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Handbook of Digital Public History

Edited by
Serge Noiret, Mark Tebeau, and Gerben Zaagsma

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Contents

Serge Noiret, Mark Tebeau, and Gerben Zaagsma

Introduction — 1

Part 1: Historiography

Anaclet Pons

The Historiographical Foundations of Digital Public History — 19

Serge Noiret

Crowdsourcing and User Generated Content: The Raison d’Être of Digital Public History — 35

Serge Noiret

Sharing Authority in Online Collaborative Public History Practices — 49

Mary Larson

Shifting the Balance of Power: Oral History and Public History in the Digital Era — 61

Chiara Bonacchi

Digital Public Archaeology — 77

Sophie Gebeil

Identities – a historical look at online memory and identity issues — 87

Joshua MacFadyen

Digital Environmental Humanities — 97

Emily Esten

Combining Values of Museums and Digital Culture in Digital Public History — 107

Pierre Mounier

Open Access: an opportunity to redesign scholarly communication in history — 121

Marcello Ravveduto

Past and Present in Digital Public History — 131

Andreas Fickers

Digital Hermeneutics: The Reflexive Turn in Digital Public History? — 139

Part 2: Contexts

Trevor Owens and Jesse A. Johnston

Archivists as Peers in Digital Public History — 151

William S. Walker

History Museums: Enhancing Audience Engagement through Digital Technologies — 165

Michelangela Di Giacomo, Livio Karrer

Interactive Museum & Exhibitions in Digital Public History Projects and Practices: An Overview and the Unusual Case of M9 Museum — 175

Marii Väljataga

Digital Public History in Libraries — 185

Rabea Rittgerodt

Publishing Public History in the Digital Age — 199

Mills Kelly

“Learning Public History by doing Public History” — 211

Kimberly Coulter, Wilko Graf von Hardenberg, and Finn Arne Jørgensen

Spaces: What’s at Stake in Their Digital Public Histories? — 223

Thomas Cauvin

Digital Public History in the United States — 235

Priya Chhaya with contributions by Reina Murray

Technology and Historic Preservation: Documentation and Storytelling — 243

Florentina Armaselu

Social Media: Snapshots in Public History — 259

Part 3: **Best Practices**

Mark Tebeau

Curation: Toward a New Ethic of Digital Public History — 279

Martin Grandjean

Data Visualization for History — 291

Fred Gibbs

Mapping and Maps in Digital and Public History — 301

Nico Nolden and Eugen Pfister

Gaming and Digital Public History — 309

Tammy S. Gordon

**Individuals in the Crowd: Privacy, Online Participatory Curation,
and the Public Historian as Private Citizen — 317**

Rebecca S. Wingo and William G. Thomas III

**Building Communities, Reconciling Histories: Can We Make a More Honest
History? — 327**

Sandra Camarda

Cybermemorials: Remembrance and Places of Memory in the Digital Age — 337

David Dean

Living History: Performing the Past — 349

Lara Kelland

Activist Digital Public History — 359

Jerome de Groot

Digital Public History: Family History and Genealogy — 369

Valérie Schafer

Digital Personal Memories: The Archiving of the Self and Public History — 377

Pierluigi Feliciati

**Planning with the Public: How to Co-develop Digital Public History
Projects? — 385**

Brett Oppegaard

**As Seen through Smartphones: An Evolution of Historic Information
Embedment — 395**

Part 4: Technology, Media, Data and Metadata

Matteo Di Legge, Francesco Mantovani, and Iara Meloni

What does it Meme? Public History in the Internet Memes Era — 407

Paolo Mogorovich and Enrica Salvatori

Historical GIS — 419

Gerben Zaagsma

Content Management — 431

Carlo Meghini

Linked Open Data & Metadata — 439

Frédéric Clavert and Lars Wieneke

Big Data and Public History — 447

Gioele Barabucci, Francesca Tomasi, and Fabio Vitali

Modeling Data Complexity in Public History and Cultural Heritage — 459

Yannick Rochat

History and Video Games — 475

Dominique Santana

**Historians as Digital Storytellers: The Digital Shift in Narrative Practices
for Public Historians — 485**

Enrica Salvatori

The Audiovisual Dimension & the Digital Turn in Public History Practices — 495

Raffaella Biscioni

Digital Public History and Photography — 505

Seth van Hooland and Mathias Coeckelbergs

**Exploring Large-Scale Digital Archives – Opportunities and Limits to Use
Unsupervised Machine Learning for the Extraction of Semantics — 517**

Federica Signoriello

Infographics and Public History — 531

List of Contributors — 545

Raffaella Biscioni

Digital Public History and Photography

Abstract: This essay intends to analyze the current contribution of photography to Digital Public History (DPH) starting from the perspective of changing relationship between photography and memory in the new web context.

Keywords: digital public history, cultural memory, photography collections, digital humanities, audience engagement, crowdsourcing

In its original historical form, photography constitutes a direct and immediate link with the past; a form of permanent memory whose *noema* is expressed with the words “it has been.”¹ The current “technical revolution” and dematerialization into a network environment and the possibilities of immediate and multiple sharing, have emphasized the changing and fluid nature of the image, constantly renegotiated on the basis of the new contexts it passes through.²

The new spaces offered by the Internet therefore represent a new environment where photography can take different and sometimes apparently conflicting roles. For example, photography gets very easily into the logic of “disintermediation” typical of the web and takes up important space within social networks through user generated content. At the same time, it is central to large operations of “cultural memory” directed from the top.³ In the latter case, such operations are often centralized and have a strong cultural-political meaning, oriented by governmental institutions or by very important private subjects. These cultural institutions must deal both with the interactive and participatory nature of the web,⁴ and with the new great private digital companies (like Google), which have made important strategic choices from the outset in the direction of cultural heritage, using their technological advancement to structure new networks and control of resources.

The historical photographic heritage is also traditionally disseminated, articulated and rooted in the territory, but at the same time the universality of the photographic language makes it particularly attractive for the new digital communication channels that lead to it being widespread in new global communities.

1 The best-known statement about the documentary dimension of photography concerning the past is in Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire. Note sur la photographie* (Paris, 1980).

2 For example, André Gunthert theorized the diffusion of a “conversational” use of digital photography, completely oriented towards the present, see André Gunthert, *L’Image Partagée. La photographie numérique* (Paris: Textuel, 2015).

3 Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

4 Faye Sayer, *Public History: A Practical Guide* (London: Bloomsbury, (2015) 2nd edition 2019); *Participatory Archives*, ed. Edward Benoit and Alexandra Eveleigh (London: Facet Publishing, 2019).

All these aspects have stimulated practices of DPH, but since it's difficult to compare the vast universe of photos shared in the DPH projects which runs on social media,⁵ this chapter will focus mainly on the use of photography in some important national or international “cultural memory” projects on the web which share historical narratives with photographs. We will observe the interactions of these projects “from above,” trying to understand their characteristics both in relation to participatory practices “from below” and to the examples of some public and private “mega-projects” that use historical digital photography in a quite different perspective from that of DPH, but very much linked to it.

Europeana

Europeana was born in 2008, about 15 years after “American Memory,” a pioneering digital project on American cultural memory⁶ (Fig. 1) and represents an experience allied to an important effort to digitize the heritage but also with a clear political intent. In fact, on the whole, Europeana is a major undertaking to construct a shared “cultural memory” for the European Union, in the sense given to this term by Jan Assmann, that is, processing memories as a means of constructing a shared cultural identity.⁷

This operation found a privileged space online: according to Jill Cousins, Europeana “is Europe’s most visible representation of our common European cultural heritage”,⁸ and a situation that can engage users through new participatory practices and support the new telling of old stories.⁹

Through Europeana, therefore, the images of cultural institutions and private citizens, find a new dimension, strongly oriented in terms of common European identity, and for this reason the cultural themes on which it has invested most in recent

5 It is estimated that Facebook has 300 million new photos uploaded every day, Instagram 40 billion photos shared from 2010 to today and 95 million new images every day, while for Pinterest, the total number of pins is above 100 billion; see *Social Media Statistics 2020: Top Networks By the Numbers* <https://dustinstout.com/social-media-statistics/>.

6 Sally Stieglitz, *The American memory project*, in *Cases on electronic records and resource management implementation in diverse environments*, ed. Janice M. Krueger Hershey (Pennsylvania: Information Science Reference, 2014), 106–116.

7 Jan Assmann, ‘Communicative and Cultural Memory’ in *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, ed. Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning, (New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 109–118.

8 Jill Cousins was Director of Europeana Foundation since its beginnings in 2005/2006 until 2018, see Jill Cousins, http://www.culturaitalia.it/opencms/en/contenuti/focus/Jill_Cousins_Europeana_s_success_receives_a_boost_from_CulturalItalia_and_other_national_aggregators_.html?language=en, [last accessed 10.02.2020]. See also Bjarki Valtysson, “EUROPEANA. The digital construction of Europe’s collective memory”, *Information, Communication & Society*, 15, (2012) 151–170.

9 Sharon Macdonald, *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe Today* (London: Routledge, 2013).

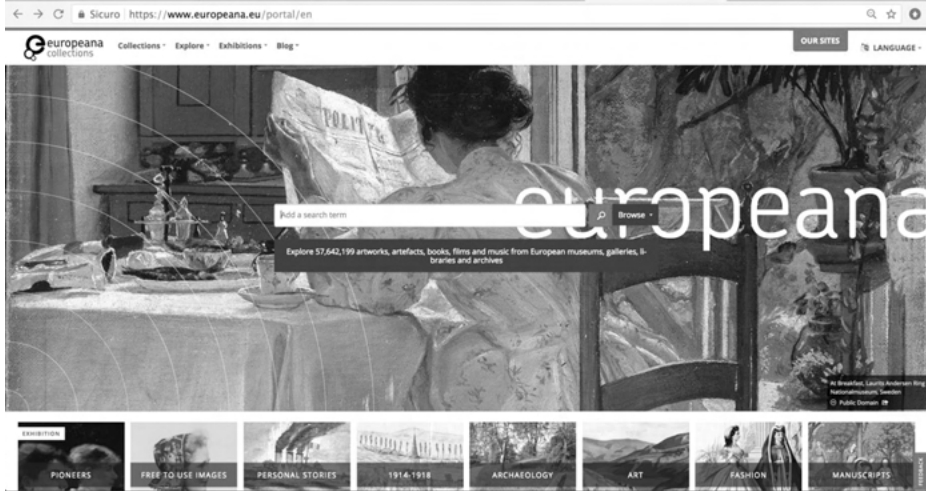


Fig. 1: Europeana homepage.

years are significant: the Great War, European migration, European society of the 1950s engaged in reconstruction after the Second World War.

We can consider Europeana an emblematic example of how web 2.0 and Digital Public History practices have progressively changed the role played by institutions in the policies of memory and access to European cultural heritage, which become more dynamic and innovative in digital form, while also hosting private heritage assets.

Europeana organizes digital collections from different countries and, over its 12 years of activity, has added more than 58 million digital artefacts: works of art, books, videos, photos, audio materials, organized into specific thematic collections. In terms of photography, more than five million items have been accrued. A very complex infrastructure collects digitized heritage from more than 3,500 European institutions thanks to the work, knowledge and skills of professionals in the Digital Humanities.

One of the collections that had the greatest amount of collaboration from private users is *Europeana 1914–1918 – Untold stories and official histories of World War I*, (Fig. 2) which collected more than 370,000 digital artefacts (books, newspapers and magazines, maps, archive documents, videos, propaganda material, school books, posters, photos, memorabilia, etc.).¹⁰

In fact, not only does the portal bring together collections from the principal European institutions, but it also invites users to upload their own materials and share their family story, through “Adding your story to Europeana 1914–1918” page. Thanks to special online collection forms, the user is able to upload materials and relevant information, by specifying the type of document (a postcard, diary, photo, etc.)

¹⁰ <https://www.europeana.eu/portal/en/collections/world-war-i>.

and adding the story that they wish to share (for example, who the person in the photo is, how they came to have it, what is known about the artefact). Once added, the contribution is reviewed by an expert from the Europeana team and, ultimately, made available to everyone, and included in a participatory context.

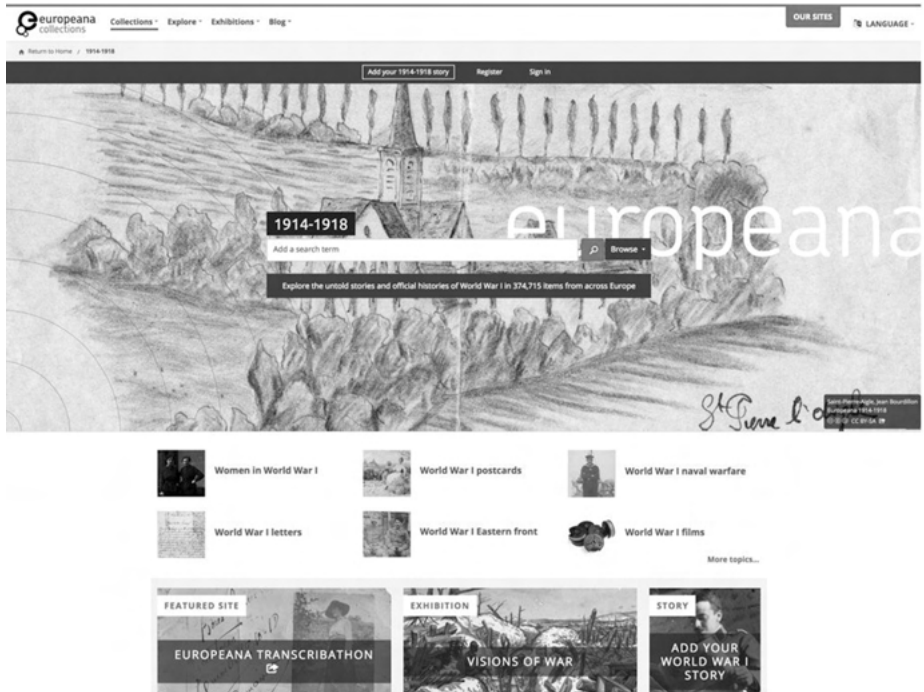


Fig. 2: Europeana 14–18 Collection Homepage.

One of the first tools that Europeana used to engage the public for the creation and implementation of online collections are the Collecting Days held in various European cities: during these events, anyone who owns letters, memorabilia and historically interesting photos was asked to participate. A team of experts helped to digitize the materials and record the oral history testimonies. All the materials were returned to the owners on the same day, while the digitized artefacts were reviewed and added to the Europeana collections. In this way, they became part of a shared heritage.¹¹ It is not only the remarkable number of photographic documents in these collections that is important: especially in a multilingual and multicultural context such as the European

¹¹ Since 2011 to date, over 50,000 pieces of memorabilia have been digitized. See <https://blog.europeana.eu/2014/04/documenting-the-great-war-behind-the-scenes-at-a-14-18-community-collection-day/>, last accessed February 10, 2020.

Union, the universal language of photography becomes an important facilitator for sharing and comparing story and experiences.

In the summer of 2017, Europeana Transcribathon¹² came into existence as a competition between EU countries to digitize crowdsourced materials in Europeana 1914–1918. Participants were asked to transcribe maps, diaries, letters and postcards which were already digitized as best as possible, and as quickly as possible. The finale Transcribathon took place in the House of the European History in Brussels in November 2018.¹³

Europeana Photography is one of Europeana’s thematic collections. Launched in 2012, it was dedicated to the digitization of photographs with a high level of historic, artistic and cultural value related to the first century of photography (1839–1939).

In 2014 virtual and multimedia exhibitions began:¹⁴ these included *Untold Stories of the First World War*, curated by historian Peter England,¹⁵ which was based on private and personal stories and images that people had uploaded to Europeana 1914–1918.

Blue Skies, Red Panic. A Photographic Perspective on the 1950s in Europe is the latest online exhibition, telling stories about society, culture and politics in European countries “between East and West, freedom and oppression, cliché and normality.”¹⁶ The exhibition is related to the Europeana project Fifties in Europe Kaleidoscope (2018–2020) (Fig. 3), dedicated to the 1950s in Europe.¹⁷

The case of Europeana, and its relationships with new digital channels and DPH practices from the top-down, is only a part of photographic digital content on offer. The first great experience of this type was American Memory, ended in the same years in which Europeana was born. Her legacy was substantially carried forward by the Library of Congress, thus taking its place within the large LoC digital catalog. At the same time (since 2009) a part of the LoC photographs has been made available through Flickr, the famous photosharing platform which was created in 2004.

As specified by the Library: “Offering historical photo collections through Flickr is a welcome opportunity to share some of our most popular images more widely.”¹⁸

¹² <https://transcribathon.com/en/>. To date, this has yielded more than 38,472 documents, a number that is continuously increasing.

¹³ <https://pro.europeana.eu/event/centenary-tour-finale-europeana-1914-18-transcribathon>.

¹⁴ It is possible to consult the list of exhibitions at <https://www.europeana.eu/portal/en/exhibitions/foyer>.

¹⁵ <https://www.europeana.eu/portal/en/exhibitions/untold-stories-of-the-first-world-war>.

¹⁶ <https://www.smb.museum/en/exhibitions/detail/blue-skies-red-panic.html>.

¹⁷ The final conference of the project was dedicated to “New strategies for user engagement and digitized photographic heritage,” see <https://www.photoconsortium.net/kaleidoscope-accomplishment/>.

¹⁸ https://www.flickr.com/people/library_of_congress/ The photos posted on Flickr, currently more than 36,000, do not have the accurate cataloguing and the philological-critical analysis that accompanies the LoC website: here the users tag the images and add their comments, sometimes



Fig. 3: Kaleidoscope Project postcard.

In this way, a clear distinction was made between the creation of a “digital library” as a professional and orderly tool according to advanced cataloguing and digitization criteria, and a dissemination area that offered a “pre-packaged” selection, although rather large, of very “popular” images.

While American Memory had established approximate criteria for the first digitization campaigns of photographic materials, leading to a large contribution of images from peripheral territories towards the centre, the use of Flickr allowed a simplified distribution oriented towards a “consumer” using a top-down logic.

Due to the open access policy of institutions like the LoC, which makes an immense photographic heritage freely available, photography appears as an instrument available to all, to scholars as well as the generic public, but without any predisposition for any specific disciplinary approach: in practice it is a valid tool for PH practices for scholars of different disciplines or those who are simply enthusiasts.

extemporaneously. For example, in the case of the famous “migrant mother” by Dorothea Lange, there are some posts by “pro” users that underline some key points for a philologically accurate reading on a historical level (in this specific case the “thumb after retouching”: https://www.flickr.com/photos/library_of_congress/3551599565/in/photostream/) but overall the presentation of these photographs aims for a faster and more aesthetic “consumption” of images.

In this regard, we can recall the Public Library of America (DPLA),¹⁹ launched in 2013. Also, in this case, it is a very large repository, which serves as an aggregator of over 4,000 American archives and institutions, with a total offer of more than 30 million items. Designed at the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University, supported by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, it was established after preparatory work that “brought together hundreds of public and research Librarians, innovators, digital humanists, and other volunteers.” DPLA appears on the web without an explicit reference to DPH, but has some very interesting tools, like a section dedicated to searching for sources of family or community stories.²⁰ DPLA has a strong ethical imprint based on the principle of free and universal accessibility of information. Another aspect interesting for DPH is the attention to the educational uses of images and documents and for the connection with schools and teachers, as well as the fact that it endeavors to make the material available thematically through the “exhibitions,” or specific topics.

Flickr Commons

Since 2009, Flickr Commons²¹ (Fig. 4) supports public engagement between cultural institutions and individual users. Due to this collaboration, the Library of Congress, and other institutions, have taken advantage of the most popular channels to improve access to its collections thanks to an active and numerically very important online audience.²² It has also harnessed the rich and structured interface where those who publish and view photos can leave comments, provide short metadata tags, organize their photos in a pool and share and disseminate the photos.²³

¹⁹ <https://dp.la/>.

²⁰ It can be used for four types of activities: Education, Family Research, Lifelong Learning, Scholarly Research.

²¹ The Commons was created in 2009 through an agreement between the Library of Congress and Flickr <https://www.flickr.com/commons>. Approximately 115 institutions are now members of the project.

²² As can be read on its homepage, today it hosts “tens of billions” of images and 2 million groups. In the case of LoC the dissemination was more limited: “During The Commons’ first year, Flickr users tagged and commented on digitized heritage: more than 67,000 tags were added and more than 2,500 users got involved. More than 500 photos have been verified by the US Library of Congress and transferred to the library’s permanent records. In a relatively short period of time, the Library has managed to get a group of amateur historians involved in the construction of a heritage asset.” See Barbara Orbach Natanson “A Happy Anniversary: Four Years of Sharing on Flickr,” *Library of Congress Blog*, January 16, 2012, <https://blogs.loc.gov/picturethis/2012/01/a-happy-anniversary-four-years-of-sharing-on-flickr/>.

²³ Historypin, a platform expressly dedicated to history, allows you to upload historic images and “pin them” to a map, creating mash-ups if the historical picture is overlaid in Google Street View.



Fig. 4: The Commons homepage on Flickr.

The presence of users' vernacular, family photography and private collectors is also very common on this sharing platforms (Fig. 5). Through the thematic groups, the images are organized in a pool, and generally they deal with the widest possible range of subjects, from history, arts landscapes, design, fashion, etc. In many cases, they become a veritable *wunderkammer* (cabinet of curiosities) for the contemporary era.²⁴

There are numerous groups related to history, and one of the first crowdsourcing projects was conducted on Flickr, *The Great War archive*, promoted by the University of Oxford in 2008.²⁵ In these groups we find an important part of the DHP's bottom-up practices. The nature of private memories in this groups is not static and the same image is not anchored to a specific Group, but can be shared on different groups not necessarily related to the same topic: in some cases it may even be possible to have over 30 or 40 shares in different groups. Thus the traditional classifications give way to a strong component of unpredictability, which contemplates not only indexing, but also the formats and quality of the images.

To date, Historypin has attracted 100,454 members and 35,232 collections, and approximately 3,000 cultural institutions who use its technology.

²⁴ Melissa Terras, "The digital wunderkammer: Flickr as a platform for amateur cultural and heritage content" *Library Trends*, 59.4 (2011): 686–706, 689.

²⁵ The group collects around 17,000 images, <https://www.flickr.com/groups/800965@N21/>.

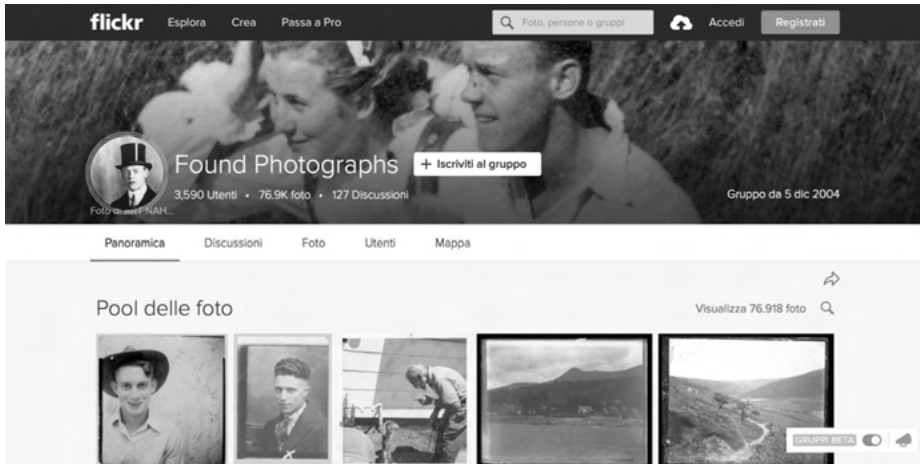


Fig. 5: Found Photographs group homepage on Flickr.

Although the presence of user generated content is central, it is easy to find groups where photographs of users and cultural institutions are mixed. These are not just images posted by The Commons collections, but also shared by other platforms, such as, for example, on Europeana, Google Arts and Project or institutional websites, which make it possible to share images on social media.²⁶

Google Arts & Culture

Google Arts & Culture²⁷ hosts the most important museum collections in the world, including digital exhibitions that have been curated by private or public institutions or cultural professionals. The online exhibition service provides storytelling tools, which include a high-resolution zoom view for admiring photos in greater detail, the ability to search photos by place, person, event and date, the creation of videos with expert narration and the ability to display notes and maps. These possibilities have attracted an increasing number of institutions. When the online exhibition tool was launched in 2012, it hosted 42 virtual exhibitions, including those curated by the Imperial War Museum in London, The Anne Frank House and the Smithsonian Institution.

²⁶ This is a benefit of the new open access-oriented policy. This type of sharing is widespread in all the main social networks, including Pinterest and Instagram in particular, where massive parts of the photographic collections of the main world museums are shared.

²⁷ The portal hosts more than 9,000 online collections produced by more than 1,500 partner institutions in 70 countries and approximately six million images, see: <https://artsandculture.google.com/>, last accessed June 10, 2019.

They wanted to tell the story of major historical events and enhance images that were disseminated on the Internet for the first time ever: “Each exhibition features a narrative which links the archive material together to unlock the different perspectives, nuances and tales behind these events.”²⁸ (Fig. 6).

In 2018 it launched a new app that also makes this heritage available on the smartphone, with the slogan “Play with art using only your phone,” and every image in the portal can be shared by users on their own social account. From a photographic point of view it has its own importance, because it allows access from a single portal to very important photographic archives, even private ones such as Getty image or the Alinari Archive.

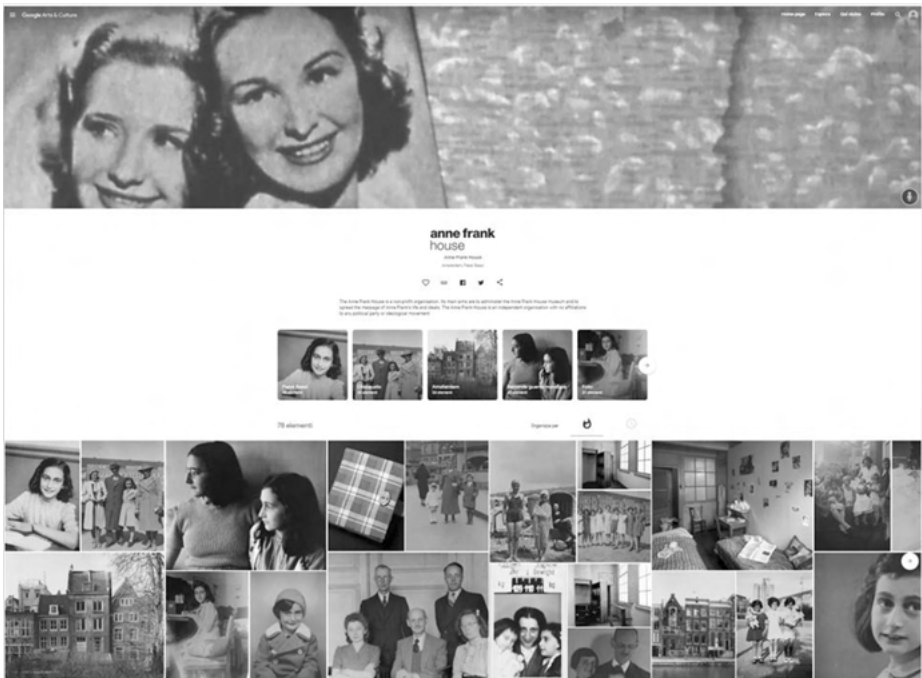


Fig. 6: Anne Frank House on Google Cultural Institute.

Naturally, we cannot forget the very strong role of the Google image search engine, which, even if it has elementary functions and a search system that produces very approximate results from a heuristic point of view it has, however, integrated a reverse search system and probably also plays an important practical role for many DPH searches.

²⁸ Mark Yoshitake, “Bringing history to life,” Google Official Blog, October 10, 2012, <https://www.blog.google/outreach-initiatives/arts-culture/bringing-history-to-life/>.

Conclusion

The picture we have drawn of the relationship between photography and DPH is very general, and moreover is concentrated geographically between the USA and Europe; while surely many very interesting uses of digital photography in a “public” dimension are located in several emerging countries, also for the purpose of consolidation or “invention” of a national identity.²⁹

However, it can be seen that the drawing of the relationship between photography and DPH is in full swing, and that rapid technological changes have a very complex effect on the social uses of photography, difficult though they are to fully understand while they are happening. We hope that the picture we have drawn here may help increase understanding of how some recent development dynamics are moving along the axes of those different polarities that we indicated at the beginning (such as top-down, local-global or private-public) which are central to the field of DPH practices.

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²⁹ Interesting case-studies in Costanza Caraffa and Tiziana Serena, ed. *Photo Archives and the Idea of Nation* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015).