Hands off the Picture Collection?

For my master’s thesis in information science; “They don't know that we know they know we know” : A philosophical approach to complex information behaviors and digital limits, I received a research scholarship from the ALM department at Uppsala University. The scholarship enabled me to visit and interview librarians at the famous Picture Collection, New York Public Library. This unique and browsable research collection of images was founded in 1915 and holds over 12,000 subject headings. The semi-structured interviews with the librarians highlight their personal experiences of user behavior. The value of physical browsing is underlined through the strong criticism that arose from users when the library wanted to archive the unique collection.

Keywords: Complexity, Chaos theory, Science–Philosophy, Serendipity, Information behavior, Reductionism, Browsing, Databases.

---

1 Camilla Lyckblad is a librarian at the Department of Law, Stockholm University. She is a former master’s student at the ALM department at Uppsala University. E-mail: camilla.lyckblad@juridicum.su.se
Serendipity in New York

The unique Picture Collection at the New York Public Library is the largest public picture reference archive in the world. It’s a physically searchable circulation library, an unusual combination for a research library, that enables serendipity in a unique way within the library world and stands out from the rest of the collections at the New York Public Library. I read about the Picture Collection in the New York Times during the fall of 2021 when the article “Hands off the Picture Collection!” announced that the famous collection was being archived. This was quickly met with widespread criticism from users ranging from Broadway producers, art students, photographers, historians, researchers, artists and set designers to regular New Yorkers. The library read all the letters and comments in the media and something very unusual followed; The New York Public Library revoked its plans and decided to keep the Picture Collection open and browsable for the public. This illustrated perfectly the importance of browsing in physical collections for users that my masters thesis philosophically argues for. The physical information environment is valued by users and cannot be reduced to a linear digital search. Browsing provides complex possibilities to users with a high chance of serendipity in a way that is almost impossible for a database to replicate. The physical collection means something of importance to people's creative process and opportunities for innovation. The Picture Collection was created due to user needs in 1915 and it stays open in the digital world of 2022 for the same reasons. New Yorkers started asking the librarians for pictures in 1915 and a library picture collection started taking shape due to this demand. In 1930 the collection was searchable and it currently holds 12,000 different subject categories and over one million images.

I first got in contact with the librarians at the Picture Collection in late autumn of 2021. I was welcomed to visit during March of 2022 to get the experienced librarians views on the collection, browsing, serendipity and user behavior. On a sunny Wednesday afternoon, I am warmly greeted in the beautifully marble decorated Astor Hall, accessed by the main entrance between the New York Public Library's iconic lions on Fifth Avenue, Manhattan. The library does not require face masks but at the time of my visit it is still recommended. When the huge queue outside the gates evaporated into the enormous building at ten o’clock, guards urged everyone to put on masks so I haphazardly put mine on. My welcoming librarian, like all other employees of the New York Public Library, wears a mask to work and I immediately notice how this complicated the interview process immensely.

Not only was it more difficult to hear each other, the opportunity to read lips and facial expressions was gone as well, and I found myself more linguistically insecure than usual. At the time of my visit, the Picture Collection is packed up on trolleys due to a shift in rooms at the library. I am shown the new beautiful but smaller location directly to the right from Astor Hall. The new premises are similar to the National Library in Stockholm with beautiful large windows, a narrow balcony floor and stately gold decorations throughout. However, my guiding librarian fears that this room is much smaller than their current one, and that the collection will not fit. The previous location for the Picture Collection is going to be used by the education department. The shift is something that was decided at the time the library planned to archive the Picture Collection. As we go further through the library I get to see the archives and arrive at the current location where the collection is now packed. The room is bigger but darker with a lower ceiling, carriages full of pictures in the classic file system fill the room on my right. On the opposite side of the room the librarians work at beautiful vintage desks with golden lamps.

I sit down with the librarians and start the interview by asking about user behaviors, which are described as very diverse. Several of the users talk a lot with the librarians and some go straight ahead and look for themselves. The visitors consist of all kinds of people from researchers, students, classes, tourists and ordinary New Yorkers. Some users always look at the same pictures, many are searching for nostalgia and childhood memories in the collection. Users will look at old pictures of different boroughs in New York and families come to show their children what New York looked like when they grew up. From a librarian perspective, much emphasis is placed on human interaction, tacit knowledge and opportunities for interpretation and

3 Librarians at the Picture Collection, New York Public Library, interview on the 16th of March 2022.
reflection of user needs. It is obvious that the search process could not be recreated digitally as it requires social librarians with vast experience of users and extensive knowledge of the collection. Everything in the Picture Collection is sorted alphabetically and under topic, but it is strongly recommended that users take the opportunity and talk to the librarians. The librarians can help the users distinguish more precisely what they are looking for and guide them further in the subject categories.

When I ask about a general policy about what is saved to the collection, I get the answer that the library does not censor images, and does not save too many of the same things. However, it is often the individual librarians who decide what is saved or not, based on their experience. This variation between the staff's selection also contributes to a fundamentally complex and non-linear collection. The librarians believe that the reason behind the collection being so popular is that everything exists in one place with great variety; it is easy to find the unexpected and surprising.

User behaviors

There are no typical behaviors for users but tourists are often looking for pictures of their own city. Some take over an entire table and spread out their pictures like a big fan, others are very private and quickly build forts with lots of binders and wish to sit in peace. Others just take pictures of the collection with their phones. Artists there for the first time sometimes leave color prints on the pictures. In general, users are respectful and all types of people visit. The questions asked to the librarians differ from the rest of the library by being more specialized. According to the librarians, a typical behavior from users is to ask for something very general but actually mean something extremely specific. One of the librarians voices:

“They say they want a picture of New York but they really want a picture of their grandfather outside his shop in Brooklyn selling apples in the 50's and assume we have that.”

The quote above shows the complexity of human dialogue and how social interpretations are required to help users express what they are really looking for, something that requires a librarian with extensive experience of both users and the collection itself. The librarians also point out that they often get strange questions where users don’t really seem to hear what they are actually asking for, requests such as: "I want to see thunder, not lightning.”

---

4 Librarians at the Picture Collection, New York Public Library, interview on the 16th of March 2022.
5 Quote from user, described by librarians at the Picture Collection, New York Public Library, interview on the 16th of March 2022.
Many people ask for pictures of New York and several visit to see pictures under the subject headings “ufos” and “witchcraft”. According to the librarians, people seem to believe that there are secret government photos of ufos at the Picture Collection for some reason. There also seems to be something special about photos of New York from the 50’s that makes it a recurring request. The librarians are amazed at the predilection for this particular time period and argue that there must be something nostalgic, safe and very classic New York about it. One of the librarians thinks the worst part about the job is people’s lack of imagination. Many users ask for the same things when the librarians know they have so much more to offer. The best thing about the job on the other hand is the feeling of meaningfulness, especially when users become so overwhelmed by their findings that they just have to share it with the librarians. An often repeated phenomenon that strongly shows the importance the unique collection directly gives to users.

To search for serendipity
The librarians agree with my question concerning the possible paradox of actively seeking serendipity, but come to the conclusion that it’s more about having an open mind than applying some sort of serendipity method. However, they point out that they do see that some users have a certain recurring tactic. The back of the pictures in the collection can be surprising as many are cut out from books and other materials with prints on both sides. Some users only look at the front main picture. For example they may have collected lots of pictures of light bulbs and only look at the front where this item is visible. Other users systematically turn the pictures for the possibility to see something completely different in addition to the original picture they collected. This is a form of structured serendipity the librarians consistently notice in user behavior.
Digital versus physical collection
Disadvantages of having a physical collection are, according to the librarians:

"The struggle for existence, people don't understand the need, we continue to have to explain it and argue for a budget." \(^6\)

The librarians also point out that the digital database gets a completely different search than the physical one due to issues such as copyright. This means that the majority of the collection is not available online. The librarians also believe that the tactile feeling is strongly underestimated, users want to be able to feel the pictures and see them in their entirety. It is limiting to grasp a large poster reduced to an item on a small screen instead of seeing it in reality. When you revoke things such as size and texture you somewhat create a different object in itself.

The archiving
The motivation behind the New York Public Library wanting to remove the browsing option and archive the Picture Collection was to streamline the entire library. In the other research departments material has to be requested and the management wanted it to be applied throughout the entire Library. The librarians however believe that there is a very big difference between books and pictures. Users at the Picture Collection do not know exactly what they are searching for but a researcher looking for a specific book can know the exact title and easily make an archive request. The Picture Collection has a history of having a constant threat of closure hanging over it, but is blessed with many dedicated users who frequently voice that they would fight for the collections existence if needed. However, the staff tells me that they would never take this for granted. The community feeling at the Picture Collection between users and librarians is very important and according to the librarians it is not like a regular research library. The staff feel very connected to their users and are extremely thankful for the loud protests concerning the archiving in the autumn of 2021. A large number of users wrote letters and comments to the New York Public Library to preserve the possibility of browsing and keep the collection open as it is now.

A pattern similar to that in Sweden where physical collections are downgraded and archived far away from the library can also be seen in America. I mentioned the modernization of the Royal Institute of Technology's library\(^7\) in Stockholm, where vast amounts of shelves in the

---

\(^6\) Librarians at the Picture Collection, New York Public Library, interview on the 16th of March 2022.

\(^7\) Ahrbom & Partners (2016). KTHB – Ombyggnad och inredning
https://www.aop.se/projekt/kthb-ombyggnad-och-inredning/ [2022-03-10]
main library were removed, favoring seating areas for students with computers. The librarians commented that it sounded like I was explaining the development of the library on the other side of Fifth Avenue. The staff adds shockingly that books are now almost used as a background for meeting rooms and that there are services\(^8\) in the U.S. where for example lawyers, can buy books per foot to fill an office nicely.

Experiences the librarians would bring to other libraries that they’ve learned at the Picture Collection are the importance of the one on one experience, to be friendly and helpful, to have patience and to be able to interpret people. To strengthen people's self-confidence and protect their dignity when they ask you things and build on what they already know. People should leave the library feeling smart and capable, librarians must be available and there to help. People are not a bother, without them the Picture Collection would not exist!

References
Librarians at the Picture Collection, New York Public Library, interview on the 16th of March 2022.

Copyright: CC BY-NC-4.0
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/

\(^8\) The article below describes the company “Books by the Foot” and is an example added by the author.