting the integrity of the image lies not only with newspapers and stock agents, but also with museums and archives in charge of photographic collections, and is at the core of their struggle with the new media.

Preservation and Conservation

In September 2003, at the closing conference of the SEPIA project in Helsinki, Wolfgang Hesse (2003) focused on the responsibility of preservation managers and conservators in guarding the authenticity of photographs. For Hesse, in the world of digital images (which in the case of heritage institutions primarily means 'digital copies of analogue originals', rather than digitally born images), where the material object and the information it presents have become separated, conservators have dual role. On the one hand, they are the guardians of the original, which in a fleeting world of digital images constitutes the ultimate material reference. The continued existence of the material object will provide an essential safeguard for cases when photographs are used as evidence and research, and their preservation therefore needs to be ensured. On the other hand, conservators have a role to play in the digitization process, as they have developed ethical guidelines for working with originals that can be the basis for a responsible conversion of original photographs to digital images.

Hesse's paper took a central theme in the SEPIA programme full circle, in raising issues similar to those discussed at the very first meeting in 1999, but there was a difference in emphasis. For Hesse, the digital world is a reality in which photoconservators and collections of originals have their place, whereas at the earlier meeting there was still considerable concern that conservators were excluded from the digital realm and uncertainty as to the survival of the originals. As a result of the 1999 discussion, 10 recommendations were drawn up to emphasize the need to involve preservation specialists in digital projects.[5]

There are several reasons for wishing this would be common practice. First, the quality of digitization, in terms of creating a faithful representation of the original, may be at stake when it is done by imaging experts with little understanding of the material objects they are working with. To ensure that the characteristics of the numerous photographic processes are reflected in the digital images, input from specialists is required who have studied historical photographs for their material aspects.

Second, the experience of the conservator who knows how to work within the limits of the original object in cleaning, repairing or stabilizing has a relevance for image processing. There is a difference between removing artefacts such as dust particles that are not part of the original, increasing contrast of a faded print

– which is similar to cleaning a discoloured object – and 'improving' an image. At every step of the way one needs to exercise ethical judgement to decide what is acceptable. Depending on the nature of the photograph and its function, one can choose to emphasize its appearance as object or its information value. Any choice can be legitimate, but if in order to bring out the information content one sacrifices the faithful reproduction of the original in its present state, it becomes important to document what has been done and to alert users to the difference between the image and the original. This resembles the way conservators document work on an object, and the procedures they developed can inform digitization projects.

And finally, there is also the issue of handling old, fragile materials, the risks of exposure to light and heat, of abrasion, scratches, flaking emulsion and curled negatives, that any scan operator needs to be aware of. The training of digitization staff by conservators and their involvement in selection processes is indispensable to create a workflow and workspace that limits risks of damage to originals.

Role of Digitization

In the SEPIA programme, the connection between preservation and digitization was always seen as going in two directions. It was not only a matter of encouraging those involved in digitization to pay attention to preservation issues, it was at the same time considered necessary to encourage conservators to take an active interest in digitization. When the project started in 1999, it was not uncommon to meet conservators hesitant to embrace the new technology, which can partly be explained from a strong commitment to the material objects with which they work everyday. For a specialist in 19th-century photographic prints, a digital image on a screen is a very poor substitute indeed, as a lot is lost in the transfer from original to screen presentation. This is an aspect that is often underestimated by those who see images as pictures, rather than photographic objects. Yet it is also true that the vast number of photographs in European collections are for a large part of interest to users for what they show, rather than for what they are.

In discussions in the SEPIA group, which were unusual in that representatives from different sectors sat around the table, it turned out to be more fruitful to talk about digitization in relation to the wide variety in function and use of collections rather than in terms of material characteristics. A photograph and a digital image are essentially different, but a digital image can fulfil the function of a photograph. It is not a matter of substituting original collections with digital images, but of employing digitization to meet certain user requirements – but not all. The crowds flocking to photography exhibitions deserve to be treated to the real thing, also to fully appreciate why these collections need to be preserved, and researchers using photographs must have access to originals to check their sources. Over the years, photoconservators have begun to welcome digitization

for its role in preservation, in that providing digital copies may relieve stress on vulnerable originals through use. High-quality digital copies can in some cases meet so much of possible user requirements that originals can be safely kept in cold storage, a measure which is more beneficial to the survival of originals than any other.

The discussions in the expert meetings and the findings of the working groups were used in the training programme, which was the backbone of SEPIA. The European workshops focused on management of photographic collections and aimed to provide an overall view of choices and possibilities. Apart from technical instruction on photographic materials, damage and decay, preventive preservation, and digitization, a lot of attention was devoted to making project plans and setting priorities. Rather than delving into technical and material aspects – which is very tempting when discussing artefacts like photographs – the courses sketched the whole picture and tried to convey how preservation and digitization, as complementary strategies for access, fit in the management of collections. They were primarily intended for staff in the heritage sector responsible for photographic collections, especially in organizations that do not specialize in photographs. In total there were five European workshops, each of them bringing together participants from many different countries and backgrounds.

The experience with the European workshops was used to encourage a network of contacts to organize national training events, of which there were finally 12 in 10 different countries. The format was chosen by the local organizers so as to best meet the needs of their colleagues, and ranged from small intensive workshops to seminars for a 100 or more. This variation stemmed from the firm conviction in the SEPIA group that the conventions of training and the organizational structures in every individual country should be respected in order for a European training programme to be effective. By centring training around a specific medium there is enough common ground in technical aspects, such as characteristics of photographic materials, deterioration processes, metadata, resolution and bitdepth, to deal with the same issues. Differences in management styles, funding systems, and organizational and administrative structures should not be ignored, but help to get another perspective so as not to take things for granted. In short training events like these, gaining insight so that it becomes easier to develop one's own solutions is often more important than transfer of factual knowledge.

Some of those involved in the training network undertook the translation of introductory texts, which is an essential step in the dissemination of expertise to those actually working with the collections. The contacts for training and materials published in the SEPIA programme can be found on the website, from presentations and reports to a concise brochure on preservation aspects of digitization (of which printed versions are available in French and English).

Standards

Of the three SEPIA working groups, the one on descriptions had quite a formidable task. From the 1998–1999 survey it had become clear that there is little or no standardization in cataloguing photographic collections and that there is a huge gap between the actual situation and the requirements for digital collections. One such obvious gap is that many photographic collections have only been summarily catalogued or not at all, because describing photographs at item level is immensely time consuming. From the survey it appeared that when institutions embark on digitization projects, they all too often find that a major part of the time and budget available are consumed by work on descriptive metadata.

The working group had to develop a pragmatic approach to meet requirements for access and digital collections without ignoring the realities of limited staff time and vast collections. As members of the group came from museums, libraries and archives, large and small, and worked with photographs as objects, as documents, as information or as works of art, their views of what constitutes a good description obviously were not immediately the same. But what may seem to be a complication (and did cause some wrestling with terminology!) helped to explore all possible aspects of a photograph that can be studied and described.

An issue the SEPIADES model they finally developed tries to deal with is description at different levels, of (sub)collections as well as individual items. For institutions that hold millions of photographs description at item level is simply impossible and other approaches must be sought. The group decided to follow principles of the archival standard ISAD(G), which enables description at any level of collection or grouping. The advantages are that the provenance and the history of a collection can be reflected, while a certain level of access can always be achieved, which may be sufficient, especially when digital reference images are available for users to check the contents of individual images.

The relationship between the 'image' (the picture, what is in the photograph) and its various physical manifestations – as negative, print (possibly several) and digital format (again several) – was another key issue. For photographic collections, which often include negatives and prints of the same image that have to be linked in a catalogue, this is a familiar problem, but with digitization it has come to the fore. The SEPIADES model distinguishes 'visual image' (content) and 'physical image(s)' (the objects), and thus associates various manifestations with one description of content, thereby avoiding duplication of information.

The working group finally listed all elements that may be relevant for describing a photographic image in a modular structure, making it possible to limit cataloguing to modules most essential for the collection at hand. This flexibility followed from the realization that as there are many different requirements, any limitation in, for instance, the elements relating to physical

aspects of photographic prints, would detract from the usefulness of SEPIADES as a model. Even though the average institution will not be in a position to list all the technical details for every single historical print, a model should offer all elements anyone may need, or it is unlikely to be widely adopted.

SEPIADES provides guidance at every level as to how to structure specific information and comes with a lot of recommendations for the use of authority lists and standards. To facilitate decisions for cataloguing, the working group selected a list of 21 'core elements', which together ensure an adequate description of photographs, and they related SEPIADES to Dublin Core to illustrate how one can map elements from one to the other. To implement the model, an open-source software tool was developed, and this can be downloaded from the SEPIA website. A PDF version of the complete model can also be found there, as well as a brief report explaining the thinking behind SEPIADES.

When the SEPIA project started in 1999, we did not foresee that work on descriptions and metadata would become so central to the programme – and not only for purposes of search and retrieval. We intended to study what could be done with photographs, what was needed to preserve originals, and how a good digitization process should be set up. Photography we found fascinating as a multifaceted medium, from the impressive qualities of many 19th-century prints to its immense potential for use on the web – so easy, we thought, to deal with images that communicate directly rather the complication of words in different languages. 'A picture paints a thousands words' – and yet in the end it appears we need thousands of words to do things with images.

Some Limitations of Digital Images

Photographic objects may show where they come from, by the stamps and scribbles of previous owners, and they show their age and the changes coming with it to one who can read the material. A digital image on its own does not reveal how it was changed, it is silent about its history and leaves us far more uncertain whether it is what it seems to be. More than ever before the words that are attached to images, in the form of what we have come to call metadata, should clarify their status and history and guarantee their integrity over time, when digital preservation strategies will move them to new platforms. Even worse, digital images as such do not even exist, but they are re-created as a representation on a screen or a digital print every time from the bits that define them. At every level, then, it is language, computer-language or natural language, that makes up the image and preserves access over time, and we need vast amounts of computer data to see what a simple original showed us at a glance, fixed without further intervention for decades.

Digitization is a wonderful way to do more things with more images, but the power and attraction of prints will not fade. We will have to preserve collections of prints, old and new – for the photograph of the future is the digital print. Those who believed that one day there would only be virtual collections to

manage have already been proven wrong, now that services are introduced that deliver a true paper album, to have and to hold, made from digital files that were sent to them a couple of days ago. Or the magic Kodak machines that produce prints within the hour for the true photographic experience which, as Kodak claim in their commercials, digital camera users were already beginning to miss. Apparently we are still driven by the same yearning for permanence as the pioneer of photography, William Henry Fox Talbot (1844–46), who claims to have been inspired in 1833 by the idea that 'How charming it would be if it were possible to cause these natural images to imprint themselves durably and remain fixed on the paper!'

Notes

1. The SEPIA partners were: Biblioteca Nacional de España (Madrid), British Library (London), European Commission on Preservation and Access (Amsterdam), Finnish Museum of Photography (Helsinki), Netherlands Photo Museum (Rotterdam), National Archives (Kew, Richmond), Royal Library of Denmark (Copenhagen), Saechsische Landesbibliothek, Staats-und Universitaetsbibliothek Dresden (Dresden) and Stockholm City Museum (Stockholm). The project ran from 1999–2003 and received funding from the Culture 2000 Programme of the European Union. See: http://www.knaw.nl/ecpa/sepia
2. EVA stands for European Visual Archive. It was a European project funded by the Info 2000 Programme, from 1998 to 2001, and aimed to develop a model for bringing together digital images of photographs held by different European archives. The EVA partners were: Antwerp City Archives, Telepolis, London Metropolitan Archives, Netherlands Institute for Scientific Information Services, Saillabs GmbH and the European Commission on Preservation and Access. See: http://www.eva-eu.org
3. The survey was published as Klijn and de LUSENET (2002)
4. http://www.snopes.com/photos/politics/kerry2.asp
5. These recommendations as well as other SEPIA publications are available at: http://www.knaw.nl/ecpa/sepia/linksandlit.html

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