

# ARCHIVES AND MUSEUMS COLLECTING SOCIAL MEDIA PHOTOGRAPHS FOR THE FUTURE – SOME SCANDINAVIAN EXAMPLES

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## Introduction

Never before have so many people photographed so much of their everyday lives. We post and share billions of photographs online every year, primarily in social media. The photographs overflow our daily lives, and yet they are not necessarily there for future generations. This development represents a significant challenge for archives and museums, which aim to preserve history, build heritage collections, and archives.

The Nordic research project *Collecting Social Photo* (CoSoPho) addresses this challenge through empirical case studies and analysis based on multidisciplinary methods and theories. The project is a cooperation between The Nordic Museum in Stockholm (national), Stockholm County Museum (regional), The Finnish Museum of Photography (national), and Aalborg City Archives (local) in Denmark. Research partner is the Department of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University. CoSoPho runs for three years (2017-2020). The paper will discuss social digital photography as a phenomenon based on previous research and connect the findings to questions about the relevance of this kind of photography to archives and museum and the consequence for existing work methods.

The general assumption behind CoSoPho has been - as the experience has shown with other kinds of born-digital material - that the heritage institutions will have to work in a contemporary mode together with the producers in order to collect social digital photography. If not, the material will be lost for the future: Deleted or lost for technological reasons. Simultaneously there is no legislation covering vernacular social media photography or other imperatives in the Nordic countries or probably not elsewhere that will secure the material for the future. As a consequence of both observations, the archives and museums need to be present shortly after the creation of the photograph and develop participatory methods to collect and preserve the vernacular social photographs.

## Why Archives and Museums should collect Social Digital Photography

What are the arguments for collecting the vernacular networked digital photographs shared through social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter, as records to be saved for the future as a part of the cultural heritage and archives? Few museums and archives actually collect social media photography today due to lack of knowledge, competences, and resources. There also seems to be uncertainty about the relevance of collecting this kind of photography. These are observations from a recent survey in Sweden and interviews performed by the CoSoPho project (<http://collectingsocialphoto.nordiskamuseet.se/> January 13, 2018).

The CoSoPho project claims that the strongest reasons to collect social digital photography is that this type of photographs has replaced the analogue photographs commonly collected by archives and museums. A similar observation can be applied to traditional private archives such as diaries and collections of personal letters. Today this content is often shared as communication on social media in a mixture of words and images. Another reason is time. This vast tangible imprint of everyday life, a result of more photos being produced than ever, has already become important historical documentation.

Furthermore, a less explored potential of social digital photography is the communicative aspect, which offers new possibilities for archives and museums to integrate collecting and collections into the museum/archival outreach and dialogue with audiences and users. This could indicate a new value of photography collections to the institutions as contributors in two Nordic anthologies: *Bilder för Framtiden* (Pictures for the Future), (Boogh, 2011) and *#Snapshot* (Lehmuskallio, 2013), as Jensen (2013, 2014) also has suggested in articles on how especially Instagram photos could become a part of the photo archives and hashtags function as collecting tools.

### **Research on Social Digital Photography**

Previous research reveals that the social digital photograph challenges current museum and archival practices in many different ways, Bushey has e.g. discussed the trustworthiness of social digital photography, the validity of social media records and problems connected to them (Bushey, 2015). Besser has noted the presence of non standardized formats (Besser, 2012), and Cameron has pointed at the heritage collections databases' inability to host complex digital objects (Cameron, 2010).

Chalfen notes in the foreword to *Photography and Everyday Life*, there is a lack of empirically based studies, which keep up with the fast changes of the emerging camera technology (Chalfen, 2016). A pilot study (CoSoPho, 2016), which led to the CoSoPho project also confirmed that few scholars discuss the memory aspect of social media specifically connected to photography and to archival and museum practices. However, there is a growing awareness regarding social media content, including photos, as records that should be acquired as a part of public archives. A recent innovative example from 2017 is the President Obama White House social media archives (<http://obamawhitehouse.gov.archivesocial.com>). Furthermore, Besser has studied of the "Occupy" movement, where he touches upon participatory issues as well as the entire process of selecting, capturing, and preserving media shared online (Besser, 2012).

Other researchers have analysed the social media platforms in terms of archives, which also offer insights useful for the process of collecting the photographs. Geismar has in 'Instant Archives' reflected on Instagram as a massive, user-generated archive in itself, structured by a corporation (Geismar, 2017, 332). Gehl (2009) has analysed YouTube; identifying roles and relations between the media platform, the user, and the content in archival terms. Bartoletti (2011) has in: 'Memory and Social Media: New forms of Remembering and Forgetting', analysed how memory in a continuum from private/public and individual/collective/cultural were supported and managed on e.g. Flickr and YouTube and identified user practices connected to the platforms.

As the years go by the different social media platforms have increasingly focused on memory, history, and personal archives.

Recently (June 2018) Facebook introduced 'memories' as a possibility to reminisce, and even Snapchat, which signified volatility, now allows to preserve snaps. The same tendencies appear in Instagram. Google Photo curates (hi)stories from the creator's private archives and makes them easily searchable. Regarded pragmatically from archives' and museums' point of view, the creators of the images could experience that their need of archives and heritage were covered by the social media platforms. A tendency, which could complicate collecting. In a survey by CoSoPho about social photo practices <https://minnen.se/tema/socialadigitalabilder> these issues are touched upon. A preliminary conclusion reveals that the creators are positive towards the idea of offering their photos to archives and museums.

### **The Impact of Social Digital on Photographs**

CoSoPho is based on the assumption that the social digital photograph is considerably divergent from the physical object characteristic in heritage photography collections. Today photography is part of everyday life, ubiquitous through ever-present smartphones, and also ephemeral; stored on

private accounts in the cloud or on easily breakable devices. A major difference from analogue photography is a massive increase in participation, and the number of images shared (Van House, 2016). Furthermore, the networked social digital photograph is reliant on its context, being an assemblage of geodata, motif, text, emojis, likes, shares, and networks. Photography today can be regarded as primarily a form of communication, a new kind of vernacular, where the visual resembles words and language.

Another impact of technologies and digital ecosystems on vernacular (everyday life) photography is that photographs are “increasingly becoming algorithmic and a source of metadata” (Gómez Cruz, 2016, 229). Simultaneously, they are complex sociotechnical assemblages, an intricate mix of technology, practices, and services, which is not stable or fixed, nor might it ever be (Lehmuskallio and & Gómez Cruz, 2016, 8). Looking at traditional work practices in museums and archives, which still revolve around (seemingly) stable, unique, and delimited objects or visual sources, it is not astonishing that institutional infrastructures and policies are “ill-suited to new ways of seeing objects as polysemic entities” (Cameron, 2010, 84).

The introduction of the social digital photograph as a complex object, an assemblage constantly in change (Gómez Cruz, 2016), is highly relevant to archives and museums aiming at collecting this kind of photography. The photograph exists in an ecosystem of social media services, technologies, individuals, and organizations, and above all, in a vast stream of content in constant change. For museums and archives, this notion poses the challenge of reaching out and breaking through the stream of content in social media. It implies successful outreach, in order to be able to collect at the very time, when the photo is produced and to engage audiences in order to facilitate co-creation of the photographic heritage. The success of these tasks are highly dependent on strategic communication initiatives (Roued-Cunliffe and Copeland, 2017). Researchers like Eveleigh (2015) and Huvela (2015) have also identified the need of participatory methods in archival settings today.

## **Case Studies**

Building on previous research and experience, CoSoPho has used case studies as a primary method of data collection. The case studies aimed to capture relevant dimensions of social digital photography, from individual to media-specific practices, and relate them to current museum and archival practices. Focus in the following case studies presented here are on localities (towns) and events. The time dimension extends from everyday to the extraordinary (events) and changes. The first two terms are inspired by Manovich (2014) in his work using social photography as data.

As CoSoPho is closely related to collecting institutions in practice, the case studies presented reflect the field of work of the participating archives and museums. Each museum and archives has designed case studies based on their particular aims and scope: The local, the regional, and the national. The concrete process of collecting social media photography in heritage institutions is a new field of work practice that has only been sparsely tested and researched before CoSoPho.

### **Case: Södertälje – Place Related Social Photography**

The purpose of this case study, carried out by the Nordic Museum and the Stockholm County Museum, was to “open-endedly” investigate and learn how a place - the town of Södertälje in Sweden – was depicted through Instagram using qualitative as well as quantitative methods. The purpose was also to explore new methods to increase motivation for co-creating photographic heritage. The approach builds on research in visual anthropology (Miller, 2016; Edwards, 2014) and place-making in urban areas (Anselin and Williams, 2015). Through the the case study the museum wished to understand how culture heritage institutions could reach out to interact with communities through social media photography on Instagram in order to eventually document a

place and collect photography. These are initiatives that need strategic planning and dedicated resources as Roued-Cunliffe and Copeland point out (2017).



Figure 1: Södertälje – the channel illuminated by Northern Light – from Instagram. Photo: Stefan Christophs

There are other issues that occur when approaching a place through Instagram photography. Despite the fact that everyone has access to exactly the same functions (adding hashtags, optional geotagging, etc.) and the same user interface, the result is diverse, as Miller argues (2016). At the same time, there are gaps of information, as not everyone uses Instagram, not all parts of a town are depicted through Instagram; a fraction of all photos are geotagged; and in addition, the service itself is decreasing diversity by highlighting popular images and by framing the photos in certain aspects (Manovich, 2017). Reaching through this complex and elusive flow of images, the fragmented ocean of information, as well as Instagram's own universe, is therefore of greatest importance when approaching a place through Instagram, both for collecting and outreach purposes.

The entry point for the study was hashtag #södertälje. As it was observed that a majority of these photos appeared to be posted for commercial reasons, the research was redirected towards geotags. Through a series of initiatives of outreach, observation, interviews, collecting efforts, and analysis, issues emerged directly related to the initial assumptions of the project; For example, difficulties in outreach and engagement, but also facilitating online collecting through purpose-made websites. Following this line CoSoPho is presently evolving a prototype collecting platform especially suited for digital social photography.



Figure 2: Boy with scooters surrounded by street art on skating rink in Södertälje, posted on Samtidsbild. Photo: Milagros Sahlén

The Södertälje case study has enabled the CoSoPho to start concretizing the process of collecting, by mapping efforts to existing work practices, identifying specific challenges, and discussing purpose and methods. This has provided a first step towards establishing new recommendations for collecting social media photography, and to developing participatory methods for co-creating the photographic heritage. Next to follow is a new case study to be performed in the city of Aalborg in Denmark, which will be mapped to improve methods and allow comparison.

### **Case: Collecting using #hashtags in Aalborg**

Aalborg City Archives initiated digital collection from Instagram by launching the project #Christmasinaalborg in December 2012 (Jensen 2013 and 2014). The archives have conducted the project for six years, latest with the hashtag #christmasinaalborg17 (#juliaalborg17). Today, it is one of the case studies in CoSoPho illustrating how to collect from an event, as Christmas also is. The advantage of the long period of time is the possibility to identify changes in the use of the platform (Instagram), user behaviour, and in user behaviour, as well as changes in the depictions of town. The time span allows comparison of observations, as is used in the tradition of longitudinal studies in other research fields. As Manovich (2017) states: "The period covered here (2012-2015 in his case) includes both the time when most people used Instagram spontaneously without deliberate planning, and the later period when the spontaneous and strategic uses co-existed." use of the platform (Instagram) and in user behaviour, as well as changes in the depictions of town.



Figure 3: #juliaalborg16 (#Christmasinaalborg16). The arrival of city Christmas tree. Photo documenting the celebration of Christmas in the citycenter on Instagram. Photo: Mia Nielsen

The collecting practice was and is still today adopted from analogue photo collection -only the photo, not captions, is collected with permission from the photographer, which means new insights into the complexity of social media photos as a mixture of image, caption, and platform are not yet incorporated in the practices; this confirms Cameron's (2010) assumption that work practices in memory institutions are based on stable and delimited units and are not easy to change.

The option to become a part of history was accepted positively by the Instagramers, and regarded as recognition from the beginning. However, the experience is that people do not spontaneously share images with the archives by themselves, as observed in the Södertälje case. In 2017, the archives found it harder to involve people, perhaps because of changes in the use of the media as cited above. Instagram seems not to be associated with the same hip factor as in 2012. At that time, being an early adopter was one of the reasons for participation. Today growing numbers have private accounts and use one to one media, such as Snapchat.

In 2017 as a part of CoSoPho Aalborg City Archives also tested collection of images and captions through hashtags in a short term project, #Aalborginstachallenge1-5. The project ran for a month in cooperation with the city planners in the Aalborg municipality and was intended to be a new method to increase citizens involvement in changes of the city center (<https://www.aalborg.dk/media/6416274/debathaefte-low.pdf>).



Figure 4: Half Marathon (left) and carnival in Aalborg 2017. Activities, which made life in city center attractive for the contributors to the campaign #aalborginstachallenge. Photos: Tove Hansen and Millie Vinther

Documenting changes and attitudes to changes fitted well with the aim of the City Archives' collection policy. The co-creation was supported by gamification, a competition, and selection by a jury of well-known people in town. During the campaign 156 photos were tagged with #aalborginstachallenge. The motifs were relevant and reflected peoples' thoughts on life in the city center but fewer than expected. The experience was that when collecting using a hashtag, the themes should not be too complicated. Complex issues do not easily transfer into captions, and citizen involvement in political processes was not as motivating as could have been expected.

### **3: The Terrorist Attack in Stockholm 2017**

April 7, 2017, a terrorist attack took place in Stockholm city center. As observed in similar cases, as the Boston Marathon Bombings (Männistö, 2016), social media was used for communication among the public during the attack and in the following days. Social media photography was widely used, and shared with the hashtag #openstockholm.

At the onset of the CoSoPho project, the use of networked photographs during events was already identified as a relevant topic to explore. Even though a traumatic event was not anticipated, the framework of the project allowed to initiate a rapid collecting initiative shortly after the attack. This case study has emphasized the need for adequate infrastructures and collecting interfaces, successful outreach, and the need to better understand the social digital photograph as big data and its relevance for museums and archives.



Figure 5: Flowers left at the place of the attack in Stockholm, to commemorate the deceased and injured. Photo: Peter Gullberg Eriksson

Shortly after the attack, the Nordic Museum and the Stockholm County Museum introduced two collecting initiatives: #openstockholm on Minnen ([www.minnen.se](http://www.minnen.se)) and Dokumentation 14:53 on Samtidsbild ([www.samtidsbild.se](http://www.samtidsbild.se)) using two digital collecting websites, each with a slightly different focus. Outreach initiatives were performed mainly through media and social media. A third method of collecting was done by downloading metadata through a third party service from 7,100 of the approximately 10,000 images posted on Instagram. A total of 389 images were uploaded to Minnen, and 105 to Samtidsbild. Through categorization, a method used for non-text documents to assign a denotation based on visual analysis (Rasmussen Pennington, 2017), three categories emerged: the attack and events directly related to it; the memorial sites and gatherings; and feelings and reflections.

The collected photographs showed that different contexts (Web interfaces, questions asked, outreach, and even the scope of the collecting organization) provided different affordances. Minnen targeted a hashtag #openstockholm. A majority of these images depict the aftermath of the attack and the memorial site established, where the attack took place. On Samtidsbild, there was an element of citizen journalism, where people on the street photographed the attack, the heavily armed police officers securing the streets, and the people walking home. To be at the right spot at the right time turns an amateur into a photojournalist, which becomes particularly valuable for news media; the photos are from the perspective of a participant in the event, rather than a detached observer, such as a professional photojournalist. (Rubinstein and Sluis, 2008).

One significant conclusion from the case study is the importance of collecting in real-time, and how this is dependent on successful outreach. Despite the vast amount of photographs produced and circulated online, there is a rapid decline only shortly after the event, as illustrated in Figure 6.

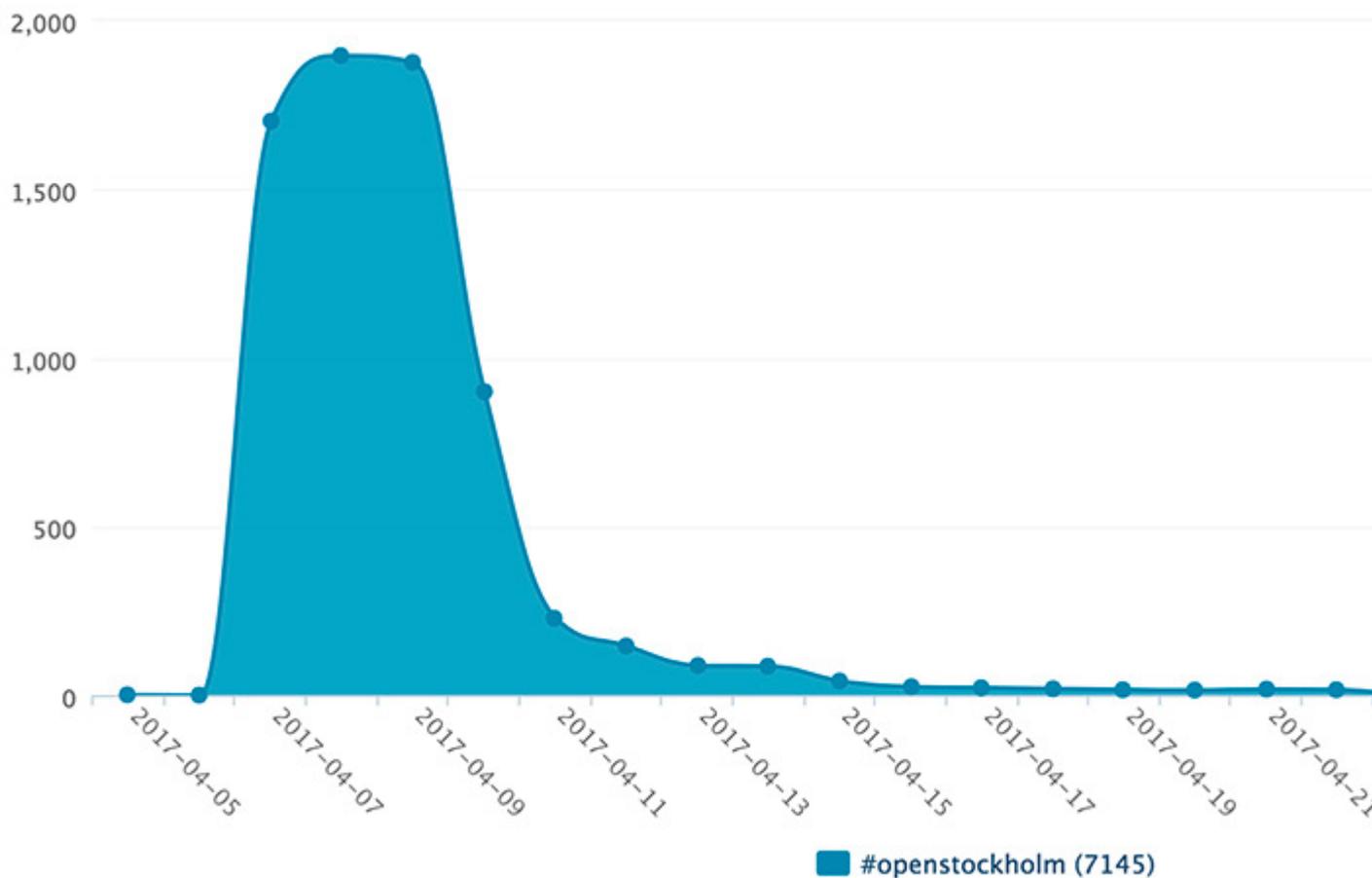


Figure 6: The amount of photos posted on Instagram with hashtag #openstockholm after the attack on April 7, 2017.

Another conclusion is that especially in cases of events, collection of metadata is important, as discussed by Lehmuskallio and Gómez Cruz (2016): “Because digital photo files carry metadata and can be combined with a variety of database, their use for the purposes of modelling events which have taken place, or for predicting what might have happened, is increasing”. This is confirmed by Männistö (2016), who argues that big data analysis might also challenge the notion of social media as a fragmented hyperreality and provide important patterns. The metadata from the photographs of the event will therefore be further examined through the use of language and speech processing tools, and geolocation tools. New possibilities emerge, such as mapping the photos onto a timeline, and that map providing new information not available through single images, enabling the telling of new stories about the event. An initial conclusion from the project is to consider collecting social media photography metadata in large quantities as a complement to qualitative and curated collecting efforts.

## Conclusions

The case studies have helped concretizing the entire process of collecting, from outreach to acquisition, appraisal, and dissemination, and initiated thoughts on the complexity of the social digital photograph. They also have proven it necessary to use multidisciplinary methods for collecting, as social digital photographs are embedded with new characteristics, and a combination of image, text, and media platforms.

In the case studies, the archives and museums have placed themselves in the mediation junction between communication, self-presentation, and memory (Van House, 2011, 130), and offered history and eternity to the volatile photo practices. Through the cases, the institutions have experienced that maintaining this position requires participatory methods. These methods are a prerequisite for collecting in real time, meaning the time the social photo is produced, in order to capture metadata and context, and even to ensure that the photos are not deleted. Furthermore, it has been confirmed that to identify changes in practice and understand the implications of the changes within the social media platforms, longitudinal studies are needed combined with short term campaigns. These conclusions confirm postulations in modern archives and museum theory in general, which focus on the need to involve and communicate with the user/creator at an early stage of creation of digital data.

CoSoPho operates within a field where research and practice around photography collections are closely connected. The project attempts to implement theoretical findings in the field of social media photography into the case studies and relate them to current museum/archival practices, in order to recommend new practices. Regarded the other way around, with the project positioning social media photography as a potential historical source and record, the results could contribute to the research of social photography in general, with a strong focus on memory, which so far has not been identified in many works.

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