

CHAPTER TWO

Personal, Public, Individual, and Collective

Shifting Boundaries of Personal Photography in Online Public Spaces

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In recent years there has been much discussion about the value and effect of amateur and individual media contribution online. But as Cheryl A. Casey describes, in her review (2007) of Andrew Keen's polemic *The Cult of the Amateur* (2007), this discussion is a case of "infinite monkeys versus the long tail, the professional versus the noble amateur." Popular books like Dan Tapscott's *Wikinomics* (2006) and Clay Shirky's *Here Comes Everybody* (2008) herald this wave as a normative good, one which is expanding civic participation, challenging the power of institutions, and changing accepted ways of working. Others, like Keen, argue that amateur content is a destructive cultural force. Using T.H. Huxley's evolutionary theorem to illustrate (where masterpieces are the result of infinite monkeys with infinite typewriters) he argues that "instead of creating masterpieces, these millions and millions of exuberant monkeys [networked individuals]—many with no more talent than our primate cousins—are creating an endless digital forest of mediocrity" (pp. 2–3). Keen's book is a response to Tapscott and Shirky's proposition that amateur content production will change the way we live. But all these propositions are trapped within the same paradigm: they judge amateur contributions against professional ones, rather than trying to understand these social activities on their own terms.

In this chapter, we consider everyday and personal media production, particularly those activities that centre on photography and photosharing. As cameras are integrated into digital devices, our rates of consumption and production of images



is ever increasing, and photography is arguably becoming a ubiquitous practice of modern everyday life. More broadly, however, we are arguing against the simple dichotomous framing of such activities as amateur or professional, private or public, individual or collective. In view of this we adopt the term “personal photography” as used by media scholar Jose van Dijck (2008) to avoid the connotations usually associated with words like amateur, family, or tourist photography. New tools inevitably engender changes in the ways we interact, communicate, and record our everyday lives, and research is often quick to privilege the way technology *transforms* existing cultural practices. We take the position that often underlying and entwined with these new ways of doing things, are persistent conventions and habits supporting our ongoing social needs, *continuities* that reveal the complexities of social and visual interactions. In this chapter we address both narratives by examining how the practices of personal photography are maintained and transformed by the advent of websites like the online photo hosting sites Flickr and Picasa. In particular we understand that a photograph presents a different set of interpretive and evidentiary possibilities and characteristics than text. Photos are curiously polysemic: their meaning is ambiguous and specific at the same time (Mitchell, 2005; Chaplin, 2006), they are a medium of communication, objects of affect as well as locations, which support social interactions and moments of personal reflection. These uses of photography are not new, but their presence in the online domain is. Modern information and communication technologies (ICT) and increased access to digital media production tools have the effect of increasing the flexibility of these practices and extending these into new territories.

After locating our discussion within the broader literature on photography, we discuss the *use* and *extension* of two analytical perspectives used in the authors’ own research: that of Chalfen’s concept of the “home mode” of pictorial communication, and van Dijck’s theory of “mediated memory.” For each one, we *summarize* the core points of the authors’ original argument and *illustrate* their application through examples drawn from our prior research. Each example considers personal photographs that are often described as mundane; a snapshot of a new home office, photos of food, a collection of almost identical views of a tourist landmark. We ask what compels individuals to take these photographs, how they are used, and what they might mean. We find that such photos, when viewed within their creator’s social networks, have finely nuanced meanings contextualized by the relationship between the photographer and the viewer; posting an image of the home office can be a message to one’s spouse that work is indeed being accomplished, whilst to a colleague an affirmation that the consulting venture is making progress. Similarly the photo of a landmark is a process of personal memory making as well as an artifact of social currency evidencing participation in larger social customs like tourism.

Through these examples, we highlight the strengths and weaknesses of each



analytical perspective, demonstrate their applicability, and discuss how they supplement each other. Despite their differences, both perspectives support a key aspect of our argument that personal and everyday media must be analyzed in reference to their participants' goals, contexts, and behaviors, rather than treating the everyday media domain as subsidiary to dominant or professional cultural narratives. We suggest this not simply to replace over-privileging professional production with over-privileging amateur production. Instead, we seek to challenge researchers of technology to question their assumptions about the multiple functions of user-generated media—not to assume by default that all media production online inevitably targets markets (whether financial or reputational), and not to assume that individual contributions can be neatly assigned into boxes of meaning, interpretation, and valuation.

PERSONAL PHOTOGRAPHY

Mobile phones, digital cameras, web cams; photography and the means for generating photographic images have proliferated in the last decade. Most people are now likely to own several image-making devices, such as a mobile phone with a camera, an integrated web camera on their computer, as well as a variety of digital cameras ranging from small compacts to semiprofessional models. But personal photography is not new. By the mid 1980s, 93% of US households owned a camera; each household produced an average of 126 photos each year (Chalfen, 1987, pp. 13–14.). The recent advent of more economical and available means of producing photographs has increased the pervasiveness and frequency of images as a mode of communication and a site of social interaction (Chalfen, 2006). This “pictorial turn” (Mitchell, 2005) has spurred academic interest in understanding how images communicate—within their own right—rather than with reference to text. Images, pictures, and photographs have specific qualities; they are affective objects, they require interpretation, and yet, they provide a sense of specificity.

For many years, much of the academic literature treated the photograph as either a fine art object (art history and criticism) or as a document in service of an event (photojournalism). Social scientists are also party to this limitation, focusing primarily on the object itself, rather than the actions and social interactions related to photography—producing them, displaying them, using them. Key exceptions to this generalization include Bourdieu's (1965/1990), Barthes' (1981), and Sontag's (1977) books on photography. Their canonical works provide important insights into some of the deeper implications of photography both as an activity and a medium. Scholars who have examined nonprofessional photography outside of online settings, such as cultural geographer John Urry and cultural studies academic Stuart Hall, evidence this approach.





Chalfen and the “Home Mode”

For our purposes we focus first on the work of anthropologist Richard Chalfen (1987). In the 1980s, Chalfen investigated the way home photography entailed more than the automated making of images, describing instead how these personal photographs serve to reinforce social relations. He termed this as the “home mode,” a form of pictorial communication that supports “a pattern of interpersonal and small group communication centered around the home [...]. This concept of mode allows us to place pictures, as symbolic forms, into a process of social communication” (p. 8). Chalfen’s goal was “to learn how people have organized themselves socially to produce personalized versions of their own life experiences [...] examining how a ‘real world’ gets transformed into a symbolic world” (p. 10). For Chalfen, “home” was intended to describe a social context, not just a geographical one. Home denotes the symbolic audiences of intimates, specifically addressing familial functions, in its production, usage, content, form, and functionality. Although there are many continuities in the way individuals use photographs in the “home mode,” the advent of ICTs has greatly extended and developed their use; hence, we suggest that Chalfen’s concept of photographic communication can be extended into the “virtual home mode,” a concept we explore further in the section “Applying and Extending Chalfen”

Several findings of Chalfen’s concept of the “home mode” are developed in our discussion. Chalfen found that these snapshots did not serve as stand-alone information objects; that is, as carriers of content or communication messages. The photos themselves are not creative visual stories or visual narratives. Rather, Chalfen showed that participants reconstructed narratives and interpretations, drawing on evidence and triggers found in the images. The photos serve as a *location* (literally and symbolically) for storytelling and memory construction. Seabrook (1991) reinforced this point in his examination of photo albums of working class UK families. As he notes, these albums do not tell a story directly, but rather they “illustrate a story” or “amplify biographies” (p. 172).

Next, Chalfen asserted that home mode media serves four “functional categories” in peoples’ lives: documentary/evidentiary, preservation, memory, and cultural membership.

Home mode media provides data and *evidence* to construct and support familial stories. But this occurs selectively, via regularized patterns of inclusion and exclusion. Essentially, we document and create photographic evidence for the memories that serve and facilitate the retelling of those stories which serve our senses of self and of family; we tend to exclude representations that are locally irrelevant, unpleasant, or socially inappropriate. *Preservation* functions include the “capturing” and “encapsulation” of events and individuals, similar to Barthes’ assertion (1981)



that photography is a form of symbolic acquisition. *Memory functions* emphasize the photo as a location and locus for the “telling” and enactment of memories, rather than as a “container” for memories. *Cultural membership* functions operate at multiple levels of culture, from the very large to the local culture of the family and/or peer group. We both signify our cultural membership via our photographic practices and social uses, as well as have those practices and uses shaped in turn by our cultural membership, in what Chalfen labelled at the time as “Kodak Culture.” These functional categories are not mutually exclusive—photos are polysemic both in their message and in their use.

Finally, Chalfen’s work demonstrated how the home mode of symbolic production is distinct from commercial and fine art modes of photography. This difference is not just a question of skill or content, but types of audiences and social actions that are being addressed as well. To say that home mode producers are “doing it wrong” is a conceptual error on the part of the observer—it mistakes professional aesthetic standards as being the appropriate yardstick with the actual localized goals, meanings, and relevance of home mode activities.

van Dijck and “mediated memories”

Secondly, we ground our discussion through the more recent work of Jose van Dijck (2005; 2007; 2008). In her recent book *Mediated Memories* (2007) van Dijck turns her attention to understanding the continuities and transformations that ICTs afford to the practice of personal photography. She concurs with aspects of Chalfen’s original theory of “amateur” or “personal” photography as a mode of interpersonal interaction. Her argument is that this is not new—photography has always “served as an instrument of communication and as a means of sharing experience” (2008, p. 59). But she further expands the boundaries of these interactions and asks; “what is *personal* cultural memory and how does it relate to collective identity and memory?” (2007, p. 1, italics in the text). Whilst Chalfen’s theory is bounded by the intimate and familial, van Dijck moves beyond this to consider the broader implications and relationships of these cultural practices both on an individual and collective level, and from a technological and cultural perspective. Thus, she proposes the concept of “mediated memories” as a way of accounting for the interdependent connection between “personal collections and collectivity but also to help theorize the *mutual shaping* of memory and media” (2007, p. 2, italics in text). The concept of mediated memories provides a way to understand the practices outlined by Chalfen in a wider social context—one that is less constrained by disciplinary boundaries. Chalfen’s theory helps us to understand the localized implications of technology to personal photography, whilst van Dijck provides a framework within which to analyze the way the personal and the collective are co-constituted.



Van Dijck begins by exploring *personal cultural memory* and the way it has been the domain of specific disciplines; namely psychology and neuroscience. She asserts that autobiographical memory is crucial to an individual's sense of self. Without memories we would have no sense of the past or the future—no sense of continuity. But she emphasizes the way certain rituals—like taking a photo of a landmark or making a record of a holiday meal—are the result of 'culturally agreed' ways of constructing memory, and acknowledges the immense pleasure many derive from creating these personal histories.

She then addresses the dominance of sociologists, historians, and cultural theorists in discussing *collective cultural memory*. Her critique of these disciplines' existing conceptions is that they do not sufficiently acknowledge the way collective notions are structured by individual experiences. Further, they also dismiss the way technologies are an integral part of the "making" of memory. Diaries, photos, videos—all enable memories to be created in specific ways. But we also imagine our lives through these technologies; we describe it as like being in a film, or a "hallmark" moment. But these artifacts are often conflated with the experiences they seek to preserve. Photos and similar memory media are seen as "containers," yet they simultaneously threaten the purity of remembrance. To illustrate, consider the disdain held for tourists who spend their holidays, camera pressed to the eye, versus the "nobler" traveler who consciously experiences without a camera "to remember." For van Dijck "memory is as much about the privacy to inscribe memories for oneself and the desire to share them only with designated recipients as it is about publicness, or the inclination to share experiences with a number of unknown viewers or readers." Van Dijck's perspective on these socio-cultural processes opens up discussion that bridges these realms.

In the two sections that follow, we make use of Chalfen's and van Dijck's analytic perspectives to shed light on online photosharing practices. What happens when photography enters the online realm? ICTs and digitization enhance some factors of a photograph: the opportunities for editing and distributing. "Digitization is often considered the culprit of photography's growing unreliability as a tool for remembrance; but in fact, history shows the camera has never been a dependable aid for storing memories" (van Dijck, 2007, p. 99). Photographs have always been subject to visual retouching and having the memories and experiences they communicate edited in recollection. This supports the need to consider personal photography, not simply as a concrete object, but rather as a practice or activity, where the artifact is understood in relation to its production and consumption.

On sites like Flickr and Picasa the personal and the collective meet: members have control over their images and how they are displayed to their familial networks, but at the same time they can make their images publicly accessible, or on Flickr, add them to collectives called "groups." In the section "Applying and Extending van



Dijk: Interpreting Collective Memory Through Flickr Groups,” Garduño Freeman observes the online activities of one such group, formed to collect photographs of the Sydney Opera House, a well-known tourist landmark. The photographs and the online activities that surround them are opportunities to derive important cultural knowledge and to begin to understand how the personal and the collective are mutually shaping each other. In contrast, Cook (in the section “Applying and Extending Chalfen”) explores through interviews the nuanced personal meanings and communications that photographs through online systems can provide. The study extends Chalfen’s “home mode” and investigates the way these media technologies are shaping our intimate social interactions.

APPLYING AND EXTENDING CHALFEN

The concept of the home mode has been criticized as “ahistorical” by those who favor more ideologically deterministic explanations of personal media (Zimmerman, 1995). However, a closer reading underscores the usefulness of the home mode concept, which can be shown to be flexible enough to accommodate changes in production and distribution technologies, as well as in family structure and ideologies (Moran, 2002). In the overlapping fields of Human-Computer Interaction, Computer-Supported Cooperative Work, Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), and Social Computing, Chalfen’s work has gained renewed attention amongst researchers interested in photographic practice and sociality mediated via photography, having been cited in studies such as Miller and Edwards (2007), Frohlich, Kuchinsky, Pering, Don, and Ariss (2002), Van House et al. (2004, 2005), and Van House (2007). Other related work does not directly reference the home mode, but clearly addresses a similar set of activities, participants and functions, such as research on the camera phone by Kindberg, Spasojevic, Fleck, and Sellen (2005), Ling (2008), Ito (2005), and Okabe and Ito (2006). This literature argues for the ongoing analytic value of the home mode concept, as well as underscoring the need to continue updating and revising it. We must consider the ways that modern ICT and CMC may be supporting and changing the home mode, as it moves increasingly from the living room to networked communications; we must develop a model of the *virtual home mode* (VHM).

Personal Photography Practices and the Virtual Home Mode

In 2008 and 2009, Cook examined the relationships between everyday digital photography practices and personal well-being. As part of this study, he interviewed 24 individuals in their homes or workplaces. The participants included 10 men and 14



women, recruited across five distinct life stages: single young adults, married without children, married with children, “empty nest” adults, and elders. Participants were selected via purposeful sampling, recruiting individuals who had engaged in virtual home mode activities (sharing photos online with family and/or friends) regularly for at least a year. This sampling approach was activity-focused, rather than system-specific. As a result, the participants reported using a wide variety of tools, services, and approaches for sharing their photos. These included, but were not limited to: Snapfish, Shutterfly, Blogger, Facebook, personal websites, Kodak gallery, Livejournal, Photo.net, Picasa, Apple MobileMe, Flickr, Yahoo groups, private email lists and, in two cases, self-coded photo management systems written in PHP, HTML, and Perl. The participants often reported the use of multiple systems, contingent on their target audience and the intended function of their VHM activities.

The primary data for this study consisted of semi-structured interviews and observation sessions. Conducting the sessions face-to-face in their home or work spaces allowed the interviews to be structured primarily through a series of photo-elicitation tasks, using the participant’s own photographs to contextualize and focus their responses. In addition to revealing general photography practices, this photo-elicitation protocol highlighted decisions related to media production and sharing, as well as prompting reflection on recent life events, and the photographic representations of those life events. Centering the research in the home revealed local context and personal meanings that would not have been otherwise visible to a researcher. Similarly, this approach also provided access into the patterns of exclusion, revealing not only what images had been posted publicly, but also those that were private or never shared at all.

This study used key concepts from Chalfen’s home mode model to direct both the semi-structured interview protocol and the iterative qualitative coding of transcripts. The application of the home mode lens proved invaluable in understanding individual photographer’s accounts and actions, as well as emphasizing the need to extend it for current socio-technical settings and to develop the concept of the virtual home mode. The following examples illustrate two key points: the necessity of the photographer’s local context for full interpretation and the way ICTs allow new audiences to connect with traditional home mode representation.

“The traditional foods”

One of the more commonly used examples of the banality of online amateur photography is the food photograph. “Who cares what you had for breakfast?” is the standard refrain. Yet viewed through the lens of the virtual home mode, a seemingly banal food photo can reveal itself to be detailed and nuanced.





Figure 1. Hanukkah table setting. *Image reproduced with permission from study participant.*

An example of this presented itself during a June 2009 interview with “Jody,” a professional woman in her late twenties whose family lived several states away from her. During the course of the interview, Jody presented many photos of food, discussing their use in her related hobbies of cooking and baking. Particularly salient was a photo of a holiday dinner setting that she had posted via Picasa. Jody explained the story behind this image, stating “so I celebrate Hanukkah and I had a little party here and so I posted for my dad because he was sad that I wasn’t home to celebrate with the family. [The picture of the food at dinner] said don’t worry, I’m still celebrating. [...] I’m still making the traditional foods over here, don’t worry.”

A simple documentary photo of a holiday dinner takes on new significance when the context of the VHM participants is considered. In this quote, we see representational family communication combined with the personal symbolism that exists both in personal photos and home-cooked food. Maintenance of distant family ties are wrapped together with adherence to cultural and religious traditions, and these myriad activities are managed in a single photo posted online. This example also underscores the challenge of reading and interpreting the meaning and value of a VHM photo by an uninvolved outsider. Jody’s food image is not a self-contained message, but in a fashion similar to Brown and Duguid’s analysis (1996) of the “social life of documents,” instead supports creating common ground and shared awareness of activity. In so doing, the photo may “underwrite social interactions; not simply to communicate, but also to coordinate social practice” (ibid., p. 3).

“The home office”

Participants in the home mode share a history, imbuing images with additional con-



text and meaning beyond what is immediately visible. One new but key aspect of the VHM is that multiple audiences can be granted access to the same photo. In multiple interviews during this study, Cook saw examples of photographers intentionally addressing multiple audiences concurrently, through the careful awareness of the particular frames of interpretation that will be brought to bear on a given image by different viewers.

Consider the example of study participant “Bob,” a 36-year-old man who posted a picture of his new home office on his Flickr account. This participant had recently lost his job, and had begun to do freelance consulting. In Bob’s words, the office image was “doing multiple things at once. . . like a good book.” The messages that he intended to convey depended on the audience viewing the image. For geographically distant family members, the image was a message that he was coping emotionally with the loss of his job, and moving forward. For local professional and casual friend contacts, the home office image was to be interpreted in conjunction with other images Bob posted around the same time, showing activities such as trade luncheons and industry workshops that he would not previously have had time to attend. In Bob’s account, these images were public signals that he was available but also still professionally active, without having to explicitly state that he was unemployed.

Bob labeled this as “sideways” maintenance; he was able to send distinct but related signals to both of these audiences at the same time, but without the social embarrassment of having to address the topic head-on. He engaged in home mode style photo production, producing a seemingly mundane/photo with no intent of being professional and aesthetically “good,” which served communicative purposes and leveraged previous shared histories between producer and audience for interpretation. Yet simultaneously, his photo was serving professional and communicative functions for non-home mode audiences. Bob’s office photo was an intentionally constructed boundary object (Bowker and Star, 1999), crossing between multiple social spheres and coordinating with each in a meaningfully distinct fashion. As we will see in the following section, the boundary object aspect of personal photography takes on an additional perspective via van Dijck’s work.

APPLYING AND EXTENDING VAN DIJCK: INTERPRETING COLLECTIVE MEMORY THROUGH FLICKR GROUPS

Flickr is often cited as an example of the Web 2.0 participatory turn, and has already generated a substantial body of research. Most of these studies are empirical and take advantage of Flickr’s open source platform and metadata to analyze the site’s social networks (Lerman & Jones, 2007; Lerman, 2007; van Zwol, 2007;

Sigurbjörnsson & van Zwol, 2008), classification systems—folksonomies (Kennedy et al., 2007; Davies, 2006; Rafferty & Hilderley, 2007; Yakel, 2006; Lerman et al., 2007), socio-locative practices (Ames & Naaman, 2007; Erickson, 2007), groups (Negoescu & Gatica-Perez, 2008; Pissard & Prieur, 2007) and as an archive of digital photographs (Van House, 2006; 2007; Van House & Ames, 2007; Van House & Churchill, 2008). Although these empirical studies provide information about usage patterns like the number of images contributed and social networks between members or participation in groups, they do not analyze the photographs themselves and the way group members negotiate their collective identities through visual and cultural means. Two exceptions are Jean Burgess' (2007) thesis, which explores how Flickr is a civic space for enactments of vernacular creativity and cultural citizenship, and Janice Affleck's (2007) investigation of the opportunities that spaces like Flickr provide for the discursive interpretation of heritage by communities. The example described here proposes that Flickr is a space where personal photographs are a medium through which public memory about iconic architecture is constructed. Arguably, this is a key transformation afforded by ICTs: not that these activities themselves are new, but that these discussions take place in public, that individuals negotiate via visual representations and that these collections of photographs give rise to new public formations.

Flickr Group: "Sydney Opera House"

During 2008 and 2009 Garduño Freeman observed the social interactions of one specific Flickr group called "Sydney Opera House." The group's focus is gathering photographs of Sydney's famed landmark, ones that position the building as the main subject and prominently within the frame. Using the Sydney Opera House group as the filter for the images reveals the way collective identity is negotiated through personal photography and photosharing on Flickr. These exchanges are "visual conversations" where members negotiate their personal identity; at the same time these technologies and their respective cultural practices simultaneously shape these conversations. Garduño Freeman's observations reveal the way the representation and our *collective cultural memory* of this building are intricately connected. Ultimately the study seeks to understand the role of the Sydney Opera House, as a World Heritage site, in the everyday life of its communities. The visual and textual discussions contributed by members of this group demonstrate the complex and layered sentiment held for this place.

The Sydney Opera House is widely accepted as a masterpiece of expressive modern architecture of the twentieth century. It is acclaimed for its form and structural innovation. In June 2007, the Sydney Opera House was finally inscribed onto the UNESCO World Heritage list, described as "a great urban sculpture set in a

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remarkable waterscape.” The listing recognizes “the building has had an enduring influence on architecture.” (UNESCO, 2007). Yet this building, less than half a century old, has been surrounded by controversy for much of its life. The design is the winning entry of an international competition held in 1957, by Danish architect Jørn Utzon. Utzon’s nontraditional working methods and an unrealistic construction schedule coupled with Australian politics during that time led to an unworkable relationship (Murray, 2004; Drew, 2001). After Utzon’s resignation in 1966, the building was completed by local architects Peter Hall, Lionel Todd, and David Littlemore, a turn of events that has divided the local Sydney community and architects abroad. The recent inscription as a World Heritage site, along with the award of the Pritzker Prize for Architecture in 2003 has been seen as the reconciliation of Australia with Utzon. The Sydney Opera House continues to be an object of much debate and affection, both as an object in itself and as a recognized symbol for Sydney.

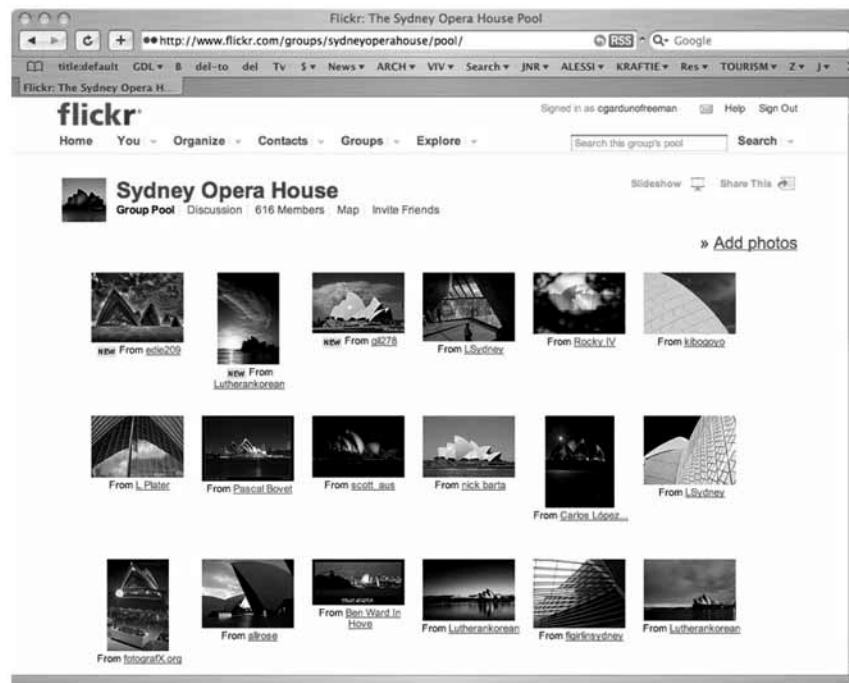


Figure 2. Thumbnail mode showing group pool from “Sydney Opera House” <http://www.flickr.com/groups/sydneyoperahouse/pool/>

Photographs courtesy of “Sydney Opera House” group members (from top left to right) Marc Emond, Peter Lee, Lee Gilbert, Laurie Wilson, Ben Hockman, Alastair McAlpine, “L_Plater,” Pascal Bovet, “scott_au,” Nick Barta, Carlos Lopez Molina, Laurie Wilson, “fotografX.org,” “allrose,” Ben Ward, Peter Lee, “flgirlinsydney” and Peter Lee. Image reproduced with permission of Yahoo! Inc. ©2009 Yahoo! Inc. FLICKR and the FLICKR logo are registered trademarks of Yahoo! Inc.



A search for Sydney Opera House on Flickr returns 123,000 images in January 2010. These are publically posted photographs on Flickr, many of which appear at first to be mundane tourist shots with little to contribute to the cultural knowledge of this place. However, tourist photographs are personal memories and expressions, and on Flickr are also contributed to groups. Groups are common spaces on Flickr where members can contribute photographs on subjects of common interest. Groups have specific curatorial guidelines; and observations show that photographs of the Sydney Opera House are contributed to various of these. Contribution to groups is one way that people make concrete their encounters with this building. The case study undertaken on the Sydney Opera House demonstrates the way members interact through and around these images via the possibilities afforded by websites like Flickr. Through “groups,” Flickr members self-organize and negotiate a dynamic and fluid collective identity as well as furthering the formation of other groups, and defining the types of social patterns which occur on this site.

At the time of writing (January 2010), the Flickr group “Sydney Opera House” has over 840 members and some 2800 photographs in its “pool,” varying from highly skilled photographs to low quality snapshots (see Figure 1). Flickr groups might easily be equated to an exhibition space or a photographic archive. But groups are more complex than simply a place to display or contribute photographs. Groups are social structures governed by administrators at the highest level and members at the lowest level. Like a club or any organization, groups are subject to peer pressure and social dynamics—some members are highly vocal in discussion threads, whilst others are avid contributors to the photographic pool. The socio-visual interactions in the Sydney Opera House group demonstrate the way its formation is tied to the high contribution of images of this place to more general Flickr groups like “Sydney, Australia.” The dominance of photos of this building in “Sydney, Australia” is the trigger for the formation of both “Sydney Opera House” and its counterpart “Sydney-alt,” a group defined by the exclusion of images of this building. This connection can only be discerned by visual analysis of the photographs contributed, in conjunction with the group members’ discussion threads. Unlike much of the current research on Flickr, which provides data about the number of images tagged, or the number of members who participate in a group, close visual analysis can account for the way the visual representation of a landmark or tourist destination affects group member’s sense of personal and collective identity. Here members contribute personal expressions, their photographs, and through them gain membership to a space in which cultural identity and memory can be actively negotiated.

Social media like Flickr are not just the territory of information science. Flickr and the photosharing practices it supports provide new opportunities for understanding both individual and collective sentiment about almost any subject. Taking photographs of the Sydney Opera House is not new, but using these images to par-





ticipate in cultural negotiations about this place is a key transformation afforded by this technology. For the study of this building's social significance, within the frame of Heritage studies, Flickr groups like "Sydney Opera House" reveal new kinds of public engagements with this building. More broadly it demonstrates that photo-sharing on Flickr is a public visual discourse, a discursive practice involving interpretation and negotiation of personal and cultural identity. It demonstrates van Dijk's proposition; personal expression is tied to personal cultural identity; it is not merely a building block of the collective cultural memory, but rather shapes cultural memory and in turn is shaped by it. The photographs of the Sydney Opera House contributed to the group are inevitably influenced by professional representations of this place. But their sheer volume on sites like Flickr, regardless of their "comparable quality," serves to democratize the representation of this building. Further, the negotiations that occur in Flickr groups fracture the consensual notion that public sentiment towards the Sydney Opera House is straightforward; it is revealed as complex, multivalent, and generative. On Flickr the Sydney Opera House does not simply stand in symbolically for Sydney and Australia; but rather it is co-constituted as a locus, a meaningful place in the lives of its contemporary communities.

DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

Perspectives such as those described above are intended to broaden the understanding of vernacular photographic practices. Cook's research focuses on developing the concept of the virtual home mode, whilst Garduño Freeman's case focuses on using photosharing online to understand collective memory. These agendas are not in conflict, but rather private and public perspectives of the same phenomenon. Cook's research has involved gaining access to private interviews with photographers to understand the way an image is intended for multiple audiences whilst Garduño Freeman has focused her observations on the public interpretations of images through groups. By considering these two approaches we can see that ordinary photographs are consequential. They need to be revealed as meaningful, both in individual and collective communication, and within existing and newly generated social networks.

Moreover, the approaches we have described above emphasize that personal media should be *approached on their own terms*, rather than viewed simply as unskilled or incompetent versions of professional production. Personal photographs may be visually pleasing or blurry and ill lit, poorly executed or masterful. Yet for the participants, they serve a purpose regardless. A point of connection may be drawn with Becker's descriptions of folk art activities in his broader analysis of "art worlds" (1982). Becker noted that for many instances of folk art, the social cohesion function of engaging in the act of artistic production is often more important than the

quality of an art object being produced. One example he provides is the occasion of singing the traditional “happy birthday” song. While singing is a form of artistic expression that can involve years of training, precise technique and a detailed set of professional practices, these aspects are not important in the setting of a birthday celebration. Rather, what is important is that the social functions supported by singing are served, rather than the aesthetic qualities of the output. Put another way, what often matters most in this context is not that it gets done *well*, but that it gets done at all.

Ultimately, concerns of quality in personal photography are less relevant than the meanings and operations that such media serve for their constituents. In the examples provided from Cook’s research, we saw the manner in which particular photos are positioned at the intersection between overlapping social spheres, and how they leverage shared context to build meaning and significance. In the example of Sydney Opera House research, Garduño Freeman notes that these Flickr images are uncommissioned, and that the discussions within the Flickr groups are self-organized. Instead of making broad generalizations about the way the public relates to this iconic location, we see evidence of public negotiation of meaning, the processes of mediation between individual and collective memory revealed. In each case, assessing personal photography and photographic practices on its own terms—that is, within the socially localized spheres of use and evaluation—was necessary to reveal hidden meaning and function.

How should those who wish to understand personal photography (online or off) on its own terms approach the subject? As researchers, we must first be cautious of assigning meaning to photographs, superimposing our assumptions or ideological stances, without first checking them against the local social reality of the photographic practitioners. We may find that our readings are valid, but they must be extracted from the participants’ actions and accounts. We can seek out their intentions and interpretations in many ways. In Cook’s work, this occurs by context unveiled through personal interviews and image elicitation methods; Garduño Freeman observes interactions revealed through behavioral traces left behind in the online setting of Flickr. Other approaches clearly exist; they will be connected by their desire to start by respecting the agency of the personal photographer.

Approaching personal media on its own terms also argues against deterministic or dominant use model conceptualizations of social media, which treat *system* and *community* as equivalent concepts. Our illustrations show that universal notions that make equivalences between systems and communities are often over-simplifications. There is not one homogeneous “community of Flickr” or one “community of Youtube”; rather, there are multiple concurrent communities, co-habiting in *infrastructures* of production and dissemination. This concurs with Michael Warner’s *Publics and Counterpublics* (2002) where he addresses the notion that publics are com-



plex and multifarious entities. Warner disagrees with much of the literature in the social sciences, which frames publics as existing entities to be studied empirically. Warner proposes a more interpretive approach towards publics, one that embraces these social entities as animated, dynamic, and multileveled (Loizidou, 2003, p. 77). Further he argues that rather than producing texts, publics emerge in relation to texts; each “text” (or photo or Flickr group) co-constitutes an audience, and a public:

“Each time we address a public (...), we draw on what seems like simple common sense. If we did not have a practical sense of what publics are, if we could not unself-consciously take them for granted as really existing and addressable social entities, we could not produce most of the books or films or broadcasts or journals that make up so much of our culture; we could not conduct elections or indeed imagine ourselves as members of nations or movements. Yet publics exist only by virtue of their imagining. They are a kind of fiction that has taken on life, and very potent life at that.” (Warner 2002, p. 8)

These multiple and more specific conceptions of the value of personal photography have greater implications; as a research area it connects disparate academic disciplines and builds programs of research, rather than enforcing a specialist model. This offers the opportunity to connect research more effectively across different socio-technical contexts. And indeed, this may be not only valuable but also required, as technological changes force different academic disciplines into new configurations, confronting new interdisciplinary problems. By crossing traditional boundaries, we can reconsider behaviors and relationships that are re-instantiated in each new generation of technology, and more readily highlight the permutations that new technology co-constructs. By treating each generation of system as new locations of inquiry into more persistent and underlying behaviors/phenomena, rather than as isolated and ahistorical cases, we may begin to paint a richer picture of technology and sociality, publics and memory. Our assumptions—as researchers and as photographic participants—may be challenged, and we may find that we have much to learn in the process.

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