Designing Digital Legacy for Flickr

A Report from Flickr Foundation, Research
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Overview:

This report presents findings of a digital legacy research project conducted by the Flickr Foundation between November 2025 and March 2026. The research was initiated at the request of Flickr's Trust and Safety team, reviewing their posthumous account management processes and seeking a more comprehensive understanding of what Flickr members want, need, and expect when it comes to the long-term future of their photographs.

The report situates digital legacy within its legal, philosophical, and cultural context before documenting participants' lived experiences of death and loss online. It distils key insights from the research, translates these into practical recommendations for Flickr (and other platforms), and identifies unresolved issues around curation, copyright, and privacy that require further attention.

The research comprised three phases: a survey of Flickr members, which received over 2,400 responses; twenty hour-long, one-on-one interviews with a cross-section of respondents selected for diversity of age, account type, and geographic location; and three group forums timed across European, North American, and Australasian time zones. All transcripts were analysed, coded, and thematised to produce this report.

This report is intended for a broad audience: technologists, designers, policy-makers, digital preservation practitioners, legacy practitioners, the team at Flickr.com; anyone who is concerned with how we maintain human memory in a networked age. Its recommendations are specific to Flickr, but the questions it raises — about stewardship, consent, community, and the cultural value of ordinary photographs — are shared by every platform that holds personal content at scale.

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Introduction

> "Preserving things over time will always, inevitably, rely on a chain of *human* custody, not just technical solutions."
>
> *— Scott, film editor, New York*

Today, social media platforms hold a significant portion of the world's memory. Billions of photos that once lived in a shoebox in the attic now live on **commercial servers maintained by commercial companies**: Birthday parties, high school graduations, seders, camping trips, pride marches, neighbourhood fetes, all kinds of global events. The precarity of these personal and communal memories is fast becoming clear. It has become so simple to capture and upload these images, but there is remarkably little infrastructure for maintaining them in the long term — and even less so for **when their creators can no longer manage them**.

The stark projection by Öhman and Watson (2019) that the dead could outnumber the living on Facebook by 2070 is unfolding as we write this. Based on 2018 user levels, they estimated that at least 1.4 billion Facebook members will die before 2100, and if the network continues expanding, that figure could reach 4.9 billion. Their conclusion was unambiguous: an exclusively commercial approach to preserving digital materials of people who have died poses technical, social, legal and ethical issues that demand urgent consideration. Facebook, as they noted, is merely one, albeit vast, example of what awaits any platform with similar connectivity and global reach, Flickr included.

From a platform perspective, storage costs grow as user bases balloon and then age. Platforms have been happy to shoulder these costs, primarily pushing them onto the user in the form of ad revenue or data extraction and brokering. The longevity of this model is unclear, and more services are introducing fees to manage snowballing user data — iCloud, Google storage, Dropbox — the long-term implications of which remain unexamined, particularly environmental ones (Masanet et al., 2020, Gonzalez Monserrate, 2022, Istrate et al., 2024) . Even if platforms are able to bill users ad infinitum (and potentially their inheritors), this does not resolve the **myriad social questions that intersect with long-term data storage**: the mechanisms by which we transfer, inherit, or distribute stewardship of digital lives.

This report attempts to address these social questions from the ground up. Drawing on a **survey of 2,400 Flickr members, twenty in-depth interviews and three group forums** conducted in early 2026, it documents how people are currently reckoning with the future of their photographs. Part I: Defining Digital Legacy briefly situates digital legacy within its legal, philosophical, and cultural context. Part II: Past Encounters with Loss Online records what our participants have already experienced of death and legacy practices online. Part III: Emerging Insights on Digital Legacy distils four critical learnings from the research that we believe should inform any future approach to digital legacy design. Part IV: Recommendations translates these into suggested, practical solutions for Flickr. Part V: Unresolved Issues names the 'stickier points' that emerged from our conversations that warrant further research. Though grounded in

Flickr and its community, we believe the findings hold relevance for any platform that has become, whether by design or by accident, **a custodian of human memory.**

Why Flickr? Why Now?

> "Photography gives something to the future that other mediums do not."
>
> *— Sam, programmer, Western Australia*

In February 2025, the Foundation was approached by Flickr's *Trust & Safety* team who were conducting a review of their posthumous account management processes and considering the issue more deliberately. Flickr Foundation's mission is to keep Flickr photos visible for the next 100 years. Having thought about legacy for some time (see our work on *How to Write a 100 Year Plan*), we were well-placed to take on this task.

Flickr currently offers **profile memorialisation** ("In Memoriam") and has committed to **preserving public, Creative Commons-licensed** (CC-BY) photos in perpetuity (Flickr Blog, 2019). To enact either of these mechanisms, an executor must get in touch with Flickr directly, establish their identity and relation to the deceased and provide evidence of the account holder's passing: a level of scrupulousness required to ensure no accidental or artificial profile transformations. Presently, this process is handled manually by the Trust & Safety team. This is a noble and human-first effort, but one that will not scale. As Flickr's user base ages and the volume of posthumous cases grows, manual handling will become unsustainable.

In November 2025 we ran an initial survey with Flickr members about their thoughts on Digital Legacy. We were pleasantly surprised that more than 2,400 Flickr members completed it, and it was clear the Flickr user base was considering the long-term horizon of their photos too. A standout data point: **82% of survey respondents had thought about Digital Legacy, but only 12% had done something about it**. Stuart, a photographer from Boston, opened one of our three group forums with the call to action: *"I'm praying for you guys at Flickr, to give us a solution to Digital Legacy."* In this stark gap between intention and action, there is an opportunity for Flickr to move from reactive to proactive — to design considered, ethically grounded solutions before the influx arrives, rather than scrambling to build them after.

The changing demographics of the web

Flickr has a particular demographic responsibility to undertake this research. Launched in 2004, Flickr is often affectionately called a "grandma of the internet." Twenty-two years online suggests an older user base, and our survey of Flickr members confirmed that **Flickr's user base skews older** (76% of respondents were 55+). This means questions of legacy, succession, and long-term access are not theoretical concerns to be addressed in some future product cycle, but immediate, practical, and for some of our participants, urgent. Gone are the days where our elders are presumed tech-illerate. They are **more tech-literate, more socially connected, more outward-looking** than elders that came before them — people who have been uploading, tagging, and participating in online communities for two decades. That

warrants a different set of considerations: ones that respect their competence and their autonomy, rather than defaulting to the paternalistic "elder user" often found in product design.

Significant time and trust invested in platforms

Many of our respondents had tens of thousands of photographs on the platform (with one respondent recently passing 1 million photos). Most of these are **carefully tagged, organised into albums and groups, annotated with captions and locations** over the course of a decade or more. The people who have invested most deeply in Flickr are precisely the people for whom digital legacy planning matters most. Many are paying members. Flickr owes it to this group to support their next phase. These people who have remained loyal through new social media fads and corporate ownership changes, who have continued to pay, contributed to the community, and entrusted the site with their memories.

Across our interviews, participants expressed a **depth of trust and confidence in Flickr** that they did not extend to other platforms. Particularly in the age of algorithmic, attention-grabbing social media, the slower, more community-moderated nature of Flickr made it feel like a safer space. This translated into trusting Flickr to "do the right thing" and "make the right decision" in terms of legacy, in ways that participants did not expect other dominant platforms to do. Flickr is therefore uniquely placed to honour this goodwill.

> "One of the main reasons I went to Flickr was the Foundation's mission to maintain photographs for the next 100 years. It's why I'm willing to pay for the platform. I really believe in you guys."
>
> *– Candace, abstract painter, California*

Building the archive of tomorrow

Flickr is now home to **one of humanity's largest collections of images**, with a scale in the tens of billions. These are not curated museum holdings but **photographs of everyday life** from across the globe uploaded during a period when access to photographic equipment became relatively accessible for the first time in history. Our previous work with institutional partners (see our report for the Mellon Foundation) recognised the value of this twenty-first-century archive, built from the ground up.

Individual participants also understood the stakes with striking clarity — and were excited for their photographs to contribute to cultural heritage at large. Take our interviewee, Lynne, for example. A retired archeologist from Virginia, she is acutely aware of how value accrues over time and in unexpected places: *"My little snapshot of a place in 1975, 100 years from now it's going to be a historic photograph… Things that were household items, or were thrown away, acquire a new significance.* ***They're not interested in me, they're interested in the dress I was wearing."***

Or consider Corey, a university archivist and documentarian of over 160,000 photos of Michigan's squirrel population: *"If we had a collection like this for the 1940s it would be pretty*

amazing." Consider the value 160,000 squirrel photographs could bring to future ecologists, should our climate suffer further. As Lynne remarked, *"We don't have snow storms like those in the old photographs anymore, not around here."* These are not photographs taken with the intention of cultural studies or environmental science, but researchers and historians may one day treasure this: Billions of **geotagged, timestamped, clearly-licensed, well-described images on Flickr,** constituting an inadvertent record of extraordinary granularity never seen before.



215/365/2406 (January 12, 2015) - Squirrels in the Snow on a Cold Day at the University of Michigan (January 12, 2015), @cseeman, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

Part I: Defining Digital Legacy

To understand what digital legacy means, it helps to consider what we mean by legacy *offline*. The question of what to do with what the dead leave behind is as old as our collective reckoning with death itself. As the sociologist Robert Hertz argued in 1906, **death is never merely a biological event** — it is a rupture in the social fabric that demands reorganisation, including the redistribution of the deceased's roles, relationships, and possessions (Hertz, 1905–6/2018). Every known culture has developed mechanisms for this, from the Babylonian Hammurabi code provided for succession in the eighteenth century BCE, to the contemporary Swedish practice of Döstädning, or "death cleaning" (Magnusson, 2018). **Legacy is also often socially circumscribed and thus politically contested**. Take for instance the thirty-nine countries that still prevent daughters from inheriting the same proportion of assets as sons

(Stone, 2018). What legacy means, who it protects, and who it benefits or disadvantages has never been universal — and any system built around it inherits that instability.

Given this complexity, it is perhaps not surprising a consensus has not been reached on defining digital legacy. For the purposes of our report, we mean **the totality of a person's online presence and the question of what becomes of it after death** (or permanent incapacity). For the Flickr context, we are most concerned with photos (often labelled 'assets' in a traditional sense) but also the social metadata (comments, tags, group membership, photo settings) that surround the photos — **things that are not codified in legacy in the offline world**. Having already encountered one of the reasons legacy is difficult to define and extrapolate to the digital realm, let's explore some others:

1. **Digital identity ≠ Digital property**: Where legal frameworks do exist, they tend to treat digital content through the lens of property or contract law, neither of which adequately captures what a social media account is or what it means to the people who use it. Philosopher Patrick Stokes (2021) argues that a social media profile is not like a watch or a savings account that just so happens to be digital rather than physical. A watch acquires its relationship to you accidentally; a social media profile is built to present you specifically and individually — it is, as Stokes names it, a form of "distributed selfhood". Stokes argues somewhat morbidly that social media profiles are more contiguous with bodily remains than the belongings of the deceased.
2. **A fragmented, territorial legal landscape**: Dominant legislation governing platforms falls uneasily between property law, contract law, and data protection. The 2015 Revised Uniform Fiduciary Access to Digital Assets Act (RUFADAA) in the United States, precisely replicates the offline ownership framework that Stokes critiques. Similarly, a noteworthy 2018 ruling in a German Federal Court, whereby the parents of a deceased teenager fought Facebook for access to her account, established that a social media user agreement is a contract like any other, transferable to heirs (Gesley, 2018). And yet, the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) explicitly excludes deceased people. This shows different legislations can be at odds. Japan does not recognise digitised wills (Civil Code of Japan, Art. 960–968). South Korea's Personal Information Protection Act does not apply to the dead (PIPA, 2011). Above all, inheritance law is territorial — governed by the state or country in which the deceased resided, or in which the asset is located. The internet is not. This results in a global patchwork governed by legislative confusion rather than individual intention and dignity, with platforms' terms of service often being the decisive factor.
3. **No commercial incentive to act:** Unfortunately, there is a lack of urgency on the part of platforms to go further than oblique terms of service. Digital legacy is, from a commercial perspective, a problem for tomorrow (and for the next Board). Addressing it generates almost no revenue, requires investment in infrastructure for users who cannot pay (or generate valuable data points for data brokering), and opens up cases that are emotionally complex and legally fraught. Where platforms are structured to operate on quarterly timelines and answer to shareholders, legacy by contrast unfolds over decades and interfaces with a broader, more nebulous group of stakeholders: kin, communities and the public interest.

4. **The fragility of the digital:** Underlying all of this is a more fundamental issue: the instability of the digital medium itself. As our previous research has shown, the digital is extraordinarily fragile and difficult to archive. Files corrupt silently. Formats become obsolete. Services shut down without warning (Vlassenroot, 2021, Acker & Kriesberg, 2020, DPC, 2015). And social media, which is dynamic, personalised, networked — is more troublesome still (Acker & Brubaker, 2014). A printed photograph, even when neglected in a shoebox, can survive decades of this indifference. In many ways, the digital is inherently at odds with legacy.

> "Your embroidery is going to last longer than most of your websites... nothing is more ephemeral than a website."
> *– Quinn, Digital Humanities specialist, California*

Yet amidst the convoluted and complex landscape of institutional and commercial digital legacy, a more promising practice has emerged from the ground up. The most substantive advocacy in this space comes not from the technology sector but from the communities that deal with death head-on: elder and palliative care advocates (Death with Dignity's 'Life File', Digital Legacy Association, AARP's 'Digital Vaults'), death doulas (INELDA, NEDA Alliance), estate planners (Everplans, Farewill), and funeral directors (Co-operative Funeral Care, Trust & Will).

The term, *thanosensitive design,* was coined by Massimi & Charise (2009), describing an approach to design that takes mortality and bereavement seriously as conditions of use, rather than exceptions to be handled (see also: Sofka, 1996 on 'thanatechnology'). Researchers in human-computer interaction (HCI) have taken up this cause, researching and experimenting with its digital implications. Notable examples include Microsoft Research's work (2012) exploring the design and testing of 'digital heirlooms'. More recently, the USB Club's 'Family Intelligence' project (2026) has extended this line of inquiry, exploring how shared family memory and digital materials might dovetail with local LLMs. Alongside these, emerging frameworks such as Machine Readable Wishes and Identity 2.0's 'How are we remembered online?' gesture towards a future in which individuals can express their digital intentions in structured, actionable formats.

A full account of this field lies beyond the scope of this report — Doyle & Brubaker's systematic literature review (2023) maps its breadth far more comprehensively. What is clear from this cursory treatment, however, is that practitioners and theorists have long understood what many platforms refuse to acknowledge: that death is not an edge case but a certainty, and that the tools people need to manage it must be built proactively and with care.

Part II: Past Encounters with Loss Online

Most of our respondents had encountered loss online, either the passing of someone close to them, or the quieter experience of noticing that a familiar presence in a community had simply stopped appearing. Before we can propose what digital legacy *should* look like, it is

worth understanding what it already looks like, and how it has been experienced by Flickr communities. What emerged across interviews and forums was a shared catalogue of corporate inadequacy: the tools that exist don't fit, the tools that should exist don't, and in the absence of either, people are improvising.

Loss begets legacy

> "Of all the things my mother lost in Hurricane Hugo—the house, the furniture—what she regretted most were the photographs; they were her connection to her family's history."
>
> *– Lynne, retired archeologist, Virginia*

One of the most striking patterns in our interviews was how often a past experience of loss, whether of photographs, of platforms, of physical possessions, had been **the catalyst** for thinking and acting on Digital Legacy. Barbara, a retired librarian from Ohio and avid family archivist (a self-proclaimed "book-keepers daughter"), joined Flickr in 2008 directly after a hard drive failure: "I carried that memory very close to me." **The fear of being too late to save something** resonated across her analogue collection too. She and her husband Bill described their regret at the deterioration of fifty years' worth of photo albums: "They're not in the greatest shape visually… Now we use Flickr to try to preserve those moments." Leo, a high school sports photographer also from Ohio, told a similar story about images from his military tour in 1970s Japan: "I have hardly any of the negatives anymore… if I had known now what I know then, I would have saved all of them."



1979-Mom and our new baby boy, @veisha, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

There is a particular insidiousness of digital loss given the **lack of visibility** of the inner-workings. Our assumption is that digital artefacts will last indefinitely, even as they pile up on our desktops. As Michael B., book designer and letterpress artisan based in Boston recalled, when he went to open a folder of digital photos years later, "Suddenly, the photos became a black box. What makes me sad is I didn't recognise there was no sort of prompt." There was no alert, no moment of decision, and no clear reason why.

The risk is even more pronounced with social media, where the relationship between user and platform is one of deep emotional investment built over years — and where the severance, when it comes, can be abrupt. Bill described social media as having "the lifetime of a mayfly — twenty-four hours." He continued: "If you look away… I've seen that even on Flickr, pictures that I know I bookmarked disappeared, for innocent reasons." It's not simply one's own photos we care about; social media **situates us in a web of connection** we are invested in.

Lynne described herself as a "Webshots refugee." When the platform shut down in 2012, there was no migration path, no export tool, no warning adequate to the scale of what was lost. "All of a sudden this major website was just gone." She came to Flickr in its wake, placing her trust in a new platform with the hope that she would not need to undertake a similar seismic migration in her lifetime. Transferring this loyalty, and effort, to a new platform is why data portability —

the ability to move one's photographs and their associated context to another home if needed — is critical in legacy contexts.

Legacy Contacts and their limits

Many of the platforms our respondents regularly use offer a “Legacy Contact” feature: a designated person who is notified, and in some cases granted access to account data, after a defined period of inactivity. Facebook was among the first major platforms to take post-mortem account management seriously as a design problem. Its Legacy Contact feature, launched in 2015, was developed with input from HCI researcher Jed Brubaker, under the principle (derived from user research) that "**stewardship is an alternative to inheritance**" (2015). It was a rare instance of thanatosensitive design research being applied at platform scale.

Google introduced Inactive Account Manager in 2013, allowing users to specify up to ten trusted contacts who would be notified — and optionally granted access to selected account data — after a period of dormancy. Contacts verify their identity via SMS and receive a data download; no death certificate is required. Apple followed suit in 2021 with its Legacy Contact option. What is notable in these examples is a **general trend toward increasing formalisation**: Apple's implementation requires both a death certificate and a pre-generated access key, a markedly more systematic and legalistic process than Google's inactivity-triggered model of eight years earlier. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Flickr does not yet offer a named Legacy Contact equivalent.

Among our respondents who had used these features, the consensus was that they were a reasonable first step — but a narrow one. A legacy contact **assumes a single trusted individual**, typically immediate next of kin: a spouse, an adult child. For a platform like Flickr, where a single account can contain private family photographs alongside publicly shared professional work, membership of dozens of different groups with varying entry requirements, and images carrying different restrictions and rights statements, this clear-cut model breaks down. A **one-person-inherits-all model cannot preserve nuanced social distinctions**. We will return to the thorny issue of transferring contextual and relational privacy in Part IV.

The most common trigger for legacy contact protocols is inactivity — a silence long enough to suggest the account holder may be dead. But **inactivity is a poor proxy for death** and carries with it many assumptions. As Candace detailed: “There are a lot of reasons why inactivity may take place outside of death. Maybe you're 70+ and your hands don't work, or your eyesight isn't good enough to see a screen." An older user who can no longer navigate a touchscreen is not dead. Neither is a person who steps away from Flickr for three years while caring for a partner. Nor someone who is incarcerated. And yet, on many platforms, prolonged inactivity without response to notification prompts is the precursor to account deletion. A person's relationship to their photographs (and digital assets more broadly) changes across different chapters of their life; legacy contact mechanisms ought to account for the multiplicitous nature of personhood, **not flatten it into a binary of presence/absence.**

Others bypassed platform tools entirely, **devising their own inheritance arrangements offline**. Older respondents, in particular, opted for analogue methods: writing down passwords on paper, or assembling external hard drives and thumb drives intended to be passed on at death. These are pragmatic solutions, but they expose a different vulnerability. As Lynne recalled: "Among my friends there was a sudden death and someone inherited their iPhone. They might as well have thrown it in the nearest river because all their passwords and codes were digital." The industry-wide shift toward two-factor authentication, biometric verification, and passkeys — driven by legitimate security concerns — means that even a written-down password may no longer be enough to access an account. It pushes the responsibility onto the user before death. As Brubaker (2021) himself even observed, "tech companies are **aggressively pushing us into other forms of authentication,** but we're not always considering what happens when a person dies."

Memorialisation and “Ghostly Echoes”

After legacy contacts, profile memorialisation was the second most recognised legacy mechanism among our respondents. Most had encountered it on Facebook, where a deceased user's profile can be marked with the word "Remembering" and preserved in a limited form. Flickr offers its own version, an "In Memoriam" designation, though awareness of it among our participants was low. In principle, memorialisation serves a clear purpose: it signals to a community that someone has died, prevents the account from being logged into or algorithmically resurfaced as though the person were still alive, and preserves the profile as a kind of digital marker. In practice, instigating this process is often laborious, inconsistent and overly clinical.

Jonathon, a self-proclaimed “quintessential IT guy” and cosplay documentarian based in New York City, expressed a frustration that was shared by several participants: "I wish sites made it easier to turn on ‘In Memoriam’ mode… if the family isn't tech savvy, they might leave the site up and not mention, ‘By the way, this person's not around anymore’." The **burden falls on the bereaved** to navigate unfamiliar processes at precisely the moment when an avalanche of uncomfortable administrative tasks are already taking up their time. And when no one makes that critical step, the account simply persists. Hans, a retired librarian in the Netherlands, described the discomfort of encountering exactly this: "I have a friend who has a Flickr account. He died eleven years ago, but his account is still there. I thought it’s rather painful to see him there as if nothing happened." He added: "Knowing him, I don't think he would have liked that his pictures were still online."

Death on Flickr, when it does arrive, often does so **without announcement**. Bert, a retired respiratory therapist and travel enthusiast based in Ontario, described the experience: "I have been on Flickr for a while and seen a few people come and go, but it often happens quietly and without any notification." He recalled learning of a community member's death only through a comment left on a photograph: "It wasn't until somebody commented, 'I'm so sorry for the family members' that I finally realised he had suddenly died” He continued: “The option to make a comment on that final photo may be something that would offer some comfort to family members, as a sort of closure." This is emblematic of the broader phenomenon of online

memorialisation, whereby the loose ties of a social media community create **novel, improvised mourning practices without offline equivalents** (Wagner, 2018, Pasquali et al., 2022).

Bert also observed that Flickr's own community culture compounds the silence: "People tend to be more vocal and open on other platforms like Facebook. Flickr is more nuanced — it probably wouldn't be the first one that people or next of kin go to." The result is a **population of ghost profiles** — accounts whose owners are gone but whose photographs, comments, and group memberships continue to exist as though nothing has changed. Lynne proposed something that several participants gravitated toward: a kind of digital graveyard, modelled on sites like Find-A-Grave — "It could be a good way to organise them, you could have an index, like people who look up gravestones." The idea is not to hide the dead but to create a public record of their passing that acknowledges what they created to continue to be found and enjoyed.

Not everyone, however, appreciated the static finality that formal memorialisation implies. Quinn, described encountering a deceased friend and former collaborator from their shared collective, The Data-Sitters Club, in old forum posts: "He kept popping up when I was Googling things… I was searching for a solution to a technical problem and he'd be there. I liked seeing those ghostly echoes of him… He's in his element, still continuing to have value and be useful." A memorialised account announces death, locking its features and ossifies it. An untouched account preserves its **capacity for movement**, allowing the content to still circulate. This would require a completely new approach to legacy, very unlike the real-world, but with the freedom of the digital, it could be possible. A speculative design challenge is to ask: how might a digital memorialisation preserve this type of mobile, distributed legacy?



Gentleman Ghost with Polka Dots accidentally scaring Neighborhood Baby. @brechtbug, All Rights Reserved ©

User barriers to digital legacy: Kristy's experience

"People will say 'write down your password,' but to really talk about the different platforms and their different legacy practices, personally I haven't found a centralised resource, or a step by step guide."

– Kristy, archivist & librarian, Texas

Compounding the scarce options provided by platforms, there are many reasons behind user resistance to deploying digital legacy mechanisms. Kristy, an archivist-librarian based in Austin, is living with Stage 4 Cancer and one of the few interviewees who is proactively engaging with digital legacy planning. She remarked that the resources made available to her by medical sources were significantly outdated: "It's as if they wrote them twenty years ago and they haven't ever updated them." As such Kristy has taken digital legacy into her own hands, in her words, "making it up as I go along." Nevertheless she described the process as arduous and unrewarding, simultaneously "overwhelming, and also boring."

A self-directed process such as Kristy's requires **constant maintenance**. "You always have to update it… I wrote out all this stuff, and then it's a year later and something has changed. So I

have to go and do it all over again." Whether someone uploads more content and an export becomes obsolete, or a platform changes its operating terms, it's a critical learning that digital legacy is experienced as an ongoing process, rather than a one-time fix.

If Kristy — a motivated, digitally-literate, archival specialist with over 25 years experience — cannot find a clear path through digital legacy, it is reasonable to ask what chance a less prepared user has. Kristy suggested that platforms and providers ought to do **further research and conversations with the terminal illness community**: a 'user group' much younger than the imagined "legacy customer" (erroneously presumed to be in their 70s or 80s). The wider digital legacy community **could learn and benefit from** the hard work done by people for whom facing digital legacy is not a future concern but an everyday engagement.

D.I.Y. Solutions

For lack of a clear solution to digital legacy, some Flickr members have built their own from scratch. Sam, a programmer and avid family historian from Western Australia, has built an archival website on top of the Flickr and Wikimedia APIs, incorporating information that neither platform can hold on its own. This includes biographical detail (as structured metadata), linkages between family members, oral histories, and the digitisation of photographs depicting Indigenous communities within the family's record, made openly accessible so that their descendants can discover and claim them.[1] The site was built in honour of Sam's grandmother, whose diligent family archive he has inherited: I'm reading her handwritten notes, I'm transcribing them. I wish I could tell her that I'm continuing her work. Whilst I can't do that, my dream is to be able to build something that is stable." For Sam, the audience for legacy is not only in the future, it is also an obligation to the past: "Now it's my turn to continue this thing."

Others spoke of the **physicality of photographs** as a guarantor of their survival, whether that be prints, photo books, or calendars. As Lynne remarked: "With a book you can pick it up and look at it. Whereas with photos in a drawer or on a website, they're just kicking around." But it is not just the durability of the printed medium that is important here. Physical photographs carry with them a **social and communal practice that has not yet been translated into the digital realm** — getting the albums out, gathering around them, remembering the stories together. Hans recounted a bittersweet story: "For almost 25 years, my brother, myself and two friends have gone to the Alp mountains. And every year, I make an album on Flickr of those trips… Last week, I found out one of my friends suddenly died. That moment triggered us to come together to look more at all these albums." A future digital legacy framework ought to consider not only how photographs are technologically preserved, but also how they are socially encountered.

[1] This kind of qualitative breathing room, the capacity for an archive to invite conversation and repatriation rather than simply store content, is something we also explored in our README work for Data Lifeboats



Overleg, @hansfransen, CC-BY 2.0

Scott, a film editor and author of the PERMANENCE project based in New York, has taken this logic further still, looking to the analogue as a strategy for preserving the digital. Scott has developed his own colour separation processes inspired by the early twentieth-century photographer Sergey Mikhaylovich Prokudin-Gorsky as a long-term archival medium for digital images: "You make actual film outs, which are archivally processed, which can be reassembled in the technology long after digital is dead." The principle is one of **reanimation**: creating materials that can be read and reconstituted by future communities and technologies that may not yet exist, without dependence on any single platform, format, or power source.

Part III: Emerging Insights on Digital Legacy

What follows are the dominant insights from our interviews and forums. These points surface the key learnings that should inform practical solutions to building digital legacy tools. They track from the personal implications of digital legacy to the more collective, outward-facing responsibilities.

1. Proactive Digital Legacy Planning

The most consistent theme across our interviews was the **desire to plan for digital legacy proactively** — to set intentions, make decisions, and prepare an account for its afterlife while the account holder is still alive and able to do so. At present, Flickr does not offer this. There is no way to pre-emptively configure an In Memoriam status, nor (as discussed) to designate a legacy contact who could manage inactivity notifications and posthumous account decisions. The tools that exist are reactive: they are activated by the bereaved, after the event, on behalf of someone who can no longer speak for themselves.

Our participants saw the value in this; the critical need to **express intentions *before* death**. Leo, who has over 134,000 photos stated, "Given the chance, I would update my profile shortly before I passed, say how much I enjoyed it, and hoping that these photos will bring enjoyment into the future… Something soapy like that". Leo has become a staple at local high school sports games (after his six kids attended the school), and his permanent fixture status is something worth noting as key context to his photo collection. Lynne spoke of her father's historic railroad photography collection. "It was only through *knowing* my father's wishes that these photos be preserved that we got the collection situated with the John W. Barriger III Library." As the first American to ride the Trans-Siberian Express in the late 1950s, this was a unique collection, but it could have easily been lost without the space to set intentions.



6-85 rocks pa, @barrigerlibrary, All Rights Reserved ©

A recurring motivation for this proactive planning was the desire to **remove the burden from family.** Hans was blunt: "I don't like the idea that I have to push others into an account that they never asked for." Kristy framed it as a question she asks herself regularly: "What can I do to make it easier on everybody if I'm gone?" The point is not just one of convenience; grieving families should not be asked to also become administrators, archivists and decision-makers for platforms they may never have used themselves. Many family members may not even know the account exists (something we'll redress in the next insight).

But the shift from reactive to proactive legacy planning is not only about relieving the burden on others. It is also, for many of our participants, **an act of self-authorship** — an opportunity to shape how one is seen and remembered. For Michael B., who publishes his letterpress work under the moniker @interrobang, this was at the centre of his rationale for partaking in the interviews: "Flickr is a repository of my work, which is why it's important to me, which is why I wanted to have some sort of input on digital legacy." For many professionals, Flickr may be the **only site where their work lives in its highest quality form** — or in some cases, lives at all — as Jonathon remarked "the number one thing I care most about is the non alteration of files." This was critical to bringing his documentary photos to Flickr in the first place – "their commitment to treat my photos like a true archive" – and it is what makes the platform viable as a legacy portfolio rather than simply a social media site where content is compressed in favour of novelty and engagement.

Candace took up abstract painting after a career in tech, she described Flickr as "my footprint in the universe, a legacy of what I did." Whilst the paintings she has sold are dispersed across collections and exhibitions, Flickr holds as the core node. Candace made an argument for why this must be done by the account holder, not delegated: "How would my next of kin know the full context of my work? Only I can know that… It's better than what somebody else writes about you." This resonates with the Joan Mitchell Foundation's Creating a Living Legacy (CALL) programme, which for over a decade has helped artists document, inventory, and contextualise their life's work while they are still alive to narrate it.

> "Flickr is a concentrated view of what *I* thought was important to me.
> You can't get that anywhere else."
> *– Candace, abstract painter, California*



WasItWorthIt-5x8-CandaceHammond-AbstractArt, @chammond98, All Rights Reserved ©

Proactive digital legacy planning offers the chance to **reveal dimensions of themselves** that their families might not otherwise see or know. Bill, an aviation professional (and son of interviewees Barbara and Bill), spoke of wanting his children to have access to "my career and things that they just don't see" — his life in the aircraft, the destinations visited, the life he and his wife experienced before their children were born. Certain things may be best revealed or articulated after death. Candace admitted to feeling embarrassed by the idea of people reading her self-description while she was still alive — suggesting that there is a version of honest self-presentation that feels easier to offer posthumously, when the vulnerability of being seen no longer carries social risk. Digital legacy, in this sense, is not only about preserving what already exists. It is about creating a qualitatively distinct space where **people might be more fully known in death** — on their own self-described terms — than they allowed themselves to be in life.

2. Beyond next-of-kin

Where digital legacy features have been implemented, they overwhelmingly rely on next of kin to sort out affairs. As discussed, the increasing formalisation of these mechanisms deepens the reliance on governmental ID systems and proof of legal relation. Our interviews revealed that this is an oversight to **how sociality works online and how the familial structure is changing** at large.

The first, most basic problem is that next of kin may not know or care about Flickr. Lynne joked: "My sister knows I'm on Flickr but I don't see her that often, and she's a bit of a Luddite… I can't imagine her even reporting me for an In Memoriam." Michael R., who has been

documenting the ephemera of mid-century Americana, was more frank: "The difficulty with that is that a lot of families just don't get it. 'Oh, you take pictures. That's nice. Now go away…' A lot of family members can be very dismissive." For these users, designating a biological relative as a legacy contact is not just inadequate — it is potentially entrusting a life's work to someone who sees no value in it.



IMG_1400, @erratic0101, All Rights Reserved ©

We encountered many cases where the person best placed to steward a collection of photos was not a relative at all. Science & Technology scholar, Donna Haraway, has a useful definition for these types of relations that **sit outside of biological connection; she names them "kin":** the "enduring mutual, obligatory, non-optional, you-can't-just-cast-that-away-when-it-gets-inconvenient, enduring relatedness that carries consequences" (Paulson, 2018). Unfortunately, many of these relationships, despite being built over years of shared experiences and interactions, **carry no legal standing.** They cannot produce a death certificate, nor would they not appear in a will. This is particularly relevant for estranged families, the LGBTQIA+ community, communities of shared interests. A legacy framework that cannot recognise these relationships is one that will inevitably exclude a significant portion of its users.

This informal handover over stewardship is already happening 'in the wild'; as Sam told us the story: "A couple of years ago, this guy I knew was diagnosed with bowel cancer and given only three months to live. He emailed me, asking if I could take over his website. I was shocked but agreed. Two weeks later, he handed me a thumb drive with 25,000 photos and pages he'd compiled about our local town over the past 15 years, saying, 'Here you go, take this and make

it live on.'" The transfer happened entirely outside any platform mechanism, based on kinship connections: a shared love of place.

The **circles of care** around a person's photographs may be concentric or overlapping. This is especially true on social media, where images reach different audiences at different levels of access (e.g. public, friends & family, groups). Corey gave the example of a boy with autism who had followed his dog photographs on Flickr for years and commented when Runyon got a new collar: "When you can make those connections, it really is nice because it gives you what could be sort of an extended family." **Social media enables these loose but richly invested connections**, forming communities of attention that current legacy tools have no way of accommodating.

The open question of **archiving group-owned or contributed content** also arose in interviews. Ben's lifetime commitment to habitat restoration has taken him around the globe, documented across his Flickr profile. He also makes heavy use of Flickr groups to "get the word out" and since 2006 has managed eight different groups. Thinking about the long term, he said: "I'd love to find someone who is interested in it to take it on. Help me take it on." Ben is concerned about what will happen to these groups when he can no longer serve as administrator. Flickr has no mechanism for delegating group admin posthumously, leaving groups **vulnerable to becoming permanently leaderless**. When the mission is larger than a single person, the tools need to be too.

Not every account on Flickr represents an individual person, in these cases **organisational ownership and authorship of photos significantly complicates** digital legacy. Rhiannon, the archivist at the Congregation of the Sisters of St Joseph in Canada, is determining what to do with the order's digital presence as it approaches the completion of its mission: "They're trying to make sure that the impact that the Congregation had doesn't just cut off and end when they do. They're planning for things to continue long after them." At present, handing over the password appears to be the only option once the staff have moved on — but it sits in a legal grey area. Most platforms' terms of service **prohibit sharing or transferring account credentials**. This goes to show they were never drafted with institutional succession in mind and yet they make up a sizeable portion of Flickr content.



Hf01-s045-02-059-hamilton-photos, @csj_canada_archives, No Known Copyright Restrictions

3. Metadata as a legacy infrastructure

One of the more unexpected findings of our research was how much our participants cared about metadata. This includes tags, comments, albums, geolocations; we call this the 'social context' that surrounds a photograph rather than the photograph itself. Whilst we thought metadata might be a niche technological concern to a small group of interviewees, in fact **metadata emerged as central to how many people think about digital legacy.**

We might see the offline precedent to this as writing on the back of photos, those tiny details that become crucial to constructing family or community histories in the present. Today, the scale and promise of what metadata can reveal to us is huge, as Jonathon remarked, "today even if a person doesn't label their photos; metadata has longitude, latitude and dates already embedded into it. We actually have *more* information, and now we can build better pictures and better archives." The flip side is that a photo without metadata is effectively invisible.

Well-maintained metadata is increasingly becoming a way to make sense of the mass of photos we are accumulating over time. Navigating a Flickr collection in the tens of thousands, their so-called "canonical archive of all the things", Quinn described: "It freaks my girlfriend out, how I can just summon stuff up using the Flickr mobile app… where I ate sushi ten years ago." This total recall is organised not by the platform's algorithm but by the user's own system of meaning — one they have spent years building, and which holds value precisely because of that investment.



"Like Mom Used To Make", @quinnanya, CC-BY-SA 2.0

In a legacy context, these systems of meaning can allow for inheritors to make sense of the gargantuan digital archives left to them. Unlike their offline counterparts, metadata offers **pathways in structured categories** to explore what is relevant to inheritors — perhaps a particular geolocation, the tag of a person's name, a series of dates. Kristy, who has diligently tagged and labelled her Flickr photos told us, "I like the idea of my family being able to explore the resources the way they want to… preserving that metadata, the albums and my captions, for my husband and my wider family is super important." She imagines her photos being valuable to her nieces, who are currently 9 and 10 years old, as they grow older and want to learn more about their shared past: "Perhaps they'll want to search a tag, or their own name, or their name with my name… 'let me see photos of me with Aunt Kristy together' and the search will reveal that". This ability to tailor explorable legacy experiences through metadata is **completely unique to networked social photography** because of the platform infrastructure: constituting a never-seen-before legacy practice.

Barbara and Bill have built exactly this kind of mnemonic practice into their daily life on Flickr. They use their collection as an activity to jog memory and to bond — sitting together, revisiting decades-old photographs and testing what they can still recall. They call it **"memory salvaging."** "We're trying to salvage what our memories are of these very past times," Barbara explained. "Going back to look at a series of fifty-year-old photographs, we say, 'let's see if we remember what we were doing and why we were doing it." Their detailed captions and descriptions might only be legible to themselves and to the wider family, for whom the collection increasingly serves as a canonical reference. When their children or grandchildren ask questions about the past, Barbara and Bill dig through Flickr to find the answers.

Bill has taken this “salvaging” further still, generating geolocation maps that accompany each album as an opening page — visual guides to the journeys the photographs document. In a lovely intertwining of the physical and the digital, Bill also crafts model trains that map onto these journeys, sharing them with the enthusiast communities he’s a part of on Flickr: "I built this box car for this railroad that hasn't existed for the last ninety years, because Barbara took a train when she was five years old that went along this railroad.” The metadata, might only be legible to Bill and his family, nonetheless holds the key to much of this meaning. Without the metadata, the photograph is just an image; but with metadata, it becomes an even richer story.



ACL Ventilated Box Car 32587, @4070mikado, All Rights Reserved ©

4. Donation as long-term legacy

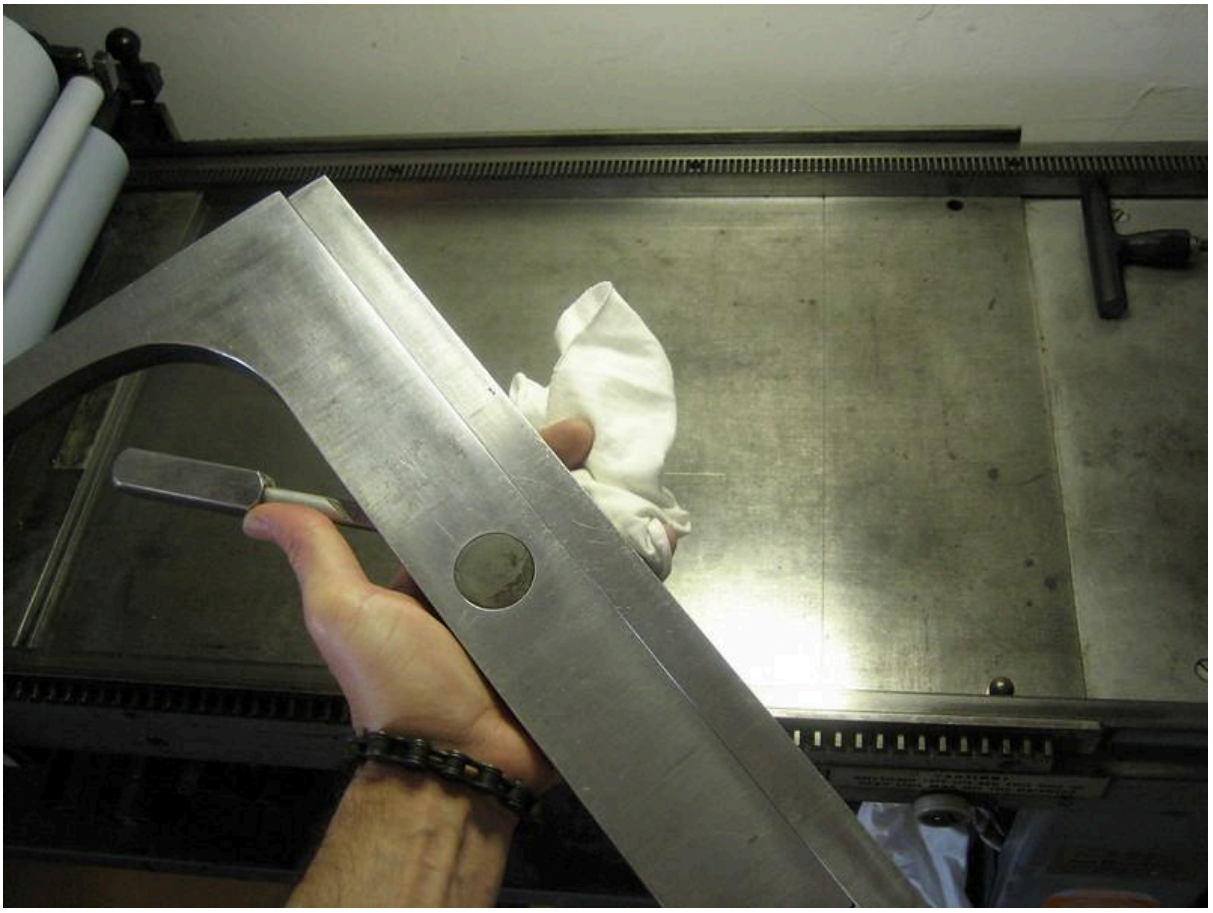
> “The whole purpose of photo sharing, the resource sharing, is so that other people can use it, other people can enjoy it.”
>
> *– Corey, librarian, Michigan*

Whilst our previous insights have focused on legacy in the context of personal, familial, and community stewardship, we also heard a strong desire for something broader: that the years of photography — and describing, tagging, and organising — that Flickr members have invested might hold lasting value for audiences they cannot yet imagine. Flickr constitutes a site of cultural heritage, but not in the institutional sense of museums and national collections. It may be the **first photographic archive in history built entirely from the ground up**. This holds enormous potential, but only if photographs can find a way into the right hands.

On this unwitting public value buried in a personal archive, Vivian Maier came up in multiple interviews, having become something of a patron saint for the Flickr community. Maier was a Chicago nanny who spent decades quietly photographing street life, amassing over 100,000 negatives that she never exhibited, nor published. Her archive was discovered by chance at a storage locker auction in 2007; only after her death in 2009 was her work recognised as among the most significant bodies of American street photography. This serendipitous discovery — and its near destruction — is **totemic for the Flickr community**, something that guides their preservation impulse. As Michael R. expressed: "I'm not saying my photos are all amazing Vivian-Maier-level stuff, but there might be edges that have a certain interest to people." This is the quiet conviction shared by many interviewees, that a collection need not be extraordinary in its entirety to contain something that may be of immense, irreplaceable value to the future.

Flickr photos have already served this kind of serendipitous discovery: Jonathon's Harry Potter fan-meetup photos printed in a PhD thesis; Chris's aviation photos from the 1980s used on Wikipedia; Sergio's photos of Ghana printed in Lonely Planet guides. In each case, the use found the photograph on Flickr, because it was **public, described, and findable.** The depth of what is stored in these collections can be significant. Michael B.'s albums document the craft of letterpress printing in meticulous, process-oriented detail — evidenced in his albums "How to Put a Draw Sheet on a Vandercook Press" and "How to Clean Oxidised Type." He described each album as "a textbook, abbreviated." This is **a form of intangible cultural heritage**, documented on Flickr, that may not live anywhere else.[2] The idea that you never know what someone may need in the future is a reason to preserve an account long after its owner can no longer manage or pay for it. The value to the public good is not quantifiable in advance.

[2] We have encountered this before: the Port Morien Data Lifeboat preserves a step-by-step photographic record of making a lobster trap — a local trade custom that qualifies as intangible cultural heritage.



Time to clean the press, @interrobang918, All Rights Reserved ©

There is also a **deeper democratic argument** to preserving Flickr photos for the public good. As Jonathon articulated, "Most of the history we know is because rich people wrote a lot of letters… it would be great if, a hundred years from now, if someone wants a picture of just a particular neighbourhood, they could build that picture historically from a multitude of people's experiences." His story is emblematic of this diversification of authorial voices: "The New York Times once used a photo of mine to document a Harry Potter event… its always cool when one of my photos is used, rather than the professional photographers." Flickr, at its best, constitutes this view from the ground up — a **corrective to the institutional bias** that has historically determined whose lives get documented and make it into the archives.

Several participants were already actively planning to donate their collections to institutions where they might serve a wider audience: Robin sending his 're-photography' documenting the changing urban landscape to Swindon Library; Hans's mother's photographs of 1900s Berlin to the city's archive; Robert handing over years of transport photography to a Trust. Ben's example is a striking one. On his Flickr he has a **photograph of one of the first Alani plants** — a native Hawaiian citrus brought back from near-extinction — growing in the wild as part of his restoration work with Auwhi. In his words, "I can't help but think someone would want a photo of that." People are eager to contribute to public collections, but as our Mellon Foundation workshops with institutional partners revealed, **accessioning social media content is remarkably difficult and clear pathways do not exist yet.** This is precisely why we developed the Data Lifeboat tool — to create archive-ready copies of Flickr content with their metadata

intact — and the Safe Harbor Network as a decentralised network for storing them. With a system such as this in place, an unknown future viewer might (as Ben put it) "learn something about what you do, and then become involved" — extending his "legacy of environmental work" beyond his own lifetime and into hands he will never know.



Alani - They don't come much more endangered, @iliahi, All Rights Reserved ©

This appeal to public knowledge and the public good becomes all the more pertinent amidst the increasing **privatisation and licensing of photographic collections**, through mega-agglomerators like Getty, Shutterstock or even Ancestry. Michael R. voiced his concern: "Somebody essentially decides what they like, then the rest is what they don't like. They might just summarily delete something which maybe another group of individuals cares about." The inequality of what gets saved — and who gets to decide — is not new in archival history. But when the decision-maker is a corporation, there is no public visibility, no appeal process and very scant means of access. This appeal to public knowledge takes on additional urgency when we consider the changing nature of image-making itself. **In an era of AI-generated imagery,** Flickr may represent one of the last large-scale collections of photographs taken and described by humans. It is messy, incomplete, and erroneous at times. But it is also real, which may prove to be its most enduring value.

Part IV: Recommendations for Digital Legacy

> "If you give people the tools, you give them a chance to make choices about what survives."
>
> – *Quinn*

With these insights in mind, we propose **four practical recommendations** for implementing a more equitable and sustainable digital legacy framework. These range from the immediately actionable to the more speculative. They are most relevant to the context of Flickr, deriving as they do from our interviewees' experiences on the site, but we believe they can be instructive for any platform.

1. Long(er)-term Subscriptions

Flickr operates on a freemium model. Free accounts permit a maximum of 1,000 photos with caveats and limitations, whereas Flickr Pro allows for unlimited uploads, private photo storage, and full-resolution downloads. This distinction becomes critical in the context of digital legacy. The relationship is a reciprocal one: the subscription fee covers the infrastructure — servers, bandwidth, maintenance — that keeps those photographs accessible. But **once payment stops, so does that contract**, and the photographs enter an uncertain limbo, which to our respondents felt categorically unfair. Flickr has a greater investment in providing a sustained service to its Pro members, many of whom **have paid continuously for over a decade**. As former RAF pilot and long-time aviation enthusiast, Chris, said, "I just don't like the feeling that when I stop paying my subscription, those photographs are going to be deleted."

At present, Flickr offers one- and two-year Pro subscriptions. A deceptively simple step toward supporting digital legacy would be to extend these — **to ten, twenty, or fifty years**. For the account holder, this provides a measure of certainty: a guarantee that their collection will remain accessible and intact for a defined period after they can no longer manage it. For Flickr, it provides upfront revenue to offset the long-term cost of maintaining dormant accounts.

Flickr also offers the ability to **gift a Pro subscription**, a feature which takes on new significance in a legacy context. A family member could gift Pro to a deceased relative's account to keep it online; a community of interest could collectively fund the subscription of a particularly valued contributor. Sam has done this himself on several occasions: "being able to give someone a Pro account means you can keep their 'archive' alive. Not many services offer this option; with others, you watch someone's whole digital realm just crumble away and disappear forever." Michael B. wondered whether Flickr's long-term maintenance could even be written into an estate plan: "I wonder if there could be a line item in my will that says you need to pay Flickr every two years." Gifting Pro to a deceased user's account would sit in a terms-of-service grey area, but the mechanism could be formalised with minimal adjustments.

Extending subscription length, while feasible, may also mean **deferring the harder question** rather than answering it. For some, a ten-year extension is enough — a window for photographs to be found, collected, or donated. For others, the ideal timeframe was much longer. Many participants proposed a one-off, "lifetime" Pro payment. Recognising this amount would be significantly higher than the annual fee (and not knowing how storage costs may increase over time), didn't surprise them. As Bill amusingly put it: "I will throw money to protect my Flickr. Whatever it would cost is going to be a fraction of what I've dumped into lenses and camera equipment over the years."

Flickr has already committed to preserving public, Creative Commons-licensed photographs in perpetuity, even when an account is no longer managed or paid for — but it has not defined what that timespan means in practice. Presumably it **extends for as long as the company exists**, but for members whose appeals are grounded in cultural heritage, this is a rather loose assurance (this is one of the key reasons the Flickr Foundation was established). Any honest offering in this space will need to reckon with the fact that no commercial entity can guarantee permanence. But what it can do is offer **credible, costed, and transparent commitments** that extend the horizon of preservation far enough for other mechanisms — be they inheritance, institutional donation or timely deletion — to take effect.

2. Extended and Nuanced Legacy Contacts

As we have discussed, Legacy Contacts are becoming standard in digital legacy offerings and Flickr ought to catch up. We have also touched on the drawbacks of recent developments - increasing formalisation, requirements for legal proof of identity and relation - that do not reflect the lived experience of relationality online or the changing dynamics of family. Flickr has the opportunity to move beyond the existing model, **offering a solution that reflects the community-centred nature of its platform**, something our interviewees consistently identified as distinct from other social media.

At a minimum, designating just one legacy contact is a single point of failure. As Hans morbidly outlined: "If you nominate only one person, well, let's say me and my wife are together in a car — if we get in an accident, it would be better if a third person could also get into the account." Multiple contacts are a basic safeguard, but the opportunity extends further than pushing the "burden" onto the next in line.

Firstly, Flickr already has a privacy architecture that distinguishes between Friends, Family, Private, and Public content; removing the need for legal proof of relation. Legacy contacts could build on this, allowing account holders to **assign different photographs or albums to different inheritors based on these existing categories.** Private family photographs could be directed to a spouse; publicly shared work could go to a community member or an institution. This allows for the critical autonomy discussed throughout this report: the **original author knows best** where their photographs will be most valued and most appropriately received.

Secondly, rather than requiring inheritors to log in and navigate a possibly unfamiliar platform, **designated photographs could be packaged and sent out of Flickr** as a Data Lifeboat — a self-contained, archive-ready file with metadata intact. As Hans suggested: "Perhaps a Data Lifeboat after a period of inactivity that gets sent to one or two of the legacy contacts. That would be great." Flickr's existing account export, designed for GDPR compliance, exports the entire account — a comprehensive but often overwhelming package that includes all associated platform data. A Data Lifeboat sent to a legacy contact could instead deliver what is relevant to them, in a format that is immediately legible.

Finally, Kristy suggested that legacy contacts could receive **periodic prompts** asking whether they wish to keep the account online for another year. This option could be paired with an **extended subscription payment or a recognised grace period**. A version of this already exists in the form of inactivity notifications, but reframing it with legacy in mind changes the tone. Rather than a warning that an account is about to be suspended, it becomes an invitation to decide whether to maintain, download, or let go. It allows for a **gradual wind-down of access**, rather than the blunt distinction between paid and deleted.

3. Customisable In Memoriam

Several of our insights point toward the same conclusion: that the people best placed to shape how a collection is encountered after death are the people who built it. A customisable In Memoriam page would give Flickr members the opportunity to do this — to prepare a profile that speaks on their behalf when they no longer can.

This could take the form of a dedicated section within account settings, dormant during the account holder's lifetime and activated after a defined period of inactivity or confirmation by a legacy contact. Its contents would be **entirely at the discretion of the account holder**. Some may wish to include a written statement — a few lines about who they were, what they photographed, and why. Others might note the dates and places of their photographic practice, the groups they contributed to, the communities that shaped their work. Others still might choose to leave nothing at all.

Crafting an In Memoriam is not only valuable to the future deceased but also acts as a **critical moment to improve the archive of the future**, providing further detail and contextualisation. Sam spoke about this in terms of photographic intent: "When I look at other people's photos, the thing I want to know is — why did you take this photo? Why this one and not anything else?" He added: "In an ideal world, that means timeless description — I could write it ten years later and it'd still be the same caption." We often fail to get round to this timeless description — even on the photos that matter most to us — but an In Memoriam prompt may be precisely the nudge to address this.

We have explored a version of this 'critical opportunity for reflection' through the Data Lifeboat README — a series of prompts, **inspired by the archival cover sheet**, that invite creators to record the meaning behind a collection. Questions such as: *Tell us why you are making this collection*? *Who are the people in these images? Are there cultural sensitivities a future viewer*

should be aware of? What would you like someone to know before they explore this collection? These are not technical fields to be filled in, but **a space for qualitative reflection**, perhaps **even more so suited to legacy practices**. This can be rewarding too, as Corey put it: "It is fascinating when you sit there and you think about the sum of what you've done, or you've been, who your pets are, and, you know, what kind of hobbies did you have?"

4. Donations to Institutions

Throughout our interviews, we heard a recurring wish: that there should be a way to direct one's photographs, after death, toward an institution that would value and maintain them for the benefit of a wider public. This was **particularly pronounced among interviewees who did not have descendants** to take on their collections. They were eager for their years of photographic, curatorial and descriptive labour to have enduring meaning beyond their lifetime. As Robin articulated: "I'm not concerned about a legacy for myself, but the local library has expressed an interest in keeping some of my photos and I'd like those to reach the community." The necessity for preserving authorship, attribution or copyrights in these cases is less strong, when the photos can contribute to a collective cultural value in aggregate.

Neither Flickr nor any other social media site offers a **mechanism for expressing this transferral intention**. A user cannot indicate that they wish their collection, or a selection of it, to be offered to a named institution upon their death or after a period of inactivity. Nor, from the receiving end, can an institution request specific photographs from social media, through the lack of clear consent mechanisms. These agreements are therefore often informal and ad hoc, at **risk of never being formalised** once the photographer dies (which can be years or decades after the agreement).

There is also a receiving-end problem. Many collecting institutions maintain rigorous standards for acquisition that, though well-meaning, can be exclusionary in practice. As Michael R. noted: "Some organisations have a standard — it has to be a specific type of camera you use, or a specific quality photograph — which I think is limiting." These standards were designed for a world in which institutions selected from a finite number of professionally produced works. They are **poorly suited to the kind of born-digital, socially embedded, metadata-rich content** that Flickr holds. A photograph of a disappearing neighbourhood building taken on a phone camera may not meet a library's technical threshold, but its documentary value may be immense.

The Data Lifeboat attempts to address this from both sides: first by creating a technical packaging standard — with a clear consent mechanism — that **makes Flickr content ingestible for cultural heritage institutions**. This consent mechanism would need to be revisited in light of digital legacy, raising questions such as: What is the expiry period for given consent? What happens if an institution changes its collecting focus or ceases to exist? Would a legacy contact have the authority to revoke a donation? At the same time, significant work has been undertaken by the Foundation in advocating to cultural heritage institutions that the value of community-generated photography warrants updating their collecting frameworks. Scott was encouraging to see more of this work being done: "I would love to see Flickr actively get involved with the definition of a digital archival element. We have archival standards that are literally clobbering the opportunities for community collecting."

Part V: Unresolved Issues

Amidst these conversations and recommendations we encountered several unresolved issues that warrant further research. We wanted to name them here, even without clear solutions, because within their complexity they may harbour opportunities for future design and policy work.

1. The curation problem

The volume of photographs that people now produce and store is unprecedented. The ability to capture images at a moment's notice, combined with seemingly infinite (or infinitely payable) cloud storage, has created **collections of a scale that their owners struggle to manage** in life — let alone prepare for death. Many Flickr members have used the platform as backup storage, particularly through the Autoupload feature available to Pro subscribers, which automatically transfers every photograph from a device to Flickr.

> "I have an insane number of pictures on Flickr. I'm getting my money's worth out of my unlimited. I was concerned actually that the 1 million mark would be a cut off, but I exceeded it."
>
> *— Corey, librarian, Michigan*

This makes the idea of curation — of selecting what matters, organising it, describing it — extraordinarily difficult. It is **something most people never get around to,** and the longer it is deferred, the more daunting it becomes. Scott has borrowed a curatorial model from fine art practice. He described adopting the approach of Alfred Stieglitz, who distilled his life's work into a "**key set**" of roughly 1,600 images, now held by the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C: "It's the idea that these are the images I want to preserve, both for myself and for others." In the last three months before our interview, he had uploaded almost the entirety of his own key set to Flickr, precisely for this reason.

But archiving like this is labour, even on an individual level. It requires **resources of time, expertise, and sustained attentio**n. This shouldn't be overlooked, as Quinn argued: "It takes a project manager for every community… someone who champions it and puts in the work. That's the difference between things that get saved and things that don't." Every archive needs its champion.

2. The afterlife of copyright

Copyright is deeply entangled with legacy considerations; unlike most conditions, **it does not expire when its holder does**. Under most jurisdictions, it persists for decades after death — seventy years in the UK, EU, and US — passing to heirs as part of the estate. For Flickr members who have applied Creative Commons licences to their work, the terms of that licence also persist: a photograph released under a CC-BY licence remains freely usable regardless of

whether its creator is alive. But for collections where no explicit licence has been chosen, the Flickr default is All Rights Reserved, which **limits the longevity and reach** of the photo — perhaps where the creator would prefer reach.
Several participants raised the possibility of an **automatic license change after death** or a sustained period of inactivity — a switch that would move a collection into the public domain or under a Creative Commons licence, effectively donating it to the commons. This would dovetail with Flickr's existing commitment to maintain public, Creative Commons-licensed photographs in perpetuity. For some, this felt like a natural extension of their existing practice. Quinn, a self-described "copyright abolitionist" has used Creative Commons licences since their inception: "There's a tonne of my photos all over the internet for all kinds of things… It's not uncommon that I'll be watching a talk at a conference and see one of my photos with my attribution on their slides. I love seeing that. Sure sometimes, they show up in places I wouldn't have signed on for… but I understand that's the nature of the license, the cost of doing business."

But this general open sentiment felt increasingly compromised among interviewees in the age of AI training. Sam voiced his frustration: "AI is completely ignoring copyright. If these rules matter and they are significant, then they should be thought about and looked after." The capabilities and reach of AI are developing rapidly and may fork in directions we cannot anticipate — within our lifetimes and well beyond them. **Legislation is slow to catch up**, and the Creative Commons framework, designed for a world of human reuse, has not yet fully reckoned with what machine consumption means for the commons.

3. Privacy over time and in context

One of the tensions in Flickr's current legacy commitment is that it applies only to public photographs. Under the platform's 2019 policy, public Creative Commons-licensed images are promised indefinite preservation. **Private photographs are not**. As Corey observed: "In the case of digital legacy, often it's private photos that people want, and they're very hard to preserve under those rules."

Privacy (and its permissions) are not static. Several participants described their sense of what should be private as something that shifts over the course of a lifetime. In Sam's case: "As time goes on, I tend to make more of my material public. The further removed I am from it, the more likely I am to share it. A random photo from university taken 20 years ago? I wouldn't have made public at the time, but I'm comfortable sharing it now." What feels private at twenty may feel (hilariously) shareable at fifty and historically valuable at a hundred.

For others, privacy settings are not a matter of personal preference but of **active care and safeguarding.** Quinn uses Flickr's privacy levels to negotiate changing family dynamics, controlling which family members and friends have access to specific content. In Leo's case, he is vigilant about monitoring who favourites his high school sports photographs; blocking users with inappropriate content on their profiles, to protect the young athletes: "I spend a lot of time constantly checking the community that interacts with these photos". Leo crucially wants the

photos to remain accessible to the school communities they document, but he worries about what happens to this duty of care when he is no longer able to perform it.

These cases point to the need for what privacy scholar Helen Nissenbaum has termed **contextual integrity** in data management. Current data protection law is built around giving individuals control over their own information — the right to access it, correct it, or delete it (see Articles 12-22, GDPR). Nissenbaum argues this misses something fundamental:

> "What people care most about is not simply restricting the flow of information but ensuring that it flows appropriately."
> *– Helen Nissenbaum, Privacy in Context, 2009*

What is deemed as 'appropriate' **depends entirely on the context in which the data is produced and shared**. We are, as our interviews repeatedly demonstrated, many people on the internet — a mother, a sister, a best friend, an environmentalist, a public health worker, a Doctor Who enthusiast — and we may be all of these things within a single Flickr account. But we might not want an employer, an insurer, a data broker, or a legislator to encounter this full picture undifferentiated. The reasonable separation of these contexts is what contextual integrity seeks to preserve — and **we can already do this with Flickr permissions**. A photograph shared with family carries different expectations than one shared with a Flickr group, which carries different expectations again from one made fully public. A one-size-fits-all approach to posthumous privacy will inevitably violate these contextual norms that are so embedded to online existence. Designing for their preservation might be one of the most important and potentially impactful challenges in digital legacy.

Conclusion:

Before closing, we want to surface a few reflections that did not sit neatly within the sections above but which feel important enough not to leave unsaid. One of the assumptions we carried into this research was that conversations about death and digital succession would be difficult. We were wrong. Across twenty interviews and three group forums, people spoke about death, loss, and the afterlife of their photographs with **remarkable directness and candour**. Hans described the night after his mother's funeral, when he and his siblings gathered with drinks and six boxes of photographs to divide among themselves — "we were together, we were remembering, and that was really great," he said, with a genuine warmth. Everyone is touched by loss in some way, but the **cultural taboo to talk about it creates an oversight and elision of support** for when and where it is actually needed:

> "For the people who are forced to think about it, I really like it if somebody wants to talk to me about death, in a straightforward way. Or if a company says, we have thought about this, and here's a thoughtful thing that we have created for you.

I think that would be really refreshing."

– Kristy, archivist & librarian, Texas

We also assumed that the most engaged respondents would be the oldest. This too was wrong. Some of our most thoughtful contributions came from members in their forties and fifties — people who had recently lost the generation before them and remembered, vividly, the experience of sorting through what was left behind. **We were cautioned, rightly, on our age-blindness.** Death or incapacity can arrive at any stage of life, and the impulse to prepare for it is not confined to those who sense it approaching.

Aside from the optimistic visions of preservation, most of our participants were soberly realistic about how long they wanted their collections to last. For family photographs, the horizon was typically two or three generations — long enough for grandchildren to know something of the lives that preceded them – crucially **this demanded context attached**, to avoid the question: "Who's that with Grandma?". For subject-matter collections, the timescale stretched further, and participants understood that longevity might mean **ceding authorship and control**. They were, for the most part, at peace with this. What mattered most in both cases was that the work would outlive them and someone else might stumble upon this meaning.

"Somewhere along the line, someone may come along in the family, whether it's a grandchild or a great-grandchild, who may be interested in knowing a little bit more about what her relative did, and that's where the shoebox analogy comes in. So I guess I see **Flickr as that digital shoebox**."

– Bert, retired respiratory therapist, Ontario

This research has also revealed a gap in the legacy conversation itself. Much of the existing discourse focuses on two poles: the professional photographer whose work enters a formal archive, and the casual phone user whose snapshots live in iCloud or a device backup. **The person in between** — the dedicated hobbyist, the family archivist, the community documentarian — has been largely overlooked in research and design. This is Flickr's main demographic. And it is, arguably, the group with the most to contribute to a democratic, ground-up archive of everyday life.

"I see the professionals on Flickr and I'm nowhere near that calibre. But I like my photographs and think they have value."

– Lynne, retired archaeologist, Virginia

This report captures only a fragment of the stories on Flickr and we implore other platforms to undertake similar work. We have attempted to spell out clear recommendations, grounded in the words of the community, as well as grey areas that warrant further attention. What emerged from our participants were appeals to the past as much as the future — to continuing a chain of human documentation that stretches from handwriting on the back of a photograph to the 365

challenge. That chain is an **ancient human enterprise, one that the digital age has disrupted but also has the potential to refashion**: more ground-up, more interconnected, more widely held than any archive that has come before. We hope this is only the start; now imagine the stories buried in the social web's living archive that we haven't yet heard.