

This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/12279.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/12279.001.0001)

Picture Research

The Work of Intermediation from Pre-Photography to Post-Digitization

By: Nina Lager Vestberg

Citation:

Picture Research: The Work of Intermediation from Pre-Photography to Post-Digitization

By: Nina Lager Vestberg

DOI: [10.7551/mitpress/12279.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/12279.001.0001)

ISBN (electronic): 9780262375023

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 2023



The MIT Press

5

MAKING DIGITIZATION WORK

Five years after declaring the fax machine as an essential tool for picture research in 1996, Hilary and Mary Evans acknowledged that “the computer has become an indispensable part of the researcher’s life.”¹ The two had of course coexisted for some time in many workplaces; however, by the turn of the twenty-first century networked computers had taken over most of the fax machine’s tasks in the UK picture industry. When the seventh edition of *The Picture Researcher’s Handbook* appeared in 2001, the editors nevertheless expressed skepticism about moving the entire research process online: “How cheerfully does a picture researcher contemplate finding the illustrations for an encyclopedia by searching website after website, downloading hundreds of images from scores of suppliers onto her on-screen lightbox?”²

The response from actual researchers was more positive. Some years later, in 2008, I interviewed a seasoned freelancer, Julia, who had worked in picture research since 1974 and told me that “nothing is like being able to open ten libraries, have their windows there in front of me and just search on all of them simultaneously. It’s just great.”³ Similarly, Marie-Louise, a staff picture editor with experience going back to the 1980s, recalled that “overnight my whole world was revolutionized” when the main picture supplier of her specialist magazine launched its searchable website in 2002: “I thought it was the most wonderful thing that had ever happened because suddenly I was back in control of what I was searching.”⁴ Having spent the early part of her career visiting picture libraries to carry out research on-site (in the manner recommended by the first edition of *The Picture Researcher’s Handbook*, as we recall from chapter 3), Marie-Louise had found it frustrating when, in the 1990s, her role had

demanded that she mainly work over the phone, and she had to rely on library staff to interpret her picture requests. Far from feeling despondent, both these picture professionals positively relished the sense of control and efficiency that web-based, self-service picture research seemed to offer.

In the meantime Evans and Evans, too, had come round to the fact that “today’s marketplace is made up of websites.”⁵ When the eighth and final edition of their handbook was published in 2006, the editors not only acknowledged that “picture research has changed more since our last edition than in all the 31 years since our first”; it was also clear that their own compilation work for the handbook had been largely conducted on the internet.⁶ By this time, picture researchers were less likely to be put out by the routine task of trawling through thousands of pictures on websites than by the idea of working on an obsolete print product like an encyclopedia.

In fact, the fate of the printed encyclopedia—that flagship commodity of the book publishing industry, disintermediated by a crowd-sourced website—exemplifies the profound impact that digitization visited, in the early years of the twenty-first century, on all the print-based sectors of the pictorial economy served by the picture business. It is possible to see its demise as the sad passing of a tried-and-trusted medium for the preservation and transmission of general knowledge. It is also possible to see the online encyclopedia Wikipedia and its various avatars as more viable technical solutions to the perennial problems of encyclopedia publishing, such as updating information, correcting errors, and restricting the scope and size of entries. Viewed from this perspective, digitization solved specific problems that were associated with the encyclopedia as a cultural form, but which had in fact been caused by its historical instantiation in the material device of the printed codex. In the process of solving those problems, digitization simultaneously disintermediated encyclopedia publishing as a viable business model. Considering picture research from the same angle reveals that digitization also solved specific problems inherent to the work of accumulating, extracting, and transmitting pictures. And the particular solutions that digitization offered had consequences, in turn, both for the business models of picture libraries and for the work of picture research.

When speaking of digitization in the 2000s it makes sense to think of it as two distinct but interdependent processes: on the one hand, making pictures available in digital formats on platforms where users could find and receive them and, on the other hand, providing users with access to the digital tools and networks they needed in order to do so. In the first process, digitization made new kinds of work for employees in picture libraries, producing digital surrogates for both pictures and researchers. In the second, picture researchers made digitization work for them, enlisting its tools in the service of getting the job of finding a picture done. In both cases, digitization eliminated or alleviated some kinds of work, and created or magnified other kinds. In the digital environment of online search and delivery, picture librarians and research staff at picture sources largely disappeared from view. At the same time, it required a lot of work behind the screen to give those sitting in front of it the impression that they were doing it all by themselves.

In the picture industry as elsewhere, the digitization of work could be achieved only by making digitization work. The previous chapter showed how digitization in the 1990s became thinkable as a set of technological solutions to problems of picture research, a form of knowledge work that information scientists sought to reconfigure as information labor fit for computers. In the early 2000s, these efforts bore fruit in the sense that digitization became workable as a set of tasks and practices. Paying particular attention to the disruptive impact of Getty Images on the picture industry in this period, this chapter draws on firsthand accounts by experienced picture researchers and contemporary evidence from relevant editions of *The Picture Researcher's Handbook* and other printed sources to explore both the new kinds of work that digitization was making and what workers in the picture business made of digitization.

THE PLATFORMIZATION OF PICTURES

As I suggested in the introduction to this book, it is impossible fully to disentangle the material production of digitized content from the cultural expectation that content should be available in digitized form. From both these aspects, digitization in the picture industry must also be seen as part of the wider restructuring of contemporary capitalism around the

core unit of the “platform,” as opposed to the “firm.”⁷ Around 2000, the web-based platform emerged as an infrastructural device of disintermediation across a wide range of industries. Platforms seemingly provided consumers with direct access to any number of goods from any number of suppliers, whether the trade was in pictures, airfares, hotel rooms, books, or antiques. Transactions could now be carried out without the intervention of traditional human intermediaries like library staff, travel agents, booksellers, or auctioneers, whose functions were replaced by automated approximations in the shape of e-commerce applications and search algorithms.

In the same way that digital disintermediation in the early 2000s seemed to produce, or favor, or coalesce around one or two hegemonic platforms in each sector—think Amazon, eBay, or Expedia—the picture industry saw the establishment of Getty Images and Corbis Images as twin behemoths. From the mid-1990s they “competed for supremacy in the picture market,” as Estelle Blaschke puts it, each company representing “a mirror image” of the other.⁸ Notwithstanding their mutual rivalry, these two actors established the industry-standard platforms against which all other purveyors of pictorial commodities were forced to compete, and with which virtually all picture researchers sooner or later had to deal.

Indeed, Getty and Corbis were perceived almost as a double act among picture professionals in this period, both on account of their relative similarity vis-à-vis the diversity of traditional picture libraries and because smaller operators in the industry were doubly pressurized by their combined presence. We recall from chapter 1 how Corbis started out trying to license digitized surrogates of works of art for domestic consumption before realizing there would be more money in a digital version of the tried-and-tested picture library model. As Corbis has been the topic of numerous studies already, including a definitive one by Blaschke, cited above, I will focus my discussion of platformization in this chapter on Getty Images, which in any case ended up absorbing its main rival and thus emerging victorious from their struggle for hegemony—albeit not until 2016.⁹ I will nevertheless refer to “Getty and Corbis” in contexts where it would be misleading to suggest that Getty Images was the sole actor involved.

In the same edition of the handbook where they declared the computer as indispensable, Evans and Evans identified Getty Images and Corbis Images as “the most prominent examples” of what they called a new breed of “mega-sources.”¹⁰ From their point of view, the most obvious characteristic shared by these new consolidated sources was that they made “essentially the same pictures available on a global basis.”¹¹ As we have seen in the preceding chapters, of course, neither consolidation nor global distribution was in itself a new phenomenon in the picture business. The long-established syndication agreements among libraries and agencies had for decades ensured that “the same pictures” were available to clients across the world. Distributing them by digital means only meant that more pictures could be distributed faster to more clients at the same time. The true impact of the Getty and Corbis platforms on the picture industry, however, came not so much from harnessing the distributive power of computational networks to provide the same pictures everywhere as from providing instant access to all kinds of pictures in one and the same place.

In the pre-digital period the picture business was comparable to an old-fashioned high street in a European town or city, where different picture purveyors operated out of their own separate shops. Stock photographs were held by certain libraries and historical pictures by others, while travel pictures, fine art reproductions, and animal photographs could each sustain entire businesses on their own. By the 1970s, this virtual townscape made up of general and specialist sources had grown bewildering in its breadth and diversity, prompting Evans and Evans, as we recall from chapter 3, to publish the first edition of *The Picture Researcher's Handbook* as a finding tool conceived along the lines of a travel guide. When Getty and Corbis around the year 2000 both launched digital platforms that gave researchers instant access to substantial collections of pictures in most of the general as well as specialist categories, it had a similar effect on independent businesses in the picture industry as the opening of two out-of-town shopping malls would have on local shops in a city center.

The “fragmented” character of the picture business was in fact what first made it an attractive investment prospect for eponymous cofounder of Getty Images, according to a profile of Mark Getty published by *The*

Economist in March 2000.¹² An investment banker and scion of the petroleum-enriched Getty family, Getty had created Getty Images in 1995 together with fellow banker Jonathan Klein. Neither partner had any previous experience of the picture industry before actively setting about disrupting it through the targeted deployment of digital technologies. According to *The Economist*, Getty was casting around for an area of business in which to set up a firm of his own when he settled on the stock photography market both because its innumerable traders in intellectual property appeared underappreciated by other investors and because he had identified “scope for increasing efficiency by digitizing the business and putting it on the Internet.”

Picture libraries had been routinely merging and consolidating for decades, as previously noted, yet in the pre-digital picture market mergers and acquisitions had tended to happen among collections that were similar in kind. A typical example would be the Hulton Picture Post Library absorbing other historical press libraries like the Keystone Press Agency, as discussed in chapter 2. The approach of Getty Images to consolidation followed a different logic: within the space of five years the company had acquired the already-consolidated historical archive that originated with the Hulton Picture Post Library; the global general stock photo franchise the Image Bank; Tony Stone Images, a highly successful supplier of contemporary high-end stock; and the Liaison Agency, which specialized in photojournalism.¹³ Making pictures from all these extensive collections of very different kinds available in the form of digital surrogates through the same web platform certainly created a mega-source, as Evans and Evans put it, but more importantly it produced a meta-source of pictures, a digitized collection of collections.

Creating this meta-source in the shape of a digital platform required Getty to invest heavily in what *The Economist* termed “electronic infrastructure,” exemplified by “data centres and websites,” as well as “thick pipes for downloading images.” Such investments “raise[d] the fixed cost of the business” on top of the running costs involved in day-to-day digitization tasks like scanning and keywording. According to the 2000 profile, the estimated cost of Getty Images’ infrastructure investment over the two preceding years had been USD30 million, while the cost of digitization could be broken down to a figure of USD45 per picture when

scanning and keywording were included. These numbers were put into perspective by the information that by early 2000, Getty Images had thus far processed just over one third of the three million pictures it was planning to put online. "Small firms cannot afford that sort of investment," *The Economist* laconically noted.

This observation was precisely in line with the assessment that Evans and Evans had offered some four years earlier, in their introduction to the 1996 handbook. Reflecting on recent examples of "rash institutions" committing themselves "prematurely" to newfangled systems of digital transmission, the editors had noted that "[f]ew can afford to invest substantial sums in systems that may be out of date in a couple of years."¹⁴ In the event, the large-scale adoption and development of digital computational technologies for picture-industrial purposes was led (and bank-rolled) by investors who had specialized in computationally mediated trade or management of information: investment banking, in the case of Getty and Klein, and software engineering, in the case of Corbis founder Gates. It stands to reason that individuals from these backgrounds could recognize the potential for information technologies to transform the management and exploitation of photographic collections. "Stock photographs are information," as Paul Frosh has observed, and "[m]ore to the point, they were always information, even before the advent of digital technologies."¹⁵ Digital platformization, as exemplified in this chapter by Getty Images, first and foremost amplified the volume, accelerated the speed, and extended the reach of existing practices within the industry: the aggregation and syndication of collections, the exploitation of pictures as intellectual property, and the globalized distribution of pictures.

The new online platforms functioned both as repositories of digital surrogates produced through technical digitization and as finding aids whereby anyone with the required access privileges—not just experienced picture researchers—could search for and retrieve pictures from those repositories. In practice, the work of interpretation, which had previously been performed by picture library staff (like Oswald, Marilyn, and Veronica in *Shooting the Past*) in response to individual picture requests, was now built into the database as an algorithmic operation performed by a search engine. Sifting through a comprehensive vocabulary of keywords and search terms, which designated keyworders had attached to

each picture file, the engine would automatically retrieve any picture that matched the search terms entered by the researcher.¹⁶ Converging both the storage and the search functions of picture libraries in one and the same interactive interface, Getty and Corbis thus offered intermediation as an infrastructure rather than a service. And by setting the pace and standard for the provision of digitized content by picture libraries, these two platforms also taught picture researchers to expect digital search and delivery from other purveyors. In this respect the platforms were as instrumental in creating a demand for digitization as they were in supplying the digitized content to satisfy it.

The impact of digital platformization as promoted and pioneered by Getty and Corbis hit the UK picture industry with full force in the course of 2000–2001. With the exception of news and sports agencies, which had already gone fully digital by the end of the 1990s, libraries serving clients in advertising, book publishing, magazine publishing, and documentary production had been able to carry on throughout the 1990s more or less in the same way as in previous decades. Once the meta-sources Getty and Corbis had established their online one-stop shops for all manner of visual content, including high-quality stock photography and historical archive pictures, it nevertheless became clear that digital search and delivery was no longer the preserve of agencies serving the fast-moving market for news and sports photographs. The marketplace for pictures had moved definitively online, and any picture library wishing to stay in business must make the contents of their archives available in digital formats, one way or the other.

THE WORK OF DIGITIZATION

Moving picture research onto the internet was not a simple matter of building a website and expecting researchers to come, however. The establishment of a fully-fledged digital platform like Getty Images involved substantial investment beyond the means of small businesses, as underscored in *The Economist* article cited above. Therefore picture libraries had to approach the work of digitization in different ways, depending on their size, economy, and inclination. Regardless of scale, the technical processes of digitization required some form of access to both dedicated hardware,

such as scanning equipment and servers, and specialized software, like search engines and asset management systems. So-called wetware, in the form of skilled human operatives, was equally important to each step of the process. On a general level, picture libraries that turned a large profit or formed part of an international franchise were able to take a factory-like approach to transforming their holdings from analog to digital formats, employing dedicated scanning operators and keyworders for the purpose. Less profitable and/or smaller-scale operations were more likely to organize the work of digitization along the lines of a cottage industry, adding tasks of image processing and metadata input to the workloads of existing staff, or putting it out to trusted individual associates.

The case of the commercial picture library studied by Tope and Enser, which was discussed in chapter 4, provides an example of a wholesale digitization project conducted according to factory principles.¹⁷ The anonymized stock photo library, which aimed its pictures primarily at advertising and publishing clients, had prior to digitization held its stock in 35-mm slides and relied on printed catalogs to promote its images. The new web-based resource for image search and retrieval was intended to replace the catalogs as “a finding tool for customers,” partly at the initiative of the IT director and partly as “a response to rising customer expectations after the creation of websites by other picture libraries.”¹⁸ From the viewpoint of their clients, this picture library went more or less overnight from having no online offering to having a fully operational platform for digital search and download. Behind the scenes, however, the official launch of the website marked the result of three years’ labor.

The kinds of work that went into this project included lengthy preparatory stages of selecting and prioritizing pictures for digitization; an extensive period of scanning, indexing, and keywording each digital file; and a full year of testing before the actual website went live. The kinds of workers involved included library staff and sales executives during the selection process in the United Kingdom, technical operators at the international franchise’s designated facility in the United States, where the scanning and original file processing took place, and various web designers, programmers, and other IT staff engaged in the design, testing, and implementation phase back in the United Kingdom. The project also affected the working conditions of employees both during and after

its completion. During the main processing phase operators at the US scanning facility had been put on extended hours to keep on top of the workload (even factoring in overtime pay, it had reportedly been cheaper to transport the 35-mm slides to the US and back than to establish a separate scanning operation in the UK). And as already noted in chapter 4, once the searchable website was up and running many library staff members at the UK site found themselves redeployed in the capacity of sales representatives, since their research tasks had been disintermediated by its automated search engine.

A small and family-run picture business like the Mary Evans Picture Library (MEPL) did not have the financial muscle to undertake the complete digitization of its holdings in one fell swoop. It nevertheless managed to establish what a member of staff called “a reasonable online presence” more or less at the same time as the major actors in the UK picture industry.¹⁹ Exemplifying the cottage-industry approach to digitization, MEPL responded to the rapid development of online picture research in the years 2000–2001 by producing a parallel library of digital surrogates, in the form of low-resolution scans from duplicate transparencies, which picture researchers could consult online. The work was entrusted either to employees on-site or to former employees in possession of a good-quality scanner as well as familiarity with its collection. This gradual approach to digitization was partly necessitated by MEPL’s status as a small, independent company and partly due to its owners’ faith in the affordances of the transparency.²⁰

The library’s filing cabinets full of dupes continued, meanwhile, to serve as its main repository of publication-grade pictures for some time into the 2000s. MEPL had a long-established practice of distributing photographic reproductions to clients in the compressed, yet high-resolution format of 6 × 4.5 cm color transparencies, which were produced on-site using specialized photo-reprographic equipment acquired for the purpose. There were three sets of duplicates that made up the circulating part of the picture library, allowing the original prints, vintage photographs, journals, and books from which reproductions were made to remain securely stored in the library’s archives.

The smoothness with which Evans and Evans were able to move their picture library online was in several respects an unintended consequence

of their earlier investment in this analog apparatus for the multiplication and preservation of pictures. In the immediate context of the UK picture business in the early 2000s, maintaining analog transparencies as “hi-res” versions of the low-resolution image files offered to view on the website was a pragmatic way to satisfy clients’ increasing demand for online picture research and delivery. In a wider perspective, this workaround also illustrates how digitization in this period did not disrupt or replace photographic storage and transmission media so much as it was supported and enabled by them.

Undoubtedly, digitization had some of the same effects on picture librarians’ work at MEPL as it did at libraries that had undergone a more comprehensive digital transformation, such as the commercial stock library referenced earlier. Enabling clients to consult the collection online meant fewer searches to carry out on their behalf, but more processing of scanning requests, and negotiation of usage fees for items that clients had located themselves. Library staff were nevertheless also closely involved in the various processes of digitization, owing to the fact that it happened more gradually, and largely within the premises of the library itself. From an employee’s point of view, the MEPL approach must have made it easier to welcome digitization as simply another set of faster and more efficient tools for helping pictures do their job, rather than to fear it as an assemblage of automated machinery that would soon relieve you of yours.

The approach that Evans and Evans took to the digitization of their own library was grounded in what they called “the question of quality,” which was tied to an explicit distinction between “intelligent” and “unintelligent” picture sources.²¹ Acknowledging that each served different purposes within the picture industry, the handbook editors suggested that any of the “giant stock libraries” with their “unintelligent” automated search and download facilities would probably do if you were merely looking for “a straightforward image of a tropical sunset or a portrait of a showbiz celebrity.” These were the kinds of things that unintelligent sources could provide in abundance. If, on the other hand, “your need is obscure, or you are illustrating a complex text, the personal expertise and guidance provided by a specialist source may prove indispensable.” An intelligent source was, in other words, one in which knowledgeable people did the thinking and searching.²² Even while fully “embracing the

internet,” Evans and Evans adhered to their belief that serious picture research required skilled and educated human intermediaries.²³

This was further evidenced by a brochure printed and distributed in 2004 to promote the MEPL website. Its introductory text explicitly identified the brochure as “an invitation to visit www.maryevans.com” and “a taster of the many pictures in our collection.”²⁴ The opening paragraphs served to introduce MEPL and its website to prospective clients, but perhaps more importantly to remind existing clients that its collections were now available online. Although it primarily promoted the website, the spiral-bound, forty-eight-page volume also provided clients with the tactile affordances of a printed catalog, thus enticing them to search out pictures on screen by demonstrating how attractive they appeared on the printed page. The bulk of its pages was devoted to presenting sample illustrations in full color, printed on high-quality paper stock, organized around themes that were hinted at in encyclopedia-style running headers (another nod to a paper-based cultural form that had played a significant role in sustaining the pre-digital picture business). Thus personalities were sampled “from Archimedes . . . to Zola” (with an additional insert headed “via Napoleon”), while professions were represented “from blacksmiths to bureaucrats,” children “from growing pains to playing games,” fashion “from frock coats to farthingales” (“via hats”), and religion “from Adam and Eve to Zoroastrian fire worship.” For all that the work of finding pictures by 2004 was largely being carried out online, printed paper artifacts would for some years yet remain the predominant publication context for library pictures. Thus the brochure—complete with its allusion to the printed encyclopedia—attested to the longevity of paper as a valued medium of exchange in the pictorial economy, even as its contents indicated that the transactions of that economy were, and should be, increasingly taking place through screens.

As a printed artifact promoting a website, the MEPL brochure from 2004 is a curious document that attests to a specific moment in the history of digital disintermediation in the picture industry. Reproduced on the final two pages of the brochure were photographs showing staff at work in the library, handling paper-based originals, preparing transparencies for scanning, or consulting the MEPL website from desktop computers. Aside from illustrating the variety of work that went on in an

establishment that prided itself on “successfully combin[ing] the latest technology with the traditional values of a professional, friendly, long-established picture library,” these pictures also shored up the reassuring statement that clients contacting the library, whether in person or via the web, would always encounter “responsive human beings to remind you that picture research doesn’t have to be a dialogue between robots.”²⁵ This dismissive reference to roboticized picture research evidently confirms the impression, outlined earlier, that Evans and Evans remained committed to employing human intermediaries in their library. It also suggests that they ascribed to their clients a skepticism toward fully digitized search and retrieval that was similar to their own.

The MEPL brochure offers a glimpse of how a picture library at this time “imagines its users”—borrowing a phrase from Gitelman—as both eagerly seeking out pictorial content online and reluctantly giving up in-person, hands-on research.²⁶ While its primary purpose may have been to advertise the contents and features of the website, it was equally meant to reassure clients that services offered online were in addition to, rather than in replacement of, the library’s personal services. As a historical artifact, this item printed on high-quality paper further belongs to a moment in time when the affordances of websites were not yet deemed equivalent to those of the printed page for the purpose of showcasing pictures that were themselves ultimately destined for print. Nor did this equivalence suddenly emerge with the appearance of a single, newfangled feature or technology. It had to be gradually produced, both through technological improvements to the processing, search, and display capabilities of photo library websites and by habituating users to the experience of working with screen-based interfaces. Producing a printed brochure to advertise a website was one way of contributing to this process of habituation, which in turn was yet another way of making digitization work.

DIGITIZING RESEARCH

The picture library run by Evans and Evans had three crucial elements in place that worked in favor of digitization once they decided to embark on it. First, the circulating picture collection consisted of duplicate transparencies that were easily scanned in low resolution. Second, the library

had an existing computer catalog from which it was possible to extract good metadata about its holdings. And third, the original source materials for the duplicates were still preserved in the archives, from which the MEPL was able to provide clients with high-resolution scans on request. Restricting its web presence to a modest resource limited to low-resolution picture files, the MEPL could pace its investment in equipment and infrastructure, while still meeting picture researchers' expectations of being able to consult an online image database. It had become vital by the mid-2000s to meet these expectations, as Evans and Evans admitted in the 2006 eighth and final edition of their handbook, where they saw fit "to include only sources which can be accessed by e-mail and preferably also via a website."²⁷ The now pervasive logic of web search was detectable down to the design and organization of the handbook itself, where the main division into sections of "General," "Regional," "National," and "Specialist," consistently applied since the fourth edition in 1989, had been replaced by a purely alphabetical order of subject keywords, similar to those one might enter into a website's search box. These editorial changes reflected the fact that the global marketplace for rented pictures had by 2006 moved definitively online, and that the handbook was by now addressing a constituency of picture researchers fully habituated to a digitized work environment.

In the winter of 2007–2008 I conducted a series of interviews with typical members of this constituency, professionals in the UK picture industry who had begun their careers sometime between 1960 and 1990 and who were still working or had recently retired from the business at the time of our meeting. Our conversations focused on firsthand experiences of how digitization had affected the picture business in general and their work in particular. Although their individual trajectories were very different, there were clear consistencies across the various accounts, both on key points of chronology and on what they deemed the most significant impact of digitization on the practical work of picture research. Most interviewees agreed, for example, that digital technologies began to make themselves felt sometime after 1995 and that the major changeover to digital technologies and working practices occurred around 2001–2002. There had been computerized systems of administration in place for

several years before that, but the work relating to the pictures themselves did not begin to move online until the last half of the 1990s.

On the one hand, interviewees affirmed that digital technologies had “kind of democratized” picture distribution, as one of them put it, by enabling photographers and smaller picture suppliers to connect directly with a large customer base and thus cut out the intermediary agencies with their large international networks.²⁸ On the other hand, there was a concomitant sense that the worldwide market was dominated by the two major platforms, Getty Images and Corbis Images. Rick, a manager in a large but independent picture library in London, described this as “a supermarket philosophy” where, especially in the newspaper segment, “researchers are forced to buy all the images from a few, large, preferred suppliers.”²⁹ While digitization in theory had enabled photographers and small agencies to sell their pictures directly to newspapers, in other words, the largest actors like Getty Images operated with economies of scale that, as in other retail markets, enabled them to push prices down. At the time of our interview in 2008 Rick estimated that “the average sale price for a photo is half of what it was three years ago,” a development that he explicitly attributed to the pricing policies and market position of Getty Images.

Aside from confirmation of the hegemonic position of Getty Images at the time, I identified across these conversations three main manifestations of the impact of digitization on the practical work of picture research. One was the almost total computerization of a job that had previously involved a wide range of tools and technologies. Another was the disintermediation of picture librarians and research staff at picture sources. The third can best be described as the changing temporalities of research, experienced as working not just against the clock of ever-diminishing deadlines but in concert with the time lags and redundancies of digital transmission.

In pre-digital days the job had involved a lot of legwork, often a good deal of travel, and mainly direct communication either in person or over the phone. These aspects were remembered fondly by interviewees Marie-Louise and Julia, who had both been researching for the book publishing industry in the 1980s. In each of our meetings they individually

emphasized the joys of visiting picture sources in person. “I actually got out to libraries, museums, talked to authors, looked at endless images,” explained Marie-Louise, who started out researching for picture books in 1986.³⁰ As for Julia, she laughed that, “I was thin in those days—I was literally running around London most of the time. Just running around.”³¹ Julia also shared memories of overseas trips to Berlin and New York, in order to research and collect large amounts of pictures for a long-running publishing project: “all the [relevant] pictures were in Berlin in those days and I had to fly in on the last plane. The text had just been written so I had to go in with the text, . . . rush off to the first picture library, gather all the pictures, get a taxi to the second one, gather all the pictures, get the plane back, so the thing could be laid out and designed the next day.”³² Some years later, she had been required to travel to New York to consult the Bettmann Archive and another large New York agency, Black Star:

It was a murder thing for [a magazine publisher] and the only way I could get the pictures in those days was to actually go there and physically research in two major libraries, UPI Bettmann and the Black Star library. . . . Bettmann themselves were incredibly slow. They knew I was coming, they knew that I was taking the material. I was doing something like twelve issues for the magazine in one week which was pretty heavy research and I didn’t really have much text or anything. . . . I ended up with a big pile of pictures and I couldn’t get them to book them out for me. And I kept saying, “Please could you do these today?” And it got nearer and nearer to my departure and I really had to have them on the plane because I knew they would forget about them. And they said something that really surprised me because I was going, “This is New York, this is supposed to be really fast,” and they said “No, London’s the fastest place, not New York.” And that was an incredible surprise to me.³³

Julia’s anecdotes vividly conjure up the ambulatory character of pre-digital picture research and underscore the point repeatedly made by Evans and Evans in their handbook, that the picture business was always international in remit. The episode from New York draws additional attention both to local differences in working practices and to the potential for confrontation between researchers and librarians, two of the less pleasant intermediary elements that were largely eliminated with the move to automated online search and download.

The disintermediation of picture librarians from the search process was regretted by some and considered a relief by others. "Digitization has taken some of the buzz out of the office," regretted Rick; the phones had fallen silent because the website had taken over as first port of call for researchers, and the filing cabinets—which the researchers had previously climbed over each other to rummage through—had been removed to the basement.³⁴ While Rick seemed to find it a pity that the library's own intermediaries were no longer in demand, picture editor Adam felt that the advent of searchable picture library websites had improved his own research experience. In the pre-digital days, Adam explained, "I was relying on another person at the other end of the phone understanding my brief and not having a bad day so that they would pull out the right thing from the files. Now I can do that myself."³⁵ The same sentiment was expressed by Marie-Louise, who had researched extensively on-site in picture libraries early on in her book-publishing career, and found it frustrating when moving into magazine publishing that the shorter deadlines required her to rely on briefing picture librarians over the phone. As quoted at the start of this chapter, Marie-Louise felt that digitization put her "back in control of what [she] was searching," as she had been when going through a library's physical picture files by herself.³⁶ Julia, the freelance picture researcher who had been so frustrated by the slow service at Bettmann in New York, also relished the feeling of "being in control" once she learned how to use the websites and, not least, was able to search across several of them at the same time.³⁷

These reactions are a reminder that, long before the construction of automated search engines, picture researchers had relied, for a great deal, on locating pictures by inputting keywords into an apparatus the workings of which they could not control. Whether picture requests were sent by letter (as recommended by Evans, Evans, and Nelki in 1975), fax (as had become standard by 1992), or listed up over the phone, the keywords, phrases, and descriptions provided by picture researchers had to be decoded and interpreted by the library research staff to match up with the classification and cross-reference systems according to which their particular holdings were organized. To give one example, a request for "conjoined twins" to the Keystone Picture Agency in the 1950s would have sent picture librarians searching through the boxes labeled "Freaks,"

whereas in the Hulton Picture Post Library they would probably have gone looking under “MED” for “medical.”³⁸ The picture researcher who had placed the request would have to trust the library staff to know where to look, and what alternative terms or categories to search under if nothing came up. While each collection’s idiosyncratic “archival script” would often be embedded in the metadata when pictures were digitized and made available for online search, they would normally also be supplemented by new keywords, in order to make them retrievable by as many clients as possible and, as in the case of the long-since disbanded “Freaks” category, updated to remove offensive descriptions.³⁹

The feeling of being in control of the search, expressed by Adam, Julia, and Marie-Louise, was mainly due to being able to search using variations and combinations of terms limited only by their own imaginations rather than by somebody else’s. That is not to say the users of online platforms fully trusted the pre-interpretation built into the keyword infrastructure to incorporate every possible concept or idea that they might associate with a given picture. Despite admitting frustrations over keywording standards and practices across various platforms, and missing the personal contact with librarians and archivists, however, none of the researchers I interviewed was nostalgic for the pre-digital system of human-only intermediation.

At the time of our interview, Julia considered the greatest frustration with online picture research to be the slowness of transmission due to lack of computing power or bandwidth. Waiting was of course nothing new in picture research (as her own account of getting impatient at the Bettmann Archive attested) but when waiting times were measured in hours or days it was possible to call other sources or go out to libraries for on-site research while pictures were being couriered or sent in the post. Once all sources were to be accessed through the same computer terminal, it meant one search could slow down all the others, as Julia described it:

I think one of the really frustrating things about starting to work online was the minute that you got the hang of it, because most companies didn’t have very good broadband access, everything was so slow. . . . When the system goes down or is very slow it’s still deeply frustrating because you’re onto the next kind of ten searches; the others are lagging behind.⁴⁰

This experience of the computer simply not keeping up to speed with the work rate was also highlighted by freelance picture researcher Susi, who explained that each download of a high-resolution file was taking more than a minute:

Now, in effect, it is probably still quicker than me having to ring up an agency and say, "Have you got this image?" and them having to post it to me. But there is an element of I'm actually just sat at the machine. . . . So what I now have to do is I will have to work out before I download the picture what part of my job should I leave during the picture being downloaded.⁴¹

While Susi conceded that one-minute downloads were not really slow "in the great scheme of things," she suggested that online workflows had changed perceptions of speed and accessibility: "I think people, when they expect [it] this instant, it is instant but it's a different kind of instant." The two kinds of instantaneity could be compared to the difference between Polaroid photography and digital photography. In its time, Polaroid was described as "instant photography," even as part of the excitement of using it was waiting for and watching the image that emerged from the green-gray emulsion of the print.⁴² Compared to handling in a roll of film at the chemist's and waiting for it to be processed, the minute or so it took for the Polaroid to appear was instantaneous. Yet this was clearly "a different kind of instant" to that of the smartphone snapshot, which appears on the screen in fraction of a second, and next to which the formerly instantaneous Polaroid appears more like an analog version of a slow digital download.

Working to tight deadlines was nothing new in publishing, as testified both by Julia's stories of whistlestop trips abroad and by the account in chapter 4 of how faxing had encouraged twenty-four-hour work cycles and last-minute submissions across working life in the 1990s. Accordingly, when Evans and Evans in 2001 had referred to "the shorter deadlines that have become today's norm," this was a development that had been ongoing since pre-digital times.⁴³ To the extent that digital search and transmission encouraged even shorter deadlines, this was less significant than the way digital workflows produced other kinds of "dead" time, for instance, when waiting for files to download or search engines to complete their processes. The improved efficiency promised by digitization

was further compromised by picture libraries with searchable websites that did not necessarily provide direct-download facilities. Sometimes this was due to deliberate access restrictions, as in the case of large aggregated sources like Getty Images, which, as Susi explained, provided direct download to subscribers but required non-subscribers to place orders for individual transmission. In the case of smaller outfits such as the Mary Evans Picture Library, as we have seen, the lack of download options was due to low-res website pictures being the only digital versions in existence at first, as high-res files were scanned and supplied on demand from transparencies. In either case, it was necessary to contact the picture source in question and have somebody transfer the high-resolution file separately, again incurring waiting times and delays, which revealed the idea of instantaneous picture delivery over the internet as still more of a promise than a reality for many users.

Picture researchers may have experienced more control of the process of locating pictures once picture librarians had been digitally disintermediated, but this effect was in part counteracted by the technological reintermediation of the process of retrieving publishable file sizes of those pictures. This was the downside of digital disintermediation that several interviewees noted: the reduced number of staff, both on picture desks and in picture libraries. Marie-Louise regretted that there was “no people contact anymore”; Julia said she missed the “endless cups of tea”; while Adam described how he saw the intermediary functions of picture libraries changing in the following terms: “There will be fewer jobs in agencies as everything can be run on skeleton staff—I mean, people don’t run the telephone exchanges anymore! You only need people when something goes wrong.” Adam’s prediction in 2007 echoed the earlier prognostication by Tope and Enser, cited previously, which in 2000 had foreseen that digitization would affect staff levels as well as skills requirements in picture libraries. As the information scientists had envisaged, the work of intermediation was less frequently taking place between pictures and clients, and more often between pictures or clients, on one side, and online search and retrieval systems, on the other. The infrastructure of intermediation constituted by automated and aggregated digital platforms still relied on intermediaries, but in the capacity of technicians rather than librarians.

Even though interpretive schemas and structures were necessarily pre-programmed by each platform at keyword level, the digital disintermediation of picture librarians relieved picture researchers of experiencing their own ideas and search terms being individually interpreted and filtered by another person's imagination. At the same time, digital reintermediation introduced new obstacles to efficiency, such as repeated waits for search engines to return results and unpredictable delays in the transmission of files. Digital platforms offering direct access to library holdings may have eliminated the handling, dispatching, and filing of physical pictures, thus freeing up more time for picture researchers to focus on the creative knowledge work of research: the looking at and thinking about pictures that usually drew picture researchers to the profession in the first place.⁴⁴ Digitization nevertheless created its own forms of routine and mechanical tasks, including the constant typing of search terms, the endless clicking through search results, the repeated downloading of picture files, and the clerical challenges of routing them through the temporary and virtual archives of digital picture management systems. Although the work was performed across the graphical user interfaces of networked computers, it was still tedious information labor.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the twentieth century emulsion-based photography had been the recording and transmission medium of choice in the picture industry. During the first decade of the twenty-first, it was replaced by digital technologies of image capture and distribution. For this replacement to happen it was necessary for digital images first to assume an equivalence with photographs and then to gain an advantage over them. In the early 2000s the technical quality of digital photographs was poor compared to emulsion photographs, and it required enormous computing resources to create and store digital files that were even approximate to a 35-mm slide in data richness. The small size of digital images could also be an advantage for digital distribution, however. Providing low-resolution digital surrogates online required no waiting times between search and retrieval, and thus represented an improvement of service to picture researchers who used to place orders by phone or fax. Online

searches could also be carried out without incurring either mileage or travel expenses, making it both more efficient and more economical than going out to libraries in person and sifting through their files on site.

The work of picture research has always entailed going through vast quantities of material in order to retrieve a small selection of items for actual use. In the early days of digitization it was therefore still acceptable to wait for a few hours or days for a limited number of high-resolution reproducible photographs to be delivered by post, courier, or file transfer, once the time-consuming selection process had been conveniently performed online. Once the networked computer had replaced the filing cabinet or catalog as the researchers' primary picture-finding tool, however, expectations of digital delivery were not far off. It was only a matter of time before the web also became the libraries' main channel of picture distribution. This nevertheless required a series of concerted efforts to produce digital technologies as equivalent to photographic ones, and visual content platforms as equivalent to picture libraries. This, too, was work generated by digitization.

By the turn of the millennium, Getty and Corbis had taken the lead on this development by both acquiring substantial collections of stock and archival photographs and building the digital infrastructures that were needed in order to monetize them by electronic means. "Intellectual property is the oil of the 21st century," Mark Getty was quoted by *The Economist*, going on to compare "the richest men a hundred years ago," who had "made their money extracting natural resources or moving them around," to contemporary magnates—perhaps like his business rival at the time, the software magnate and picture-industrialist Bill Gates—who "have made their money out of intellectual property."⁴⁵ It was this extractivist business logic that underpinned Getty's project to acquire and disseminate pictorial commodities across worldwide networks on an unprecedented scale in the early 2000s.

In one sense, this was no different from how picture libraries had always made their money by intermediating between picture buyers and picture sellers.⁴⁶ Yet the value to be extracted from visual content platforms was not limited to percentages collected for the smooth management of reproduction rights on behalf of photographers or archival collections. The sheer traffic in photographs sustained by these platforms yielded an

equally valuable by-product in the form of data generated simply from users' interactions. There were no search fees on online platforms because users paid with the data to be harvested from the search procedure itself, even when they decided not to buy any pictures. These data could be analyzed and used for improving search algorithms or expanding sought-after content, thus improving the likelihood of more researchers finding relevant pictures to download from the platform in question, or they could be sold for any number of other uses by any number of other data analytics companies. In this way a mega-source like Getty Images not only developed infrastructures for a web-based picture industry; it built an interface between an established pictorial economy and an emerging informational economy.

Elsewhere in the picture industry, smaller and more local actors set about producing equivalences between their established library services and the online resources they were beginning to offer, in response to the digitization challenge laid down by the likes of Getty and Corbis. The 2004 brochure produced and distributed by the Mary Evans Picture Library is a most evocative manifestation of this phenomenon. It was created as a paper-based, illustrated print product that promoted the benefits of the picture library's website, reassuring clients that an online search was just as good as visiting the library itself. It explicitly promoted equivalence between website and library by underscoring that both were staffed by the same humans—and not by robots. By the very design of its material support, however, the brochure also evoked the haptic and aesthetic differences between pictures reproduced on the screen and on the page. The implicit audience for such an artifact was, as I have suggested, the picture library's imagined users, picture researchers who by and large shared Evans and Evans's passion for print culture and ambivalence about digitization.

The interviewees who voiced the picture researchers' perspectives in this chapter were clearly not among those imagined users, in the sense that they mostly expressed satisfaction with the digitization of their working practices. I have highlighted both the advantages they reported that digitization had brought them (searching across multiple websites, being in control of the search process) and the drawbacks that were frequently mentioned (slow data processing, delayed or unavailable downloads). I

have not yet addressed a further point that came up in some of these interviews, namely, the concern that picture research itself was disappearing as a profession. Noting that the work of locating pictures was increasingly being reassigned to designers and subeditors, now that anyone with a registered account could search for and download pictures online, Susi put it this way: “We’re like the drummers in a band. You’ve got a machine that can do it now and the keyboard guy will do it.”⁴⁷ This somewhat jaded quip alludes to another equivalence, between researcher and search engine, that the digitization and platformization of the picture industry appeared to produce. It is yet another iteration of that old story of modernity, already told several times in the preceding chapters of this book, which invariably predicts that this will kill that, labor will be mechanized, and people will be replaced by machines.

And yet many bands still avail themselves of a drummer, just as press, publishers, advertisers, and media production companies still hire the services of dedicated picture researchers.⁴⁸ In effect, the drum machine did not so much replace drummers as it gave a wider range of people the ability to (re)produce the sounds of drumming. Similarly, the exponential proliferation of online picture sources since the early 2000s has made it possible for virtually anyone with an internet connection both to carry out picture research and to distribute their own pictures, whether for personal, public, or commercial purposes. In this respect digital technologies have, to a certain extent—as Rick put it—democratized aspects of both the music and the picture industries.⁴⁹ No drum machine or online visual content platform could be made to work, however, without data from which to synthesize the sounds and images they offer. These data have been derived from records and documents that together inscribe and embody the accumulated legacies of skills, knowledge, and practices developed and performed over generations. The final chapter of this book turns to examine how those legacies can be seen to endure in and beyond digitization.

© 2023 Massachusetts Institute of Technology

This work is subject to a Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND license. Subject to such license, all rights are reserved.



The MIT Press would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers who provided comments on drafts of this book. The generous work of academic experts is essential for establishing the authority and quality of our publications. We acknowledge with gratitude the contributions of these otherwise uncredited readers.

This book was set in ITC Stone Serif Std and Trajan Pro by New Best-set Typesetters Ltd. Printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Vestberg, Nina Lager, author.

Title: Picture research : the work of intermediation from pre-photography to post-digitization / Nina Lager Vestberg.

Description: Cambridge, Massachusetts : The MIT Press, [2023] | Series: Leonardo | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022036842 (print) | LCCN 2022036843 (ebook) | ISBN 9780262045315 (paperback) | ISBN 9780262362221 (epub) | ISBN 9780262375023 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Pictures—Research. | Cataloging of pictures.

Classification: LCC N4000 .V47 2023 (print) | LCC N4000 (ebook) | DDC 025.3/471—dc23/eng/20221019

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022036842>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022036843>

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1