

PHOTOGRAPHS LEAVE HOME: A STUDY OF THE USES AND IMPACTS OF PERSONAL PHOTOGRAPHS ONLINE

ESRC Small Grants Proposal, Section 27

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INTRODUCTION

In the past three years, the number of web logs or “blogs” has grown from a handful to millions. A blog is a frequently updated personal web page which people use as a journal or diary, posting photos or written commentary chronologically and usually daily (Reed, 2003). In June 2003, Blogcount estimated that there were 2.4 – 2.9 million blogs (www.blogcount.com, 2003). And a recent report by Pew Internet and American Life states that 11 percent of internet users in the U.S. have visited blogs (Pew Internet, 2004). Blogs are a highly publicised contemporary internet phenomenon (Wolf, 2004; Dvorak, 2003; Guernsey, 2002; Nussbaum, 2004). As blogs have become more popular, and digital photography more ubiquitous and affordable, many blogs have started to incorporate personal photographic images.

Pew Internet and American Life Project estimates that 21% of Americans with internet access have posted photographs to the web (CNN website, 2004). In 2002, UK sales of digital cameras accounted for 41.4% of the camera market by value (Intel, 2002; Shove, et al, 2004).

Where blogs and photography meet there is an invaluable research opportunity, for these are sites where people appear to be actively working out new relationships to their technologies, their social networks, and to themselves. The proposed research will study the production and consumption of personal photography online by conducting interviews with people who use photographs in the construction of their blogs, and people who encounter personal photographs in their browsing of the “blogosphere” (Reed, 2003). The research will complement sociological literatures on photography and the internet by identifying conceptual fissures opened by new photographic practices. Additionally, the study will be conducted in collaboration with software developers, hardware manufacturers, and interaction designers conceiving the next generation of photographic products.

The key research question is this: how is the relatively new presence of millions of personal photographs on the world wide web and the extensive circulation of those images changing how people understand images and themselves through images?

People’s personal photographs are strange social objects: while they have tended to be intensely privatised, they are also clearly integral to social economies of the home, the commercial market, and the politics of everyday life (Slater, 1991). Photographs do not operate easily under reigning conceptualisations of public and private space. The explosion in the numbers of personal photographs online stands as evidence that

photographs have always confounded the categories of their use and reception, or, that something is changing in the social role of photography—or both.

There has never been such a public showing of personal photographs (Pew 2004). Why are people putting so many of their own photographs online, where before they might have been perpetually stored in photo albums and forgotten piles? Is the answer related to the increasing popularity and diversity of the internet, or is the internet no longer so easily separable from “real life”? And what impact is the increasing publicity of personal photographs having on the spaces in which they’re encountered: online, offline, and elsewhere? The proposed research seeks to address these questions.

BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH CONTEXT

Bourdieu’s work on “family photography” connected photography with the social systems of regulation described in *Distinction* (Bourdieu 1996; Bourdieu 1984). His study details how photography is a practice that operates under “the schemes of perception, thought and appreciation common to a whole group” (Bourdieu, 1996). Photography—its use and meaning—ends up as a marker and creator of class distinction. Even while the internet seems to reinforce certain class distinctions (cf. “the digital divide”), the circulation of photographs in the highly networked spaces of the internet significantly challenges this framework.

In the 70’s and 80’s, impelled largely by feminist critiques of visual culture, the analytic centre of work on (non-professional) photography shifted to issues of identity (Wells, 2003, p. 376). Writings on both race and gender highlighted the radical potential for photography to foster self-representations and self-determinations (Hall, 1997; Spence, 1992; Kelly, 1979; Slater, 1995).

More recently, furthering these trends but also usefully doubling back, the work of Don Slater re-positions photography as a domestic product, and as such, one that is involved in processes of production, consumption, privatisation, and commodification (Slater, 1995). Thus, Slater usefully suggests, personal photography gets more complicated as one’s capacity to represent the self is shown to be compromised by, or at least exist in dialectical relation with: marketing imperatives, conventions of visual culture, and political economies inside and outside the home.

Slater suggests that new research on digital photography look “at the circulation of images within a domestic life structured around these forces of commodification and privatisation” (Slater, 1995; 133). But what is the role of technology and the internet here? Hine (2002) suggests that certain sociological categories, e.g. production and consumption, can be so complicated by internet-based practices that they no longer function analytically. Might the blog, as a site for photography, potentially transform practices of the image in domestic life as well as radically decentre the meaning and place of domestic life itself? Photographs on blogs appear to question not only the relevance of privatisation to an analysis of photography, but its very definition.

This study seeks to extend the sociologies of photography and the internet along two specific lines of inquiry:

1. Domestic, Public, Private: The common terms “domestic”, “snapshot”, and “family” photography now seem to define the circulation of personal photographs too narrowly. If, as Slater suggests, changes to the meaning of photography are arising from new “practices of the image”, then certainly one needs to account for not just the domestic sphere, but something closer to the full social fluidity of the image (Slater, 1995; on fluidity, see Mol and Law, 1994). Studying photography in blogs offers a way to maintain the focus on non-professional photographs, and to understand them in their broader cultural currents: as they exist in peoples’ homes, and via the world wide web, in friends’ homes, in strangers’ homes, and in the unique places of the internet. By challenging the domestic sphere as the appropriate analytical realm for photographs, this research will therefore investigate the kinds of publics created by and for personal photographs (Warner, 2002), and new meanings of privacy that might be created as a result. The study will therefore engage directly with literature on the changing notions of privacy, new technology and domestic sphere (Alderman and Kennedy 1997; Smith 2000; Nippert-Eng 1995; Goffman 1959).

2. Commodity, Post-Commodity: A predictable effect of this emphasis on domesticity has been the introduction of commodification as an analytical trope for photography (Slater, 1999; 1995; 1992). While Slater’s sensitivity to commodification and consumption has usefully complicated the relationship between identity and the image, it also led him to claim (in 1995, when this might have been more apt) that using photos (as opposed to taking them) is a marginal social activity because there are relatively few commoditised modes of image use (Slater, 1995, p. 142). While a study of photographs in blogs might update this claim within a commodity framework (blogs themselves seem to be a use for photography; they also seem to engender a whole set of related uses), it should also be clear from the apparent paradoxes posed by blogs (they are both deeply personal and highly public; self-made and increasingly drawn into market phenomena) that people are using photographs in ways which challenge the commodity framework. The research will test this hypothesis and explore new frameworks for the sociology of photography.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Methodological Rationale

To understand the production and consumption of photographs online, the research will consider bloggers who post their photographs and the people who encounter those photographs. This binocular perspective—working with both creators and audiences—is rarely employed in sociological analyses of photography, which have tended, instead, to privilege either sites of production or sites of consumption (Stacey, 1994). This perspective is essential to apprehending the meanings and uses of photographs as they move outside the home (e.g. out of the privacy of photo albums) and into the multi-vocal spaces of the internet.

To account for the mediated ways in which people experience content on the internet, half of the research encounters are face-to-face and half are conducted through the internet as intermediary (Hine, 2000; Sundén, 2003). In this way, the researcher enters into a “dialogue” with participants (Burawoy, 1991), while retaining, in the structure of the research itself, a perspective which experiences photographs, blogs and bloggers as mediated through the internet—as internet users themselves often experience them. Thus, the research mirrors, self-reflexively, the forms of knowing that are accessible to participants.

Interviewees will be drawn from the UK, with a focus on London. This is for reasons of cost, but also so that the work, in retaining a national specificity, may be expanded in the future by collaborating with non-UK studies or by conducting a follow-up larger-scale study. Participants will be found by emailing UK bloggers who post photographs on their websites, but also by asking the people interviewed to suggest blogs which are interesting to them, whose creators might then become participants. In this way, the research sample works within networks of interest which are operative for participants. This strategy also creates the opportunity to make explicit connections between production and consumption of online photographs (some interviewees will be audiences for other interviewees). The research sample will be strategically developed to stress the heterogeneity of internet practices and subject positions. But the research will also be responsive to social categories which emerge as relevant to the research data.

The researcher will maintain a project blog, in order to self-reflexively experience blogging and online photography. This also creates additional avenues of dialogue with participants and expands the potential range of participants.

Because the kinds of questions asked in the research require an understanding of the stories people tell about photographs, and because this is a small-scale project, qualitative research methods are best suited to the project’s aims.

Methods

On these methodological foundations, the research will employ four primary methods:

1. Interviews with Bloggers

- Interview 25 bloggers about their photographs
- 13 of these face-to-face; 12 via the internet (chat, email, or other)

2. Interviews with Audiences

- Interview 25 people about the experience of seeing other people’s photographs
- 13 of these face-to-face; 12 via the internet (chat, email, or other)
- This is a separate interview schedule from the interviews with bloggers, above. In almost all cases, bloggers are also an audience for other blogs. In this second set of interviews, with 25 different people, the research will address issues specific to viewing other peoples’ photographs, while being alert to places where production and consumption overlap.

3. “Google-Sampling”

- “Google-sampling” is an experimental online method which is sensitive to internet-specific practices, flows, and ways of knowing.
- Sample online social indices (e.g. www.google.com, www.blogdex.net, www.technorati.com)
- These sites track popular and recurrent themes of conversation on the internet, ranking themes by how often they are referenced (linked to). The latter two sites track blogs specifically, while Google is a far broader social index. These sites are not unlike ethnographers: they sample behaviour (topics of conversation, interests, conflicts, passions) and note patterns.
- Track these sites daily for the duration of the project, noting thematic ebb and flow, thematic overlap with interviews, and the ways in which blogs and photographs sit within larger networks of associations.
- Goal: to see how themes explored with participants gain and lose presence in wider online social networks; also, to broaden the relevance of a small study.

4. Project Blog

- Reflexively practice proposed topic of study
- Pose questions to, provoke discussion with the project blog’s audience
- Participant involvement: test hypotheses of the research and findings
- Enter into long-term dialogues with bloggers with wider social networks of the internet
- This is a new research method piloted in previous studies in which the P.I. has been involved (www.73urbanjourneys.com)

Data Collection and Analysis

The Incubator for Critical Inquiry into Technology and Ethnography (INCITE, www.soc.surrey.ac.uk/incite)—where the proposed research will be housed and where the P.I. is currently a research fellow—is a research group specialising in the sociology of technology and design. As part of two projects at INCITE (INCITE website, 2004a, b), we have recently conducted research with UK-based bloggers. In both projects, we were able to recruit bloggers quickly and easily. Blogs are public facing and so bloggers are easy to find. Bloggers also tend to invite contact from strangers, and we found that bloggers were enthusiastic about working with us. Moreover, the public nature of blogs makes it possible to collect data on peoples’ practices of photography before and after the research encounter, ensuring a rich, diachronic data set.

Analysis of the data will combine close visual analysis, drawing selectively on semiotics, with ethnographic methods (Manning 1987; Law 2002; Stacey, 1994; Barthes 1977a, b). It is critically important that the research account for the visual language of photographs and blogs, as practices of looking/reading are likely to be important to research participants in their own navigation of the web, photographs, and blogs. While semiotics has been criticised for its inability to account for human behaviour in relation to texts, it is not incompatible with forms of analysis which better apprehend reader reactions (Manning, 1987). In general, the study will employ semiotics to deal with data which comes from visual analyses of photographs and blogs; and ethnographic analysis for

interview data (Burawoy, 1991). But the success of the project will ultimately rest on being able to synthesise these two forms of analysis—as participants do (Stacey, 1994). The research will also draw on Hurworth (2003), who provides methods of visual analysis specifically tailored to the use of photographs. Through this combined method, what is knowable from seeing/navigating a website is synthesised with what is knowable from face-to-face and mediated personal interactions. Indeed, this is a form of analysis that the internet and blogs, in their own syntheses of textually-mediated interaction with more direct interaction, seem to demand (Hine, 2000).

Ethical Considerations

In all of internet-based research, the researcher will work under conditions of consent and disclosure. Mindful of the complicated ethics of publicity and privacy on the internet, and especially of photographs, he will quote from websites or use images only with consent (Hine, 2000, p. 24). Moreover, issues of ethics, publicity and privacy will fall within the analytical scope of the project. Internet research will be guided by The Association of Internet Researchers guidelines (www.aoir.org). In situations not covered by published guidelines, ethical positions will be worked out in collaboration with participants.

The research will otherwise be conducted according to the principles of the British Sociological Association (BSA). Therefore, a number of standard principles will guide the research, including participants' right to confidentiality, their right of access to the results of the research, and their right to withdraw from participation at any time.

RELEVANCE AND CONTRIBUTION

Sociological Literature of Photography, Technology and the Internet

Section 2 describes in detail how the proposed research will extend the sociologies of photography, technology, and the internet. Three articles are planned, one in the area of technology and the internet, one addressing issues of identity, publicity and privacy, and one in an online format, in order to reach research participants and internet cultures. Each will target a prominent, sociological, peer-refereed journal.

Past ESRC Studies

The research will build explicitly on two key ESRC programmes (Woolgar 2002; Dutton 1999, 1996), through engagement with their research outputs and direct interaction with Professors Woolgar and Dutton and their research teams.

Research Community

The project will be conducted within the INCITE research group. For the last three years, INCITE has been a vital hub of an international academic community doing research on new media and technology, and also a conduit for exchanges between academics and industry. We run an invited speaker series every week, have hosted several conferences and workshops in the last year, maintain a project blog (www.weeklyincite.blogspot.com), and collectively have presented at conferences all over the world. Recent INCITE projects have included work on blogging, ubiquitous computing, digital photography and brand, digital music in the home, mobility, online

education, internet cafes, and visual methodologies—all projects are cross-cut with serious interests in gender, sexuality, design, and new research methodologies. Situated in this community, the research will benefit from a diverse group of collaborators and make itself available to a wide set of audiences, from designers to researchers to artists. Dr. Nina Wakeford is the director and founder of INCITE; Kris Cohen has been a core research fellow there for the past two years.

Research and Design of New Technologies

It is one of the core objectives of the INCITE research group to work with people involved in the design of new technologies (Wakeford 2004, 2003; Cohen 2000). Our perspective is that they, like social scientists, are in the business of studying social patterns (which they tend to embody in designed objects and social scientists tend to embody in text). From this perspective, we believe that social scientists have as much to gain in working collaboratively with software developers, hardware manufacturers, and interaction designers as is the case conversely.

In this project, as with others, we intend to work closely with software developers, hardware manufacturers, and interaction designers, both in the course of the research, and in the analysis of data, in order to create project outcomes which are actionable and relevant outside of an academic context. For instance, detailed empirical evidence for how people are using photographs on blogs might lead directly to ideas for the next generation of cameras and photographic software. We will use existing relationships with Intel, Orange, Sapient, Skybluepink Interaction Design, and the Design Council to reach a broad community of users in the UK. There will be two primary collaborative settings: 1. workshops and presentations where we present findings, and 2. “design sessions”, where research findings are used to brainstorm new products and services (see Section 22 for more detail).

ESRC Mission

In addition to being a high quality strategic research project, the proposed project will support two aspects of the ESRC’s mission:

- It contributes to the economic competitiveness of the United Kingdom by applying the research findings, in collaboration with British industry, directly to the development of new products and services and contributing to the design sector’s research methodologies, including the modelling of methods of collaboration with academic social science institutions.
- It provides advice on, disseminates knowledge and promotes understanding of the social sciences by putting social science research and methods to work in software development, hardware manufacture, and interaction design settings.

ESRC Thematic Priorities

In its focus on new technologies and the social changes that involve them, the project directly addresses the ESRC’s commitment to “knowledge transfer between social scientists and users of research”. In our project’s thematic scope, and in our collaborations with product designers, “users” is a diverse category including social

scientists and product designers working in universities and industry, and who are interested in the internet, new technologies, identity formations, tactics of representation, and photographic technologies.

Additionally, the proposed research will make substantive contributions to the following ESRC Thematic Priority: “Knowledge, Communication and Learning”. By studying the new uses of photography on blogs, the research proposes to study a crucial period of techno-cultural transition. This issue has been recently referenced in social science research on technology and is suggested in the ESRC’s question “How are new media technologies changing the nature of communication and what is the impact on social and personal skills.” (Marvin, 1988; Cooper, 2001; ESRC 2000, p. 11).

More than simply a product of technology, photographs are also a form of knowledge and knowledge production. They appear, however, to be poorly understood as such. This project proposes to study how individual forms of knowing connect (or fail to connect) with collective forms of knowing, how new communications technologies are transforming ways of knowing ourselves, our spaces, and other people. The research addresses the theme of “Knowledge, Communication and Learning”, and most especially, the questions in the sub-theme “Communication, Information and Media Technologies”.

CONCLUSION

“Photographs Leave Home: A Study of The Uses And Impacts of Personal Photographs Online” responds to a period of critical social-technological change. When thousands of people are now putting their personal photographs on the world wide web, the research investigates what these changes mean for peoples’ representations of themselves and their worlds, and for the public spaces in which personal photographs are now so prominent. The proposed small research grant would make a significant and timely contribution to the sociological literature on photography and the internet, as well as to sociology’s capacity to work outside of its academic boundaries.

[word count: 3459/3500]

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ANNEX 2: SUMMARY ETHICAL GUIDELINES

1. British Sociological Association (BSA):

Website: http://www.britisoc.co.uk/index.php?link_id=14&area=item1

Document: "Statement Of Ethical Practice For The British Sociological Association March 2002"

Key Sections: "Relationships with research participants" (p. 2-4); "Anonymity, privacy and confidentiality" (p. 5-6).

2. Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR):

Website: <http://aoir.org/ethics.html>

Document: "Ethical Decision-making and Internet Research: Recommendations from the aoir ethics working committee"

Key Sections: "Informed Consent: specific considerations?" (p. 6); "What are the initial ethical expectations/assumptions of the authors/subjects being studied?" (p. 7); "How far do extant legal requirements and ethical guidelines in your discipline 'cover' the research?" (p. 6).

[Annexes total word count: 1193/3500]