ABSTRACT
This poster provides historical, theoretical, and chiefly methodological insights into studying information based around the work of visual anthropologist John Collier, Jr. Collier pioneered “cultural” and “photographic inventories” as means to systematically capture social phenomena. First, Collier’s inventoring method is introduced. Then, the analysis of a small sample of Collier’s work is described in light of contemporary Information Studies’ salient concerns. From this miniature case study, information scholars may learn to: utilize visual data gathering techniques effectively in their research designs; analyze visual data appropriately in their work; and incorporate visual data in their reports with maximal impact. This poster synthesizes hitherto diffuse advice about exploiting the toolkit of innovative, data-enlivening methods proffered by visual approaches and makes the often-fraught arena of visual research accessible to the information field.

Keywords
research methods, visual research, visual analysis, photographic data, still imagery

BACKGROUND
A brief window into Collier’s own interesting — and telling— personal history, as well as the pertinent details of his famed inventoring method, begin this project.

Biographical sketch of Collier
John Collier, Jr., a well known twentieth-century American photographer, researcher, and educator, has been credited with “[launching] the modern history of visual research in anthropology” (Hartel & Thomson, 2011, p. 2215). He authored the influential text Visual Anthropology, later revised and expanded with his son, Malcolm. In early childhood, Collier suffered a severe injury that permanently damaged his hearing and learning, preventing him from ever completing elementary school. Some scholars speculate that on account of these impairments, Collier’s “nonverbal sensibilities” (Biella, 2001, p. 53) heightened.

Collier’s “cultural” and “photographic” inventories
From 1941 through 1959, Collier worked as a documentary photographer for various government offices, corporations, and research teams, producing an immense corpus of photographs meant to “mirror” (Collier & Collier, 1986, p. 7) the “reality” (even when deliberately posed) of the locations he visited. Collier termed such comprehensive detailings of field sites “cultural inventories,” achievable via “photographic inventories” (p. 45).

Collier’s photographic inventories are literally camera-enabled, step-by-step audits of various settings that intentionally showcase the innumerable everyday, mundane, and routine objects around which family, work, and community lives take shape. According to Collier and Collier (1986), these photographed records of settings and contents extend “beyond material items” (p. 45): the range of visible artifacts across a setting, their styles, placements, and relationships among them are seen by the pair as keys to understanding intangible values, human behaviours, and character traits.

TAKEAWAYS FOR INFORMATION RESEARCHERS
The paradoxically broad scope and thorough documentary style distinguishing Collier’s photographic inventories mean that oftentimes, though unintentionally, his images have “information items” dispersed throughout them.

An exploratory project aiming to understand the nature of information in Collier’s photographs, and to further use this analysis as a springboard for assessing the inventory procedure’s applicability for contemporary scholars, was undertaken. By way of an empirical study of a sample of Collier’s images, this project leads by example and will offer information researchers actionable guidelines for gathering, analyzing, and incorporating visual data in their own studies and reports.

Foundational knowledge for using visual data
Before the specific case study that composes this project is discussed, certain tenets underpinning the rigorous employment of visual techniques warrant elaboration. Considered useful touchstones for information scholars at each stage of the research process, the first two points detailed below are axioms drawn from visual studies

1 The “photographic inventory” was adopted as a tool for conducting research in the Information Studies field by Hartel (2007), and later used by Thomson (2010).
literature; the third is an original conception addressing the unique situation that faces information researchers who work with visual methods. With these three ideas continually informing their work, information researchers may diminish external criticism of their analytical limitations; deepen thinking about their own topic of study; and foster broader community and inter-disciplinary discussion.

“Sites” and “modalities”

01. According to Rose (2011), researchers using visual data formulate metatheoretical frameworks through any of three “sites,” being those of: 1) production (or where an image is made); 2) an image itself (or its visual content); and 3) auditing (or where an image is viewed).

Within each “site” lie three “modalities”: 1) technological (or an image’s ‘enhancement’); 2) compositional (or an image’s material qualities); and 3) social (of an image’s surrounding economic, cultural, and political context, along with the context of its viewing and use).

Table 1 summarizes and further expands Rose’s (2011) conception, which information researchers may find brings clearer direction and more lucid focus to their image-based work.

“Positivist” and “interpretivist” paradigms

02. The field of visual studies widely acknowledges “epistemological fault lines” (Hartel & Thomson, 2011) that, historically, have pitted the variously termed “epistemological fault lines” (Hartel & Thomson, 2011) against each other. However, most visual scholars today are content to simply acknowledge these positions as two ends of a “continuum” (Prosser & Loxley, 2008, section 3.1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technological</th>
<th>Production</th>
<th>Image Itself</th>
<th>Audiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How images are generated...</td>
<td>...defines meanings, forms, and effects</td>
<td>...produces specific visual effects</td>
<td>...influences transmission, circulation, viewing, and display</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compositional</td>
<td>...adheres to a genre that lends certain elements more or less significance</td>
<td>...highlights the sensory qualities and effects of certain elements</td>
<td>...offers viewers different positions based on the arrangement of certain elements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>...inform processes of who creates them, when, whom for, and why</td>
<td>...embed them in a time and place that imbues them with meaning</td>
<td>...set their context of interpretation (where, by whom, how, and why)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Table 1. The “sites” and “modalities” of images, based in the work of Rose (2011) and expanded by the author.

Figure 1. The “Positivist-Interpretivist Continuum,” interpreted from the work of Prosser and Loxley (2008) by Hartel (2010) and modeled and expanded by the author.

Being cognizant and explicitly reflexive about one’s own paradigmatic leanings on this “continuum” is important when using visual data. Figure 1 models and further illustrates the inherent contentions that visual scholarship references, providing signposts that can be useful as information researchers initiate their image-based work.

“Informational layers”

03. To date, two of the most common ways in which information researchers make use of visual data in their studies are: 1) ethnographically, by capturing images from field sites themselves or asking their study participants to do so, and 2) historically, by selecting (or being presented with, as in the participatory work of Pollak, 2012, for example) pre-existing, ‘found’ images to engage. Either way, information researchers are likely to be involved with dual “informational layers,” meaning that their visual data at once features embedded “information items” and is, in hand, an “information item” itself.

Figure 2 models these “informational layers,” and their relation to each other and to the steps of the research process.

Figure 2. The two “informational layers” present for most information researchers who use visual data, first conceptualized by the author.
Gathering visual data

For “Information, photographs, & the cultural inventory”

This project sought to understand the nature of information in Collier’s photographic inventories. The visual data used to carry it out—47 photographs—was collected through a means referred to as ‘found’ or “salvage” (Pollak, 2012) image gathering. The pre-existing digital archive The American Image, which consists of 316 of Collier’s photographs, was mined. Each individual photograph was examined and those showing “information items” were earmarked, eliminating 269 images outside this project’s scope. Collier took these photographs while working in a federal capacity, in order to “document day-to-day life in [1940s] America.” He utilized a “shooting guide” given to him by his employer and a style known as documentary photography.

‘Found’ images have pre-defined sites of “production” and “technology” (Rose, 2011), and resist within the legacy of their creators’ positivist and/interpretivist sensitivities. In this case, recycling Collier’s images and examining them for a wholly different purpose than that for which they were originally intended (appropriating a “layer 2 information item” as a “layer 1 information item”) necessitated an inherent positivist sensitivity.

For contemporary Information Studies

01. What information phenomenon (“layer 1”) will be featured in this research project? What type of visual data (newly created images or ‘found’ “layer 2” images) will best enable this?

02. How does the chosen method of visual data gathering posit this research study on the “positivist-interpretivist continuum”? Will any concerns unavoidably escape its purview?

Analyzing visual data

For “Information, photographs, & the cultural inventory”

This project interwove two analytic strategies—content (Rose, 2011) and thematic (Hartel, Pollock, & Noone, 2012)—in order to assess its visual data. Both stages were guided by the questions: 1) What “information items” appear in Collier’s inventories? 2) In what contexts do “information items” appear? 3) How is information interpreted as a social and cultural artifact in Collier’s work?

The positivist undercurrent of this project’s own design and analytic process left it more or less firmly focused on the “image itself” (Rose, 2011), suggesting such findings as:

- In 34 out of 47 photographs, “information items” are prominently foregrounded in the centre of the shot and space they inhabit, illuminated from shadowy backdrops, commandeering the full attention of all subjects (see Figure 3 for examples).
- In the mid-century America captured by Collier’s lens, information:
  - was a common artifact, taking such varied forms as leisure books; reference books; grammars; hymnals; manuals and guides; magazines; newspapers; notebooks; letters; pages held in binders, on clipboards, and loose-leaf, whether printed, hand-written, or hand-drawn; sheet music; menus; calendars; maps; posters; advertisements; and chalkboard writings;
  - surfaced in innumerable contexts, including within homes, schools, workplaces, churches, and broader community settings, used by individuals, partners, and large groups alike; and
  - was made a tool for personal edification, entertainment, teaching, learning, sharing, creating, collecting, brainstorming, and also fostering discussion.

For contemporary Information Studies

01. What are the guiding purposes of this research and this inquiry into information? What “sites” and “modalities” will best access this? What analytic strategies will best align with this?

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3 For the purposes of this project, “information items” were defined in document-based terms, as printed matter (textual and/or visual) “which furnishes evidence or information upon any subject” (Document, n., 2012), and were inclusive of such varied and diverse items as books, letters, posters, maps, menus, and chalkboard writings. Industrial and municipal signage (e.g., main storefront signs and stop signs) was not included in this definition.

4 Content analysis is primarily quantitative, based on “counting the frequency of certain visual elements in a clearly defined sample of images, and then analyzing those frequencies” (Rose, 2011, p. 87). Thematic analysis is more qualitative, based on inductively identifying recurring patterns within a data set, and it has been explicitly employed by Hartel, Pollack, and Noone (2012). See also the discussion of methodological and analytical considerations for visual-based work in McKenzie, Davies, and Wong (2010).

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5 According to Collier and Collier (1986), shooting guides safeguard against researcher inconsistency by “defining procedure, structure, and categories for recording… They answer questions like, ‘How many photographs are to be made? At what time intervals, in what places?’” (p. 162-163).
Incorporating visual data

For “Information, photographs, & the cultural inventory”

This project re-purposes pre-existing visual data within a contemporary research agenda and framework. Intended as insight into the ways that information participated in Collier’s photographic inventories, his techniques, field sites, and context were all considered to contribute something to the strength that characterizes his images and compelled them to become the subject of this study.

Illuminating and evocative, even in the absence of text, Collier’s oeuvre encourages information researchers using visual data to include it as more than a merely illustrative component of their final deliverables. Figure 3 shows three of Collier’s photographs drawn from this project’s data set, selected for being particularly rich with “information items” and associated meanings.

Figure 3. Three of John Collier, Jr.’s photographs, reproduced from The American Image online database.

For contemporary Information Studies

01. How will the visual data (“layer 2”) present in this research project express and convey nuances of information (“layer 1”) beyond what can be explicitly represented or textually stated? (For example, through technical framing and focusing, through positioning of subjects or placement of objects, through techniques such as lighting.)

CONTRIBUTIONS

This poster adds momentum to a groundswell of interest in visually studying information (Hartel & Thomson, 2011), integrating foundational knowledge and grounded practical instruction. It ties together several dispersed strands of conversation about visual methods and showcases these in one miniature Information Studies-related application. In particular, ethnographically minded information behaviour and personal information management investigators and historically inclined scholars who make use of ‘found’ images will find it especially valuable.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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