Research Project

Participatory Knowledge Practices in Analogue and Digital Image Archives

Third-party funded project

Project title Participatory Knowledge Practices in Analogue and Digital Image Archives
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Since the beginning of the 21st century, Swiss archives and collections have been steadily digitalizing their materials, for "anything that is not digitally accessible usually gets ignored" ("Netzwerk Schweizer Pressefotografie" exhibition). While analog archives are primarily concerned with the long-term preservation of the material, digital archives mostly serve communication with the public. But the promise of unlimited accessibility and participation is misleading. Online accessibility does not in itself guarantee broad public engagement, and it has not been taking advantage of the potential of the digital domain. Even if the concept of participation has been increasingly discussed in recent years, the public, especially in the German-speaking world, has hardly been involved in the process of indexing and valorization of images at all.

The common goal of this project is to design a visual interface with machine learning-based tools to make it easy to annotate, contextualize, organize, and link both images and their meta-information, to deliberately encourage the participatory use of archives. In a series of workshops and interviews with both academic and non-academic users, along with archivists and database specialists, the project will analyze the new demands of digital (and process-oriented) knowledge production in order to achieve these goals. In their own rubric – Citizen Archive – academic and non-academic users of the existing Swiss Society for Folklore Studies SSFS's (Schweizerische Gesellschaft fur Volkskunde SGV) networks and partners will receive a series of Calls for Images inviting them to upload and comment current photographs as comments on historical images; this will further foster the contextualization of the archival material. In turn, these digital additions will have to be supplied with metadata and contextual knowledge. Such analysis of the context of images and collections (crowdsourcing) will enrich the metadata of the material and thus also make image searching and information retrieval more effective.

Along with the design of the participatory digital image archive, this four-year research project will describe the transformation of analog archives into digital archives from the perspective of technology, communication, and the anthropology of knowledge. The common goal is the analysis and systematic description of historical and contemporary archiving practices: the generation, organization, storage, and communication of knowledge. The complex interplay of participants, epistemological orders, and the genesis and graphical representation of information and knowledge in such practices will be studied in connection with three collections from the photo archive of the Swiss Society for Folklore Studies. In previous research, these areas were mostly considered separately rather than from an interdisciplinary, cross-domain and application-oriented perspective that can capture such interplay. In contrast, the proposed project's interdisciplinary collaboration between digital humanities, cultural anthropology,

and design research will serve our goal of increasing, improving, and imparting knowledge of analog and especially digital image archives and of ways to use them. This photo archive is an important part of the cultural memory of Switzerland; it contains approachable images organized according to such themes as tradition, identity, lifestyles, and everyday life. A broad public interest in these materials can be expected. The research project would like to preserve—also with the help of machine learning—what is most endangered: the personal reports of those contemporary witnesses who lived through the historical periods represented by the SSFS/SGV photo archive. All the project's planned technological developments, including the machine learning component, will be based on the premise of scalability; that is, the methods and the technology must be transferable to the holdings of other collections of the Digital Humanities.

As its common primary outputs, the project will produce not only the visual interface discussed above, a dynamic storage infrastructure, but also a handbook with guidelines for the future development of participatory archives as well as six dissertations and several scientific papers in the various disciplines.

Keywords participation, photo archives, knowledge production, knowledge storage,knowledge transfer Swiss Society for Folklore Studies Digital Humanities Anthropology of knowledge public science machine learning design research interface design deep learning artifi

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