4-2010

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Insights Into The Commons on Flickr

Jason Vaughan

Abstract

The Commons on Flickr, comprised of an international community of select libraries, museums, and archives, was a project initially launched in 2008 by the Library of Congress and Flickr. Primary goals of The Commons are to broaden exposure to rich cultural heritage photographs and to observe and participate in the communities of engagement and dialog enabled through The Commons. A survey was administered to all The Commons institutions during summer 2009, focusing on assessment of the overall satisfaction of current members and seeking additional details on participation goals, social interactions, staff time involvement, and general statistics. Members report a very positive experience with The Commons.

Introduction

In late 2008, the University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV) Libraries began a sincere effort to systematically survey, educate, and engage library staff on the central theme of information discovery. This effort was timely for various reasons. First, the reality had emerged that the libraries' collections were becoming increasingly hosted and spread across various discovery systems, local and remote, and interconnected to some degree, but not fully. Second, a new
director of technical services was soon to be hired, who would help bring new direction to the important cataloging and metadata work performed by staff in that area. Third, the libraries were authoring their next strategic plan, covering the years 2009 to 2011. Collectively, these three realities helped spur a conversation, and later action, about enabling and/or improving the discoverability of the widest range of library owned and/or licensed content.

As part of this effort, in spring of 2009, library staff were given the opportunity to volunteer and showcase a product, idea, or philosophical concept somehow related to discovery. The libraries referred to this event as a "Discovery Mini-Summit," and a total of 16 poster session-like presentations/demonstrations were provided. This half-day event was open to all library staff and colleagues from elsewhere in the state. Feedback was obtained onsite through discussion, on note cards provided at the various booths at the summit, and later via e-mail. One of the 16 sessions focused on The Commons on Flickr project, highlighting the collective work of the Library of Congress and Flickr, which, among other goals, sought to widen exposure to and enrich discoverability of some of the abundant digital objects from the Library of Congress. The UNLV Libraries feedback on The Commons presentation was positive—some along the lines of "this is such a wonderful concept, let's do it today." Such feedback spurred the author to dig deeper into The Commons project and learn more about other participating institutions' experience and the (hypothesized) benefits of engaging in such an endeavor.

Flickr remains one of the most popular Web destinations. In September 2009, the Flickr Web site ranked 33rd in terms of global traffic; in the United States, it ranked eighteenth.¹ Flickr offers a comprehensive FAQ and a guided tour to learn more about the site and its capabilities.² Flickr is about photo sharing with a global audience; but, perhaps more than that, it is about
creating communities of engagement among those viewing the photos. George Oates, an architect of The Commons project, writes how Flickr creates this sense of community.

We like to explore, change things around, and make a place of our own.

…Embrace the idea that people will warp and stretch your site in ways you can't predict—they'll surprise you with their creativity and make something wonderful with what you provide. …If you imagine Flickr as something like Game for the Masses—a playing field without rules or a "way to play"—you can see how people learn to engage with one another through conversations about their content. 

Spurred by revolutionary technologies and connectivity and new (and old) learners expecting and embracing such change, libraries and other learning institutions began, and continue, to rethink and refashion their outreach and service models. With visioning, planning, and ultimate implementation by staff at the Library of Congress and Flickr, The Commons on Flickr was born. From this initial collaboration, membership in The Commons has grown to a count of 32 institutions as of January 2010, all accepting a "no known licensing restrictions" concept and posting some of their rich digital objects online to a worldwide audience via a tremendously popular, centralized hub. The current roster of The Commons on Flickr members is provided in appendix A.

Though Flickr has existed for five years, at the time of this writing, The Commons on Flickr is relatively new. Many other libraries, museums, and other learning institutions have "regular" Flickr accounts, which enable them to post photos, create a sense of community, and engage with viewers. Because this paper focuses specifically on The Commons, it is appropriate
to outline some distinctions between Flickr and The Commons. The Commons on Flickr project has two main objectives: (1) to increase access to publicly held photography collections and (2) to provide a way for the general public to contribute information and knowledge. Anyone may create a regular Flickr account, whether affiliated with a learning institution or not. For The Commons, there is an application and review process involved for interested institutions. The Commons photos generally highlight archival, historical content housed at the institution—as opposed to contemporary photos one often finds with a regular Flickr account (at least in the author's experience). Although a "regular" Flickr account opened by an institution may have archival, historical content, often it may have other content as well, such as photos of the current facilities, photos of contemporary individuals, photos of new exhibition installations, and so on. As Seb Chan of the Powerhouse Museum notes,

The two obvious differences are the banding together of collections under the promotional umbrella of "The Commons"; and the application of "no known copyright" to the images. The increasing prominence of The Commons within the Flickr ecosystem brings Commons images to many more people than a regular Flickr account. Together this creates an interesting effect—comparatively more interest in the images and more engagement around them. I wonder whether this is the effect of providing a clearing in the surrounding data smog where the intention of putting up historical images is very clear and contextualized (rather than obscured)?

Literature Review
As part of a background literature review, easily the most substantive single piece of work to date on The Commons on Flickr is the October 2008 report from the Library of Congress (LC), *For the Common Good: The Library of Congress Flickr Pilot Project*, publicly available in detail as well as summary form. The detailed report discusses the origins of the project (even before the collaboration with Flickr was formalized) and describes goals that LC had with the project and what they hoped to learn. Michelle Springer, project manager for digital initiatives at the U.S. Library of Congress, remarked on the projects' goals:

In a nutshell, we had three goals for the Library's Flickr account: increase awareness by sharing photographs from the Library's collections with people who enjoy images but might not visit the Library's own Web site; gain a better understanding of how social tagging and community input could benefit both the Library and users of the collections; and gain experience participating in the emergent Web communities that would be interested in the kinds of materials in the Library's collections.

The report also discusses the development of the "no known copyright restrictions" rights statement, a central foundation to The Commons project, and detailed at The Commons on Flicker Web site. The report also provides some technical details on photo preparation, MARC record modifications, and the ingestion process into a Flickr hosted collection, and discusses both initial and ongoing staff commitments to the project. In addition to the broad background information, the report discusses the outcomes of the project, including discussion about the
different ways that users can interact/enhance the Flickr photos and detailed information on a Flickr tag analysis that LC staff performed. As detailed in the report, the project elicited an overwhelming public response immediately after launch in January 2008. Overall, the report paints a positive experience from the pioneer institution in developing a project, which evolved into The Commons on Flickr and currently involves 32 institutions (see appendix A).

A few other resources discussing The Commons are worth mentioning up front. Two additional hubs for ongoing information on and discussion about The Commons on Flickr are The Flickr Commons discussion group and the Indicommons blog.10 Tiah Edmunson-Morton from the Oregon State University (OSU) Archives provided an informative case study on the institution's use of CONTENTdm (a digital asset management system), a regular Flickr account, and, later, their experience with The Commons.11 This study gives some introductory background on tagging and folksonomies, the OSU Archive's experience with different access points to archival collections, planning questions and preparation prior to their experimentation with Flickr, and provides some statistical analysis and reflection related to different access points to archival collections, item views, tagging, and commenting. Additional relevant background literature related to The Commons project is integrated into the main body of this article.

Survey

The author was unable to find any systematic research encompassing the array of current Commons institutions, though several Commons members have authored informative pieces detailing their personal experiences. The author conducted a Web-based survey of all 27 Commons institutions over a one-month period during summer 2009 (note: since the survey was
conducted, the current membership has grown to 31 institutions). The initial survey invitation was e-mailed to individuals identified by the author as probably the key person involved with The Commons' project at each institution. A reminder survey invitation was sent several weeks later directly to the Flickr e-mail account on record associated with each institution's Commons account. The survey consisted of 21 questions. The individual the author addressed at the Library of Congress responded, and rightly pointed out, that the survey was not quite applicable to the institution; it did not "join" The Commons, rather it was instrumental in evolving the concept that ultimately became The Commons in the first place. Many survey questions were structured around the premise of "joining" The Commons. As such, the Library of Congress chose not to participate; because of this, the number of institutions to which this survey was applicable numbered 26. The survey was structured into five sections: background, institutional staff involvement, social interactions, statistics, and assessment. Question types were a mix of open-ended response questions and multiple choice questions (both standard multiple choice as well as ranking items within a scale). For the majority of multiple choice questions, an optional comments field was provided where respondents could add additional information if desired. Respondents could choose to skip any question(s). The most responses any one question received was 17 (65 percent); at the low end, one question netted 13 responses (50 percent). The average number of responses for all questions was 14, for an overall response rate of 55 percent. The remainder of this article provides analysis of the survey responses, integrated with additional context of the experiences of those involved with The Commons.

Background Questions
The first section of the survey consisted of four background questions. One multiple choice background question sought to understand any concerns one or more individuals at the respondent's institution may have raised about joining The Commons. Loss of control and context of the photo was cited by 81 percent of respondents. Chan notes, "In The Commons, images lose the boundaries placed on them by collecting institutions. They take on new contexts and meanings, they become malleable." The "no known copyright restrictions" licensing statement and concerns over ongoing staff time to monitor the comments, notes, or tags associated with the photos were each cited by 63 percent of respondents. Concerns over the amount of initial staff time required to set up and interact with The Commons and concerns over an influx of reference questions/user queries related to the photos were both cited by 44 percent of respondents. One respondent clarified that topics such as these arose and were discussed but were seen as issues and/or risks as opposed to "concerns." Another respondent fairly observed that, rather than being a concern, a potential increase in reference questions or user inquiries to the photos was seen as just the opposite — it was another reason for joining The Commons.

Shelley Bernstein of the Brooklyn Museum noted a fear of potentially losing revenue related to licensing fees for their images. The museum hoped a clear rights statement would alleviate any missteps regarding commercial use of the images. Regarding revenue, Chan observed, "Rather than diminish revenue from image sales, wider free access may actually increase them."

Another background question asked go-live dates for each institution's first set of photos on The Commons. The Commons on Flickr is quite new. Eight respondents reported their initial collection was published on The Commons in 2008, nine in 2009. Existing reports on The Commons point to various reasons institutions considered/might consider joining The Commons. In the administered survey, respondents were asked to rank such reasons on a four-point scale.
(not applicable/not a consideration, slightly important reason, important reason, very important reason). All but one respondent (94 percent) ranked "expose collections to a broader audience/facilitate discovery of our materials" as a very important reason in joining The Commons; with the final respondent ranking this as "important." At the other end, the majority of respondents (81 percent) ranked "We didn't already have these photos online, and Flickr was a good system to initially publish them" as "not applicable/not a consideration." The responses in table 1 are listed with the percentage of respondents ranking the consideration as either an "important reason" or "very important reason" for joining The Commons.

[Insert Table 1]

Respondents cited a few additional reasons. One indicated that they wanted to test the "no known copyright restrictions" license on collection images. Another respondent remarked that it was an opportunity to help disseminate to a broader worldwide audience the vast curatorial knowledge that their institution possessed. As noted above, exposing collections to a wider audience was a question answered affirmatively by 100 percent of respondents. One way to measure this is by the number of photo views; and Chan notes that, in the Powerhouse Museum's first four weeks of involvement, they had more photo views via The Commons than the entire previous year of the photos as hosted on their own Web site.15 Chan also notes that their photos, despite concentrating on the Sydney and New South Wales (NSW) areas of Australia, have reached an international audience, evidenced in part by the tags in other languages. Regina Sutton of the State Library of New South Wales notes, "Flickr is a positive example of how the State Library is using emerging technologies to share its rare and historical photographs with the
NSW community and beyond, with far reaching benefits for those living in regional and remote areas. The State Library's partnership with Flickr also supports the NSW Government's State Plan priority to provide greater community access to our cultural collections." Further reflecting on the global audience, The Art Library, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation noted, "We have had visitors from all over the world, from the US to China, besides a significant number of Portuguese people living abroad." Bernstein notes, "on the web, we believe in reaching out to web communities just like we would in our own neighborhood, so extending our collections to The Commons made a lot of sense to us," and noted how The Commons was a good fit for this. Richard Kurin of the Smithsonian Institution noted, "Our goals in participating in The Commons on Flickr are to expose new, larger, broader and younger audiences to our photographic collections and help them discover more of the Smithsonian educational resources. We also hope to learn how Web site visitors use our digital collections so that we can better serve the public." James Watson of the National Maritime Museum remarked, "We're using The Commons to reach new audiences and to reveal connections between our content and other stuff inside and outside of traditional digital museum spaces."

An additional multiple choice question asked about important factors in determining whether to incorporate a particular photo/collection into the Commons. The predefined factors that were seen as important are presented in table 2.

[Insert Table 2]

Several additional comments offered further context. One respondent indicated that a degree of caution figured into the consideration whether to include images of indigenous people
or associated artifacts. This applied as well to photographs containing identifiable individuals, with an initial upload of photos restricting people images to those taken at public occasions. Another respondent indicated that they thought their photos would be both enjoyable and useful for Commons visitors; another echoed this consideration that their photos would be of interest to a broad international audience and would fit well with other existing Commons collections. Another respondent indicated that timeliness and a "compelling connection to current events" were a significant factors and provided the interesting connection between a recent upload of classic General Motors and Chrysler automobile images and the current struggles of the American auto industry. It was also noted that photos that were interesting or important to staff members themselves played a role in what images might be chosen for inclusion in The Commons on Flickr. Chan notes how the Powerhouse Museum adapted future photo uploads based on analysis of what photos were being frequently viewed and commented on, and then looked for similar images to upload.21 Another respondent indicated that some items lack a sufficient level of metadata that would warrant inclusion of the photographs within their own Web site or asset management system; whereas, conversely, images can be placed on The Commons with a minimal amount of information. This theme is evident in the literature as well. Watson notes, "We decided to add our content with a very limited amount of contextual information to make as much use as possible of descriptions, comments and tags from the Flickr community. Already after a week and a half, these familiar Flickr tools are accumulating interesting strands of information."22 In fact, the Library of Congress, during the original pilot, used only one "regular" tag—"Library of Congress"—for its photos.23

Institutional Staff Involvement
A next set of two questions focused on institutional staff involvement related to The Commons; both questions had a response rate of 54 percent. The first question asked how many individuals of any category (staff members, volunteers, student assistants) were involved in Commons work on an ongoing basis. Examples of ongoing work were defined as tasks such as selection, processing, and uploading of materials; technical development; answering question from users; and monitoring user comments, notes, and tags. Responses ranged from two to 10 individuals performing ongoing work associated with The Commons. However, this does not imply full-time work from these individuals. For example, the one institution that responded that 10 individuals were associated with the work clarified that this would equal less than one full-time position. The average number of people working in some capacity with The Commons, on an ongoing basis, was 4.2 per institution.

The second question delved deeper, listing nine activities that could typically be associated with ongoing Commons work activities, and asked respondents to indicate how many hours per week such activities consumed on a five-point scale (no hours or not applicable; one hour or less; between 1.1 and 5 hours; between 5.1 and 10 hours; more than 10 hours). No activities were indicated by any institution as requiring more than 10 hours work per week. Eight of the nine activities were indicated as requiring one hour or less per week by at least 50 percent of all respondents. Two activities, "modifying records hosted in an existing local system to reflect substantiated information that was provided by users" and "IT technical work" were cited as "no hours or not applicable" by 50 percent and 71 percent of the respondents, respectively.

[Insert Table 3]
Respondents provided additional comments on the types of ongoing activities associated with their Commons involvement. Several referenced the additional work related to updating and maintaining posts/profiles/information on other sites such as Facebook, Wikipedia, Twitter, and various blogs—perhaps an hour or so of work per week. One respondent referenced collecting stats and reporting on photo use as requiring less than an hour per week. Another indicated that some time, perhaps over an hour per week, is spent talking with colleagues about The Commons, whether in person, at meetings, through statistics reports, or via an internal blog. Two respondents specifically commented on how future automated processes could help. One respondent indicated they had substantial image metadata already within their catalog and had not yet created or implemented an automated batch process for extracting and formatting this metadata, necessitating additional staff time to prepare photos for a Flickr upload. Another referenced a future goal of moving data back into their catalog, as well as investigating automatic uploading into Flickr. Peer Lawther of the National Media Museum notes, "A lack of time is the disadvantage in any community-led project. Being a pivotal part of an online community demands time whether that's through simple moderation or the more time-intensive 'friending.' We have to balance the time we can devote to Flickr." Bernstein talks at some length about staff time challenges and maintaining a sense of community in a blog post titled, "Flickr Commons: Coping with a Small Staff and Community Ideals." 

Social Interactions
As referenced above, after broader exposure to collections, nearly all respondents chose the reason, "Utilize Web 2.0 features to engage user involvement/discussion" as an important or very important reason when considering whether to join The Commons. The next set of survey questions focused on user engagement within The Commons environment, and this topic appears frequently in the literature. Chan reflects how museums must "assert relevance, don't assume relevance," and continues, "Our relevance lies not in just creating an 'architecture of publication' but as [Alfred] Hermida and others say, designing 'architectures of participation'."

Exposing collections to a broad audience and watching (and participating) in the interaction that follows are central themes of what Flickr—and The Commons—are about. Lawther remarks, "Internally, we felt that the National Media Museum, with its web remit, needed to be in the vanguard of museums on the 'social web', and The Commons fulfilled this aim perfectly. We didn't want it to be a purely commercial or promotional opportunity but rather an opportunity for us to utilize the vast curatorial knowledge we hold and to use The Commons to show some of the breadth of our holdings." Ben Vershbow of the New York Public Library observed, "We also see the Flickr Commons as a training ground for our staff (and for the Digital Experience Group)—a place to get some serious hands-on experience collaborating with users in a vibrant social Web community. Down the road, we'll definitely be considering implementing similar tools and features on our own site, but this also speaks to an important new element in our digital strategy: engaging with users in digital environments other than our own website." Courtney Johnston of the National Library of New Zealand notes that (in relation to their original Flickr pilot, the library is now part of The Flickr Commons), "Flickr is a good way of dipping a toe in the social media water—a lot less time and energy has to be invested than in, say, oh, I dunno, blogging? Compared to this blogging pilot, there's also been less work with creating
policies, administration, and in replying to comments/commentary.¹²² Springer notes, as one of the most pleasant surprises about the LC's experience, "The imaginative variety of engagement with the photographs was a wonderful surprise. We are very impressed with the quality of history detective work, the contributions from experts in everything from cooking to aviation, the additions of 'how it looks today' photos, the moving family histories, the great sense of humor, the congenial discussions of historical events, and more."³⁰

Clearly one benefit of user interaction is to potentially help the institution learn more about items within their collections. An article in a fall 2008 Library of Virginia publication was titled, "Name Game: Help Identify the People, Events, and Locations in the Adolph B. Rice Photograph Collection." The article relates,

Although we have exact dates for many of the photographs, we encourage online viewers to tag, comment, and add notes or descriptions to the images. For instance, many are missing key caption information such as where the photo was taken and who is pictured. Does a photograph in the Rice Collection document your house being built? Is there an interior view of your father's downtown office? Does the collection contain an image of a high school dance you attended more than 50 years ago? If such information can be collected from Flickr users, it will greatly enhance the quality of our bibliographic records for these images. Imagine how rewarding it would be to recognize a location and contribute your own description of a photograph, knowing that it will make the image easier to find for the next researcher."³¹
Joanne Smedley with the Australian War Memorial noted, "Flickr Commons is a way of highlighting sets of images and we hope people can tell us something about them, or simply enjoy the selection. The series of portraits, particularly those selected from the Korean War series, are a wonderful study of faces and we would love to know who they are. ...Many of the images selected have just enough caption information to tell us when or where they were taken. You can help the Memorial enhance the collection by tagging and adding comments to the photographs. You might notice a friend or member of your family in an image, or have a story to share."32 Similarly, Andrew Green of the National Library of Wales notes, "Many photographs in the PB Abery collection contain unknown locations or unidentified people. We are asking the people of Wales and beyond to help us identify the photographs."33

Flickr offers various methods of user interaction. Chan categorizes nine different forms of user interaction within Flickr.34 The survey asked questions regarding several primary methods of interaction—user generated tags (informal keywords or subject headings applied to a photo), user comments, user generated notes (allowing a user to highlight and leave an annotation over an element in the image), "blog this" functionality (allowing a user to easily post Flickr content to a personal blog), user bookmarking of photos as "favorites," and incorporation of photos into viewing/discussion/subject groups set up by other Flickr members. All survey respondents indicated that user generated comments, notes, bookmarking of photos, and incorporation of photos into other groups had been utilized to some degree or another. Tagging was reported as having been utilized by all but one respondent (93 percent), and "blog this" functionality was reported in use by 73 percent of respondents (with three additional respondents unsure).
Additional questions asked specifically about user tagging, user commenting, and user generated notes. Each question asked "Approximately what percentage of your Flickr Commons photos have received at least one (tag/comment/note) by a viewer." For tags, respondents indicated a range of "less than 5 percent" to "around 95 percent." Averaged among all respondents, approximately 66 percent of an institution's Commons photos had received at least one user generated tag. For comments, respondents indicated a range of "less than 10 percent" to "95 percent." Averaged among all respondents, approximately 46 percent of all photos had received at least one user comment. Flickr reporting tools do not provide statistics on how many user-applied notes exist; however, most respondents provided an estimate. These estimates ranged from 1 percent to 80 percent of their images having one or more user-applied notes. Averaged among all respondents, it was estimated by respondents that approximately 19 percent of photos had received a user note. Johnston observed, "Favouriting is the most common interaction, followed by commenting then tagging. This surprised me, as I thought tagging would be more common. I even experimented for a month, adding minimal tags to items I was uploading, to see if this would increase the tagging activity. It didn't. Most comments are of the 'great photo' variety. A small number give some more information about an image, and the smallest proportion are questions. When you do get a question though, it's generally thoughtful or thought provoking. We've had no problems with spam."35 Ben Vershbow notes that comments run the gamut—"As for comments, there's been a whole range: basic enthusiasm ('beautiful!' 'stunning!'), corrections, illuminations, geotagging, technical tips, questions about high res reproductions, and questions that hopefully we'll be able to pass along to our reference librarians."36 One survey question asked respondents if there were a "gem" photo that appeared
to have generated more user interaction than any other in their Commons collections. Responses are provided in appendix B.

Along with the benefits of social interaction comes the potential for abuse. Several survey questions sought deeper insight into whether such abuse had materialized. One question asked if the institution had ever observed any offensive/inappropriate comments, tags, or notes that they had to remove. Clearly what one respondent deems "offensive/inappropriate" may not reach that threshold for another respondent. Save for one respondent who reported removing "a lot" of inappropriate notes, the other respondents indicated none or a very few tags, comments, or notes had to be removed. In fact, the majority of respondents indicated that they had to remove only one user-generated tag, comment, or note, or reported no removals at all. Three respondents noted that they had removed "pure spam" comments. Another reported not having to remove anything yet, but that some items had "come close" to being inappropriate.

Another potential concern could be categorized as problematic reuse of materials. As the survey defined the concept, "Problematic reuse, as a prerequisite, would mean the photo had been downloaded or copied, manipulated, and placed in a different webspace than the Flickr Commons. …Some may consider the following as problematic reuse: colorizing black and white photos, 'photoshopping' content into or out of a photo, or posting the photo and changing the known, solid information about the photo (such as where it was taken, who was in the photo, the year it was taken, and so on)." With one exception, respondents indicated they had had no problematic reuse of which they were aware. One respondent indicated that a blog had posted a picture with inappropriate photoshopping (and that when asked to correct the issue, the blog owner consented). As opposed to a concern, two respondents indicated that they had some interesting or even "wonderfully inventive" reuse of their images. For example, one respondent
cited a "then and now" Google Maps mashup that juxtaposes historic images of New York City from the institution's collection with modern street views of the city. The mashup extends beyond New York City and illustrates a "then and now" for selected photos from four current Commons members. Bernstein notes that creative mashups or other forms of reuse can be interesting and exciting, noting a mashup of two boxers—one boxer from a Brooklyn Museum lantern slide and the other from a Library of Congress image.

Statistics and Assessment

Two final sets of questions focused on basic statistical data and assessment related to The Commons collections. Several institutions have reported statistics related to their collections on The Commons. As just one example, the New York Public Library went live on the Commons on December 12, 2008, and reported these one-day statistics: 53,220 image views, 123 comments, 1,112 favorites, 121 images tagged, and 380 user-contributed tags. In the administered survey, one question asked the number of overall views of the photos since launch. Given that different institutions joined The Commons at different times and have a different number of photos present, reported numbers were expected to vary widely. As of July 2009, at the low end, one institution reported 41,500 views; at the high-end, one institution reported 827,630 views, another "around 900,000" views, and another "over 1 million." Another question asked approximately how many views the photos receive per month, circa mid-2009. Estimates ranged from a low of 600 to a high of 150,000 views. The average response was around 44,000 views per month. Note, several respondents made clear that their responses were estimates only.
Another question asked respondents what percentage of photos in their Commons' collections were also available through some other publicly accessible online venue (such as via an institutionally hosted Web page or digital asset management system available to the public). Not surprisingly, a majority (64 percent) of respondents indicated that all of the photos in their Commons collections were also available via some other publicly accessible online venue. Another institution indicated 15 percent were available via another venue, another 60 percent, another 91 percent, and another institution reported 99 percent. One respondent indicated the photos were currently only available via their Commons presence but that they were working on developing a separate digital archive. A few respondents elaborated on what the "other venue" was, and this included digital asset management systems (such as CONTENTdm) or their Web site. As noted previously, Tiah Edmunson-Morton at the Oregon State University Archives has published a case study discussing and comparing the archives' digital asset management system (CONTENTdm) and their membership within both Flickr and The Commons.40

Another survey question asked if the respondents had noticed an increase in visitation to any locally hosted site resources (institution Web page, digital asset management system, and so on) that they felt was due, at least in part, to their involvement in The Commons. Most respondents (79 percent) answered yes that they had noticed increased visitation to local online resources. Three respondents indicated that they were unsure or that they did not have detailed comparative stats to judge. Of those responding yes, several indicated that they felt there was only a very slight increase. Another respondent was able to provide some deeper details, noting that Flickr is around the tenth most popular site referring traffic to their institution's locally hosted digital archive. Furthermore, this respondent observed that visitors coming from Flickr look at an average of around 20 pages per visit at their local gallery and spend about eight
minutes on the site. Another responded that traffic from Flickr is noticeable and that interest in and awareness of their local photo collection has been greatly increased. As noted on the New York Public Library’s "about" page for their Commons presence, "Consider this a sort of appetizer course, a sampler of collections accessible in greater breadth and depth on the NYPL Digital Gallery, and on-site in our network of libraries…and are offered as an invitation to explore further on the NYPL’s own website or in our physical libraries." 41 Indeed, the potential to bring more users to the local Web presence was seen as a potential benefit during the creation of The Commons, as noted by the Library of Congress, "Taking collections to where people are already engaged in community conversations might also encourage visits to a library’s Web site where the full wealth of resources are available." 42

Another question reflected back on some of the reasons for joining The Commons, initially explored within the "background" section of the survey. This follow-up assessment question asked if the institutions felt that they had met their initial goals. All but one respondent (93 percent) indicated "Yes, we have met all or the majority of our initial goals;" one respondent noted "Yes, we have met some of our initial goals." One respondent added that they would have preferred seeing greater re-use of the photographs because they were curious what folks would do when reproduction restrictions were removed. Another indicated that they are working internally to encourage others on staff to help drive the endeavor, underscoring the desire to experiment and develop new modes of social and professional practices.

A related question asked respondents whether the "overall popularity and impact" of the institutions' Commons collections had exceeded their expectations, met their expectations, or was less than expected. As defined in the survey, overall popularity and impact refers to such things as "overall number of views for collection photos, amount of user interaction as shown by
user contributed tagging and comments, increased visitation to the institution's Web site, an increase in reference questions related to photos in the collection(s), and so on." Sixty-four percent of respondents indicated overall popularity and impact had exceeded what they initially expected, and the remaining 36 percent indicated that the overall popularity and impact was about what they expected. No respondents indicated that the popularity/impact was less than expected. One respondent added that their involvement has drawn interest from other institutions curious about their experience in The Commons, as well as some positive feedback from government officials involved on e-government issues. Another added that they were thrilled by the international audience who had been engaged with the images, noting such folks will probably never visit the physical institution. They also noted that they are seeing huge spikes for some of their photos and that some of these were a surprise to the staff. Another was pleased at the increased media attention to both their Commons' collections and the fact of their institution being a member. They added that The Commons is a spectacular environment for showcasing their collections to the broader Web audience. Lawther observes, "The Commons has confounded our expectations. We've been featured on hundreds of blogs, 'friended' thousands of fellow photographers and chatted with countless fans about our work. In showing discrete selections from our collection we've received a huge amount of goodwill from the community. …We'd encourage any museum with photography resources to aim for a place on The Commons. The reaction has been superb."43

To the Future
Looking to the future, the final set of survey questions asked respondents if they planned to continue their involvement with The Commons; and, if so, did they plan to expand their content and by how much over the next 12 months. One respondent indicated that they probably would continue, pending an evaluation to be conducted shortly. All other respondents indicated they would definitely continue their involvement in The Commons, several quite emphatically. Similarly, respondents indicated that they planned to expand their present involvement. Respondents estimated that they planned to add anywhere from a low of 100 additional images to a high of possibly 2,000 images over the next year. Across respondents, the number of images that institutions expected to add over the coming year averaged to slightly over 600.

A final survey question asked if they would recommend becoming a member of The Commons to other institutions. Across the board, 100 percent of the respondents indicated they would recommend involvement in The Commons. Several respondents indicated potential participants be aware that an ongoing staff time commitment does exist, particularly as relates to handling the ongoing user interactions. Another indicated that their experience was aided by the fact that their images were already digitized and cataloged and observed that, if this were not the case, the task would be more involved and time intensive, perhaps prohibitively so, for potential institutions in that situation. Another recommended learning from the experiences of other institutions and, in particular, referenced the value they found in the Library of Congress' report. One respondent pointed out that institutions should be clear on why they wish to join and what the benefit will be to their organization. Another echoed similar concerns that joining The Commons really depends, in part, on the institution's goals. Another cautioned to be aware that a few "inner cliques" exist within The Commons but indicated this has not caused any serious harm. Another noted that potential members should view The Commons as a "laboratory for staff
to cultivate new practices and modes of interaction" and not just as another avenue of exposure for their collections.

Despite its infancy, The Commons has quickly grown to a current membership of over two dozen partners. Respondents were overwhelmingly positive in their view of and experience with The Commons. Members observed multiple benefits, in some cases beyond their expectations, of joining The Commons. From the institutional perspective, exposing their collections to a broader audience, building online communities, enhancing their own knowledge of their collections, and testing the "no known copyright restrictions" license were all positive outcomes of joining The Commons. As demonstrated by Web traffic statistics to The Commons' collections and apparent user interactions (such as illustrated with the identified "gem" photos), users have discovered the collections and engaged fellow visitors and institutional staff. Concerns observed by The Commons' members were basically nonexistent and were strongly outweighed by the benefits. As with any endeavor, there is an initial and ongoing staff outlay to support The Commons' work. Inappropriate user behavior hardly ever materialized, especially as measured against the context of overall visitation. In sum, members were enthusiastically positive about their experience thus far and looked forward to an ongoing involvement with The Commons and the opportunity of providing additional collections.

Here at UNLV, the libraries continue to build and publish digital collections within the Libraries' CONTENTdm digital asset management system. The libraries' Special Collections contain over 70,000 undigitized images, with varying levels of associated metadata. Substantive discussions have not yet occurred regarding piloting a photo project using a regular Flickr account, let alone investigating the application process for membership in The Commons. A likely next step during spring/summer 2010 is to establish a regular Flickr account and publish a
portion of the already digitized and available photos within the libraries' existing digital collections. Through such a pilot, the libraries could learn about—if not further accomplish—many of the goals mentioned by others in this survey. Possibilities include further exposing our collections, engaging our users to interact with and add value to our photographs, and allowing us to get a sense of staff time involved with publishing and building an online community around photos hosted within the Flickr environment.

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<INSERT APPENDIX A>

<INSERT APPENDIX B>

<INSERT APPENDIX C>

Notes


5. Ibid.


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15. Chan, "Commons on Flickr."
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26. Chan, "Farewell George Oates."

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