

For the Common Good: The Library of Congress Flickr Pilot Project

Report Summary



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Note: The full report, “*For the Common Good: The Library of Congress Flickr Pilot*” is available on request from flickrpilot@loc.gov.

Cover photo: “Woman aircraft worker, Vega Aircraft Corporation, Burbank, Calif. Shown checking electrical assemblies.” Photograph by David Bransby, June 1942. Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Collection, http://www.flickr.com/photos/library_of_congress/2179930812.

Overview

On January 16, 2008, the Library of Congress launched a pilot project on Flickr, the popular photosharing Web site. We invited the public to tag and describe two sets of approximately 3,000 historic photos at http://www.flickr.com/photos/library_of_congress. The Flickr community welcomed us warmly. By asking people for help and by offering broad public opportunity for interaction with collections, the Library struck a chord that fits well with Web 2.0 communities. In the first 24 hours after launch, Flickr reported 1.1 million total views on our account, with 3.6 million views a week later. In mid-March we began to load an additional 50 photos each Friday, with the result that more than 4,000 photos are now in the account. Today, Library of Congress (LC) photos on Flickr are averaging approximately 500,000 views a month and have surpassed the 10 million mark in total views.

The initial collections feature 1,600 color photographs showing the Great Depression and the World War II home front (Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Collection or FSA/OWI) and 1,500 black-and-white news photos from the early 1900s (George Grantham Bain News Service Collection or Bain). These photos were already digitized and on the Library's Web site and were known to be popular. They were also good candidates for additional research and description because, as often happens with valuable old photographs, many of the images had arrived at the Library with sparse caption information.

The Library has received an enormous amount of positive feedback from within Flickr, from the traditional press, and from the Web 2.0 community at large. Public reaction to the pilot from a broad array of users made it clear that the existence of these freely available digital materials was a welcome surprise. As suspected, many people have long been unaware of the rich historical and cultural resources available through libraries.

Background

Based on a desire to act quickly and minimize the IT resources required for the pilot, the Library's project team decided to look at popular social media sites that already had well-established mechanisms for user-contributed content. Flickr.com, where members are both passionate about sharing photographs and well versed in tagging, emerged as the most suitable candidate. It soon became apparent, however, that the licensing statement options Flickr provided were not appropriate to describe the copyright status of the material. Discussions with Flickr management ensued and resulted in the "No known copyright restrictions" statement programmed to appear on the Library's Flickr account. Thus began a collaboration that inspired

Flickr to launch a new initiative called *The Commons* (www.flickr.com/commons) and invite cultural heritage organizations to participate. Following the Library's lead, ten more museums and libraries from six nations have already joined *The Commons* and are sharing selections from their photo archives and inviting the public to contribute information within this specially designated Flickr space.

No staff members worked full time on this project. The majority of effort expended on the pilot occurred prior to the public launch of the Library's Flickr account as a one-time cost, including approximately 222 hours of technical programming work. Ongoing costs to moderate the account and add new images once a week came to 1 FTE. Participating more actively and keeping up with the flood of new information about the photographs would require additional resources. For additional information, see the *Background* section of the full report.

Outcomes

We entered the pilot not entirely knowing what to expect, and we were pleasantly surprised on a number of fronts. News of the project flew across the blogosphere. We were soon approached by a number of other cultural heritage institutions desiring to launch similar efforts. An outpouring of appreciation flowed into Flickr and the Library's blog; even damaged, un-retouched photos have been viewed with interest and often reverence. The Flickr community has rallied to our call for assistance with a surprising level of engagement, and the quality of "history detective" work has been excellent. Following our weekly upload of photos, avid contributors add new tags and comments with surprising speed. Finally, the images we placed on Flickr have greater weight in search engine results compared to their counterparts on the loc.gov Web site. A Google search for the baseball player "Germany Schaefer," produces the LC Flickr account photo¹ as one of the top 5 results on the first Google page; the loc.gov version of the same photo does not appear until the 5th page of search results.

The following statistics attest to the popularity and impact of the pilot. As of October 23, 2008, there have been:

- 10.4 million views of the photos on Flickr.
- 79% of the 4,615 photos have been made a "favorite" (i.e., are incorporated into personal Flickr collections).
- More than 15,000 Flickr members have chosen to make the Library of Congress a "contact," creating a photostream of Library images on their own accounts.

¹ http://www.flickr.com/photos/library_of_congress/2162646403/.

- 7,166 comments were left on 2,873 photos by 2,562 unique Flickr accounts.
- 67,176 tags were added by 2,518 unique Flickr accounts.
- 4,548 of the 4,615 photos have at least one community-provided tag.
- Less than 25 instances of user-generated content were removed as inappropriate.
- More than 500 Prints and Photographs Online Catalog (PPOC) records have been enhanced with new information provided by the Flickr Community.

Between January and May 2008, the Library saw an increase in hits at its own Web site. For Bain images placed on Flickr, views/downloads rose approximately 60% for the period January-May 2008, compared to the same time period in 2007. Views/downloads of FSA/OWI image files placed on Flickr rose approximately 13%. Average monthly visits to all PPOC Web pages rose 20% over the five-month period of January-May 2008, compared to the same period in 2007. For additional information, see the *Outcomes* section in the full report.

Comments, Tags, and Notes

Flickr provides three ways for people to add information to posted photos: free-form comments, tags, and notes applied to the pictures themselves. Comments have turned out to be very interesting and informative. Comments allow viewers to reminisce and share knowledge, increasing the sense of ownership or stewardship that people feel for that content. Often drawing on personal histories, Flickr members have made connections between the past and the present, including memories of farming practices, grandparents' lives, women's roles in World War II, and the changing landscape of local neighborhoods. Sometimes commenters have identified the precise locations of photos and posted pictures of the landscapes as they appear today. (For links and samples of the various types of interactions occurring in comments, notes, and tags, see *Appendix A: Examples of Flickr Interactions*, in the full report.)

Flickr members also have offered corrections and additions by identifying locations, events, individuals, and precise dates. This data is often supported by accompanying links to articles from the *New York Times* archive, Wikipedia, and subject-specialized Web sites. After verification by Library staff, information provided by the Flickr community is incorporated into our catalog records. For example, as a result of this project, a photo once simply captioned, "*Reid Funeral*"² is now more fully described with the note: "Photo shows the crowd gathered outside of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine during New York City funeral of Whitelaw Reid, American Ambassador to Great Britain. (Source: Flickr Commons project, 2008)."

² http://www.flickr.com/photos/library_of_congress/2515741281/.

Within Flickr, tags can be searched separately from the words in photo descriptions. Popular concepts like “Rosie the Riveter” (added to 77 of the FSA/OWI photos) provide another avenue for retrieval beyond the Library’s controlled vocabulary terms of “Women—employment” and “World War, 1939-1945.” To determine the types of tags that were being added to images, we analyzed the tags in a sample set of 50 Bain and 50 FSA/OWI photos. Interestingly, for the FSA/OWI sample set, which has fairly full bibliographic information, almost 80% of the tags were either words directly copied from the Library-provided record or were words for items seen in the images. The Bain sample set, for which we had minimal identifying information, inspired more diverse tagging including personal commentary, place names, and tags in multiple languages, in addition to the repetition of LC-provided information.

Notes (annotations left directly on the photos) have some utility, such as pointing out specific persons in a crowd or deciphering the words on a sign or placard. Notes are also a means of adding graffiti-type messages and smart-aleck humor to the images, which is a cause for some concern among Flickr members and Library staff. For additional information, see the section *Gaining a Better Understanding of Social Tagging and Community Input* in the full report.

Recommendations

Performance measures documented in the full report illustrate how the project can contribute to achieving the objectives and desired outcomes of the Library’s strategic goals. The Flickr project increases awareness of the Library and its collections; sparks creative interaction with collections; provides LC staff with experience with social tagging and Web 2.0 community input; and allows the Library to provide leadership to cultural heritage and government communities. The specific strategic goals are listed in Appendix B in the full report.

The Flickr Pilot project team recommends that the Library of Congress continue to participate in The Commons and explore other Web 2.0 communities. Creating a virtual reference center and adding more collections to Flickr are among the possible next steps. For additional information on these and other options, see the *Recommendations* section in the full report.

Key Links for More Information

- The Commons <http://www.flickr.com/commons/>
- Library of Congress Photos on Flickr: Frequently Asked Questions http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/flickr_pilot_faq.html

- Library of Congress Photos on Flickr (announcing the pilot and linked off the Library's Home page) http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/flickr_pilot.html
- The Library of Congress Profile on Flickr
http://www.flickr.com/people/library_of_congress/
- The Library of Congress Flickr Account
http://www.flickr.com/photos/library_of_congress.

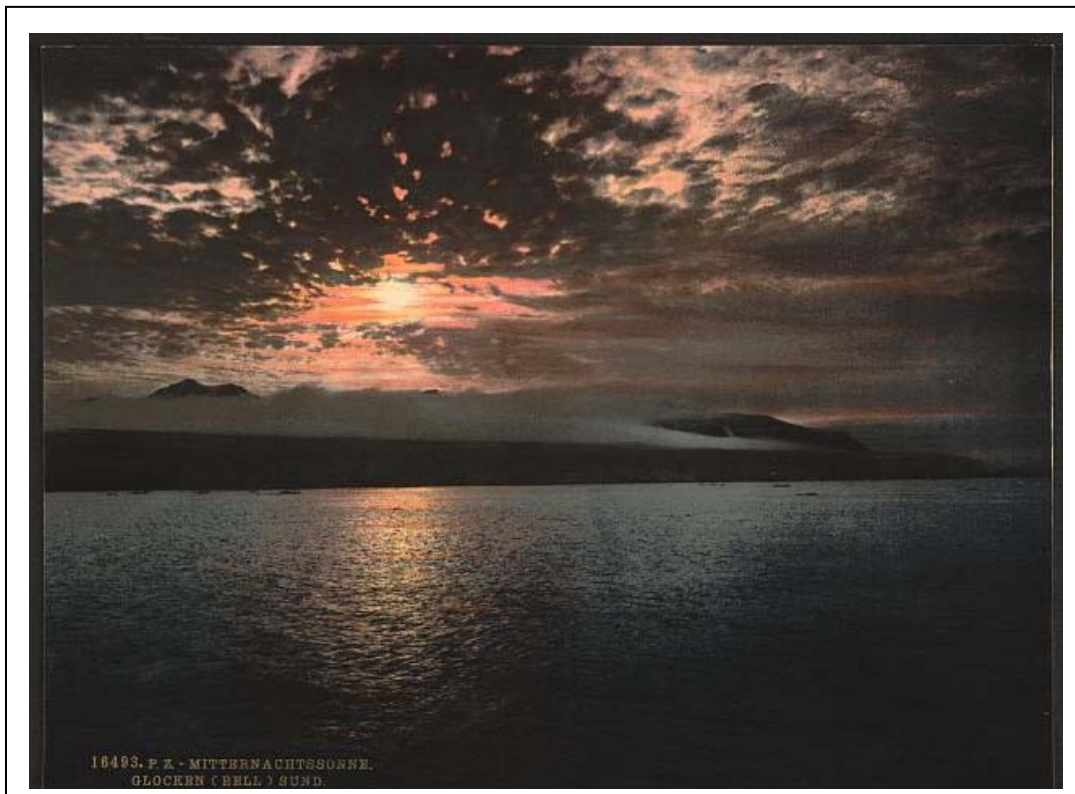


Figure 1. Midnight Sun, Bell Sound, Norway, approximately 1900. Photochrom Print Collection.³

³ <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ppmsc.06255>