SOME REFLECTIONS & QUESTIONS ON EMERGING FORMS
OF DIGITAL PHOTO-LIBRARIES

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I would like to reflect here on the hyper-growth of some new forms of photo-libraries: microstock photo agencies with global reach and innovative business models, in which 'micro' refers to the amount of money paid to photographer contributors for each electronic photo by these 'middlemen'. This means cents rather than the hundreds or even thousands of dollars photo rate which an established photographer can charge:

 '-- *a way that amateur and professional photographers can sell their photos, earning a* (very small*) commission from each photo sold. Millions of photos are licensed for use via microstock, some of the biggest names in the stock photography business operate their own microstock photo libraries,*' [1]

Microstock photography is often termed micropayment photography. Some microstock-photographers make considerable money using microstock agencies, e.g. Yuri Arcurs. Many others aspire to this happy state: for example, Shutterstock reports over 100,000 contributors. Photographers often use more than one microstock agency, but the business models are often criticised due to the low payments. It is highly competitive.

The microstock business is also extremely competitive at the inter- company level as well as the intra-company (photographer) one. Considering the former now, this is noticeable from their respective on-line profiles aimed at both their markets [e.g. advertising] and their photographer suppliers. The field has consolidated considerably despite its youth and attracted interest from very large companies from inside and outside the photo library fields. For example, Getty Images acquired iStock, a top microstock agency, in 2006. Even more striking was the takeover of Fotolia by Adobe at a reported price of $800 million [2]. Other current leaders include Alamy and Shutterstock. It is instructive to consider the historical situation in 2007 [3] and the changes since then. Now some questions

Could the rapid progress of the sector - including continuing tough Darwinian struggles between the top stock photo and microstock agencies (whether they stay separate business (sub) sectors or continue to merge) and the rise of new ones - affect the remaining independent European heritage photo-libraries, including small privately-owned ones? The situation may remind some of us of the fierce debate in the mid-1990s regarding the apparently imminent monopolisation of electronic rights over many of European cultural heritage top images by Microsoft/Corbis, IBM et al. At that time another emerging threat seemed palpable: giant Japanese companies, such as Hitachi and Toppan Printing, acquired valuable arts image rights from top European museums and galleries including the Uffizi; Japanese admiration of the Impressionists as well as the Renaissance fuelled their efforts. The perceived US and Japanese threats informed and stimulated the creation and development of Europeana, providing a valuable portal for numerous European Heritage institutions which is

still blossoming today (currently just over 50 million records) facilitated by the European Commission.[4]. Perceptions of these commercial Japanese and US challenges faded and a good case can be made that the Japanese interest was positive for both sides, e.g. between Italy, Florence, the Uffizi, and Japan. Are there lessons which may be relevant and useful for Europe regarding the possibility of future Chinese entry into this scene; i.e. could large Chinese tech companies such as Alibaba and Tencent [5] lead a new charge from Asia by acquiring European cultural rights? Might large Indian hi-techs do the same? Should Europeana, as well as leading European cultural and historical photo-libraries such as Alinari, be seen as major cultural heritage bulwarks against such new forms of image libraries from outside Europe and North America? Could this perhaps be the case regarding Social History (as well as Fine Arts) looking forward two, three and more generations? 'Early Twenty-First Century' collections may then well seem a valuable part of human History – as '1968' and the 'Swinging Sixties' seem to many of us now. Could there be constructive, if sometimes tense, co-habitation and even fruitful cooperation?

A related topic of considerable interest is the aesthetics of art photography. A current major exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery in London on the '*Victorian Giants: The Birth of Art Photography*' in the mid- and late 19th century provides an interesting view of this [6]. In this regard Stocksy United Photography, a recent start-up by Bruce Livingstone (founder of iStock), is interesting since their claimed USPs (Unique Selling Points) include: 'curating' their 'authentic' offerings, a co-operative ownership structure and a 'fair pay' philosophy to a relatively limited number of photographer artist partners [7]. Do the existing agencies contest this view? Their own quality controls appear to be increasingly rigorous. Will 'microstock agencies' continue to be (largely) demarcated from 'stock agencies'? In any case, the so-called 'photo wars' appear likely to continue.

Let us now briefly explore the broader context: the hypergrowth of the electronic-based Image Culture continues as indicated by the emergence of electronic image-based enterprises such as Flickr, Instagram and Google Photos with hundreds of millions of images --- even billions. Moreover, we are now no longer surprised by the apparently inexorable global growth of the Internet, smart phones with cameras, social media and the corresponding FANG behemoths (Facebook, Amazon, Netflix, and Google/Alphabet.) joining Apple, IBM, Microsoft and others in the top Technology business ranks with the Chinese, led by Tencent and Alibaba increasingly present [5]. However, some observers have even deeper and broader concerns regarding some of the latest trends. Sir Tim Berners Lee, the 'Father of the Web' while working at the European CERN, gave cause for thoughtful reflection recently on the Web's 29th Birthday [8]. He pointed out that 'over half of the world's population is now connected' but that nonetheless, as well as grounds for celebration, should be regarded with cautious: in addition to the well-marketed benefits the results include increasing threats. Another example of a perceived threat is in the field of public broadcasting: even large national European Public Service Broadcasters such as the BBC [and presumably RAI] are now being increasingly challenged by digitally streamed films from Netflix and Amazon, with very significant content production budgets, coupled with the trend of increasing numbers of [especially young] people to get their news from their smartphones and computers rather than newspapers, magazines and TV sets. At the time of writing, the Facebook and Cambridge Analytica furore arouses great concern. Could the area of contemporary photo-libraries be affected by such concerns?

It is hoped that this short paper will help to stimulate debate and research studies on the intriguing topic of new photo-sources and the vibrant scene of photography.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

References [All web-sites were last checked in mid-March, 2018].

[1] https://www.photoworkout.com/sell-stock-photos-make-money/ PhotoWorkout May 29, 2017

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[4] Europeana *Survey Report on Digitisation in European Cultural Heritage Institutions 2017*. https://pro.europeana.eu/page/past-surveys

[5] *The Battle for Digital Supremacy*. The Economist, 17 March, 2018 (pages 11, 19 – 22].

[6] '*Victorian Giants: The Birth of Art Photography'* at the National Portrait Gallery, London. . See: https://www.npg.org.uk/whatson/victorian-giants/exhibition/. This begs questions on the 'birth' of art photography elsewhere, e.g. in France and Italy. Online essays from the Metropolitan Museum, New York, describe art photography in France in its 'Golden Age' in the 1850s, preceding its 'industrialisation' from 1860 onwards. See: https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/frph/hd_frph.htm and https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/infp/hd_infp.htm.

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https://www.stocksy.com/service/about/

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