VISUAL ARCHIVING ADVICE:
DO’S AND DON’T’S. WHAT WORKS FOR YOU?

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There is no doubt that photo archiving and preservation is essential. Newspapers and media outlets have long been acknowledged as the first rough draft of history. While there are many different approaches to archiving, both individual photographers and news organizations maintain some collective to protect their visual history.

Such is reflected in the practices of four different professionals and their methods, but for all the differences there are also similarities. Here is some solid advice from these four professionals who have had plenty of experience working with their specific archive projects: preserve the highest quality file available, have good backups, get organized as soon as possible if not before you begin archiving, use your archives for monetization and engaging your audience and viewers, archive everything and maintain good metadata practices. The advice that follows comes from two photographers who primarily deal with individual archives and two others who mainly work with news organization archives. Each one of the four professionals interviewed holds a different background in photojournalism and deals with a different format of archives.
With photographers coming into the profession every day and new technology increasing the amount of images produced, any bit of photography archival advice helps.

Pulitzer prize-winning photographer Jack Dykinga, who is also known for his landscape and nature photography, said his best advice is to just preserve the highest quality of an image possible.

“You can always dumb it down. I can spit out jpegs at will, but why would you want to have something so eliminating, in terms of color range and nuance of colors. I want the original file to be as broad as possible,” Dykinga said.

For example, he mentioned that some magazines typically use 300 megabyte TIFF files which are much larger than what a newspaper would generally print. He also mentioned the scenario of publishing an image on a billboard that is 50 feet long, saying that a JPG image wouldn’t be able to handle that size and keep its quality at the same time.

“Biggest box of crayons is a way to look at it,” Dykinga notes. “To me, you should want infinite versatility.”

“JPGs are worthless. What am I going to do with a 1.5 megabyte JPG? I can’t modify it. I want a layered file I can always go back to. [Newspaper photographers] are printing on toilet paper. I’m not in that world. You can always dumb it down,” he says.

Dykinga won his Pulitzer for feature photography in 1970 while working at the Chicago Sun-Times and has since shifted his focus to landscape and nature
photography, producing various photography books and habitually having his works featured in National Geographic and Arizona Highways.

Dykinga also advised on having reliable back-ups for archives. United Press International (UPI) contributing photographer William Greenblatt agrees on this stance, acknowledging his wariness of digital storage.

Greenblatt advises that having an archive he can physically access is a better process than just keeping the digital copy.

“This way... stuff is done. It’s there. Nothing is going to disappear. Digital is nothing but air, so I guess going from something physical like film to digital, by putting it on a CD I have it. I have something tangible,” Greenblatt said.

Greenblatt notes that hard drives have a tendency to disappear or for things to fail such as files getting corrupted or memory disks crashing. For his personal archive, he maintains quarterly books that include a CD or DVD for each shoot organized by date.

The downside of Greenblatt’s archive is the ease of access. While he is able to search through the selects on UPI’s database, his physical archives tend to take a lot of time to navigate through.

For example, Greenblatt mentioned that Jack Buck’s wife asked for pictures of every famous person Buck was on the field with, and Greenblatt replied that it would be a six-month research project just to find all of those images since he didn’t have much of a digital catalog.
“The ideal thing would be to, if I shoot it, to cross reference it for the subject so I could just go to the computer and find it, but I have little need for that. If somebody walks up it just takes a little time to find it,” Greenblatt admitted.

Greenblatt’s needs are based off of convenience, timeliness and the concept of wanting to hold on to physical, tangible assets. As a regional photographer who doesn’t work in a group setting, he is the only one to rely on his archives and therefore is the only one who really needs to understand how they are organized.

“I started shooting digital in ’98-’99 so I’ve got 20 years of negatives, and to start going through negatives and to start putting them by subject I would have to have three people doing it eight hours a day... and I might never need it,” he notes.

In contrast, Dykinga sells his work on a regular basis and has value in maintaining a decent, sortable back-up. He is able to sort his images by digital catalogs in Lightroom where he has created all of his databases that link to his two back-up drives.

“I have two file copies. ‘Photography’ contains all of my digital work and ‘Scans’ which is both the Django scans and Hasselblad scans. They are in separate Lightroom files. One of each is backed up in the G-RAID via TimeMachine, and then manually backed up into a J-BOT through a terabyte drive that is kept off the computer,” Dykinga notes.

Unlike Greenblatt, Dykinga has all his images cross-referenced so he can easily find them through metadata information and dates digitally.

This trend of referenced and cataloged archiving becomes more prominent as the collective gets bigger or more photographers contribute.
Only after a few years did Michelle Jay, the Boston Globe’s photo archivist, learn the importance of good preparation and organization.

Jay has been at the Globe for around 2½ years. The project she and her colleague are working on has only been active since she just before she arrived.

“The riskiest thing digitally is we were just scanning stuff into our internal system and not pushing it out to the [company-wide] system for reasons that were not explained to me in my earlier role as the lowest member on the totem pole,” Jay says.

Jay recommends getting organized first before beginning an archival project or direction shift while also having a clear mind in terms of subjects so things can be prioritized.

“We initially tried to mitigate some corrections that would need to happen by not taking the risk of putting [the pictures] in, but the risk of not putting images in now is that nothing is in and we have probably 7,000 images that are just sitting around and waiting for me to get to them.”

Her advice mainly stems from the Globe’s recent decision to relocate from their current building to a few floors in an office building downtown, leaving many questions revolving around what happens to all the content of the physical archive.

“We hit a point where we were like, 'what happens to our archives,' and the project became less about scanning and more about just getting stuff done. Before we sacrificed speed for the sake of file size and things being very complete, and within the last year it has been like scan it and get it in,” she says.
The shift in location has caused Jay to adopt a “Don’t worry about perfection, just get it done” mentality. Due to a limited new office building, she wonders what happens when they need something from the archive they haven’t scanned.

“We were scanning in RAW, and then every iteration was being saved as a JPEG just for space purposes. So we had one RAW and one JPEG. That’s what we were doing for close to two years, but since the beginning of 2015 we’ve been scanning just as JPEG’s in the kind of second iteration of this project. I’m technically the only archivist we have (we went from 2 1/2 to 1) so we not only lost people but we lost some of our funding,” she notes.

She hopes the digital archiving will help offset the costs of daily production since the Globe has monetized their archives.

“Anywhere where a newspaper can make money is great without having to spend a lot of money,” she says. “Monetization is always a good thing in this industry.”

Jay believes people are interested in much of the archival content yet to be published. She advocates the importance of engaging readers and audience members in any way that could benefit organization.

“A great thing for me would be to public outreach a little more in an attempt to sell more prints to get that notice out there more and educate Boston. We have a lot of interesting stuff. Everything from like a raccoon jumping out a window to escape a fire to pictures of the great molasses flood of the 1900s,” she says.

According to Arizona Daily Star photo editor Rick Wiley, a rich history of photographs is its own reward. His organization was lucky enough to have merged
with the Arizona Citizen within the last decade and in doing so received their print and digital archives as well.

“If you have a rich history of photographs at your organization or newspaper, think about making those available to the public in some way,” Wiley says.

He creates then-and-now galleries that the Daily Star publishes on their website where photographers go out and shoot locations based off of “really interesting scenes” from 50 or 60 years ago.

“That is source material that would be gathering dust otherwise but is now producing page views and ad revenue for the newspaper,” he mentions. “And it’s only because somebody, the librarians, had the foresight 50 or 60 years ago to actually archive the material, put captions on it and make it searchable in the old physical archive.”

The difference at the Daily Star is that Rick Wiley only preserves the selects that his photographers send in but requires them to have full metadata information before being uploaded to their Merlin platform. Wiley believes in the importance of making, “sure that [the photograph] has all information about the event in each photograph.”

While this form of archiving differs from the “save everything” position the other three professionals take, Wiley feels his style fits the needs of his paper.

“You need to be judicious about it and always teach photographers what the mission of newspaper is and help them understand what is important to edit for saving, for future use,” Wiley states.
He still agrees with his peers on a point of maintaining an organized and structured archive.

“If I can’t find your photographs then you are not doing yourself any favors. If you’re not getting published, you’re not going to have a job, so make sure you’re photographs are able to be found,” said Wiley.

All four photographers agreed on the importance of good archiving technique.

“The true value is in maintaining a database and cross-referencing via captions or keywords so you can resurrect anything. If you can file it by date, you can always retrieve,” said Jack Dykinga when reflecting on his own organization practices.

“I just keep everything,” Greenblatt says. He recalls the days of film when other photographers had boxes of reels that they couldn’t recall when or where they were shot and he is thankful he didn’t have that problem.

“I’ve got it in order and I was good about cutting everything up and labeling it,” he says.

While their archival practices may stem from different backgrounds, the combination of their advice is meant to be a starting point for any individual photographer or media organization to get a foothold in archival practices.

Learning from our fellow professionals, quality visual archiving and preservation should be of high importance for any visual creator or media organization.
As with any guide, once you have the basic idea, that is the point in which modification and adaptation can flourish based on individual or organizational needs. The fact that so many organizations choose to function without backup servers, in-depth metadata or a clear and definitive infrastructure in the digital age is only detrimental to the preservation of the first rough draft of history.

“I have millions of images,” Greenblatt states. “I keep telling my kids when I take them down into the [archive] room, ‘This is your inheritance right here.’”