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Picture This: the Impact of Mobile Camera Phones on Personal Photographic Practices

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The convergence of the camera and mobile phone has proved to be highly popular. This should come as no surprise to anyone interested in both the history of mobility and the history of photography.¹ As media archaeologist Errki Huhtamo has asserted, the first mobile medium proper was arguably amateur or personal photography (Huhtamo, 2004). Camera phones are not, however, just another kind of camera. Located as they are in a device that is not only connected to the telecommunications grid but that is usually carried with us wherever we go, camera phones are both extending existing personal imaging practices and allowing for the evolution of new kinds of imaging practices. Given the centrality of personal photography to processes of identity formation and memorialization, changes to the ways in which we capture, store, and disseminate personal photographs through the use of devices like camera phones will have important repercussions for how we understand who we are and how we remember the past. The aim of this paper is to look at the current social uses of personal photography and to consider the impact that camera phones will have on these uses. I will examine the ways in which camera phones are enabling new modes of personal photography, which will extend the role that photographs play in our lives.

The Social Uses of Personal Photography

In order to understand the relationship between existing personal photographic practices and new practices emerging from camera phone usage, we need to understand why people take photographs in the first place. Surprisingly, despite its tremendous popularity as a practice, personal photography has received relatively scant attention from scholars. (There are a few important studies in this field. See, for example, Sontag, 1978; Bourdieu, 1990; Barthes, 1980; Chalfen, 1987; Hirsch, 1997). One study (Van House et al., 2004) does provide us with a useful set of categories that can help us to understand the reasons why people take personal photographs; in order to construct personal and group memory; in order to create and maintain social relationships; and for the purposes of self-expression and self-presentation. I will first examine each of these categories as they relate to older analogue photographic practices before looking at the ways in which these categories apply to new practices emerging out of camera phone culture.

Constructing Personal and Group Memory

The introduction of celluloid film and easy-to-use box cameras in the late 1880s sparked what Huhtamo describes as a 'camera epidemic' in Victorian society (Huhtamo, 2004, website). But this epidemic was far from spontaneous. As Pierre Bourdieu observed in his now famous sociological study of 1965, *Photography: a Middle-brow Art*, the desire to photograph is not a given—it is socially constructed and culturally specific. Writers who have tracked the evolution of personal photography

seem to concur that the rise in its popularity can be directly attributable to the emergence of a correlation in the public imagination between photographic practice and private memorialization. Leading this change in public perception was Kodak Eastman—the premier manufacturer of portable photographic devices in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As Liberty Walton notes:

By the turn of the century, Kodak no longer promoted the camera's instantaneous capabilities that were a novelty in the 1888 promotions. Instead, the idea of the snapshot's value as an aid to memory was promoted. The idea that photography could be used to capture and save moments is evident in Eastman's advertising campaign, containing such slogans as ' . . . a means of keeping green the Christmas memories.' 1903: 'A vacation without a Kodak is a vacation wasted.' 1904: 'Where there's a child, there should the Kodak be. As a means of keeping green the Christmas memories, or as a gift, it's a holiday delight.' 1905: 'Bring your Vacation Home in a Kodak.' 1907: 'In every home there's a story for the Kodak to record—not merely a travel story and the story of summer holidays, but the story of Christmas, of the winter evening gathering and of the house party.' 1909: 'There are Kodak stories everywhere'. (Walton, 2002, pp. 26–38)

Personal snapshot photography took off on the back of such rhetoric. As Bourdieu notes, as 'a private technique, photography manufactures private images of private life . . . Apart from a tiny minority of aesthetes, photographers see the recording of family life as the primary function of photography' (1990, p. 30). Evidence of the importance of photography to private memorialization is all around us—in our own collections and albums. It can also be heard in the often-told story of survivors of natural (or unnatural) disasters—after securing the children and the pets, one must also ensure that the family photographs are rescued as well.

Personal photographs not only bind us to our own pasts—they bind us to the pasts of those social groups to which we belong. The documentation of social groups through photography reinforces our connections to others. Photographs are often the sutures that bind the narratives of group memory. As Giuliana Bruno argues: In a post-modern age, memories are no longer Proustian madeleines, but photographs. The past has become a collection of photographic, filmic or televisual images. We, like the replicants [of Blade Runner], are put in the position of reclaiming a history by means of its reproduction. (Bruno, 1990, p. 183)

Creating and Maintaining Social Relationships

'Photos reflect social relationships but they also help to construct and maintain them' (Van House et al., 2004, p. 7). Exchanging and sharing personal photographs is integral for the maintenance of relationships. One important function of personal photography, one that extends its existence as a material prosthesis for personal memory, is the role it plays as an aid to storytelling. Sharing memories through the creation of narratives around them plays an integral role in the construction and maintenance of personal relationships. As Richard Chalfen argues, personal photography is 'primarily a medium of communication' (Chalfen, 1991, p. 5).

People share personal photographs in many ways. They send copies of photographs through the mail (and now e-mail) to distant loved ones. They frame the photographs for display in their homes and workplaces. They attach them to pinboards and fridges. They post them to photosharing sites such as Flickr (<http://www.flickr.com>), Photobucket (<http://photobucket.com>) or Kodakgallery (<http://www.kodakgallery.com>). However, while in the strictest sense of the word these activities involve sharing, in reality sharing requires some dialogue and annotation. These activities emphasize display and can operate without any dialogue or annotation at all. But when they do function in silence, their ability to build and maintain social relationships is somewhat diminished.

Photographic albums, on the other hand, function by virtue of presence. Not only do they make the subjects of the photographs present to us in the form of their image, as Barthes famously noted, but they require, if they are to enact their primary function, the presence of a narrator and a listener (see Barthes, 1980). The performative act of showing and telling is integral to the ritualized use of personal photography. Not that this, as we all know, is always a pleasant experience. As Martha Langford points out: Looking at another person's snapshots, slides, home movies or tapes can indeed be killing: presentations are rarely of short duration, and repetition seems endemic to the genre. The real-life domestic experience is loaded with compensatory pleasures—intimacy, conviviality, emotional investment and perhaps a slice of cake. Inside stories frame the pictures, animating even the most stilted of studio portraits with family secrets and subversive tales. (Langford, 2001, p. 5)

Our preference for face-to-face sharing, coupled with our resistance to annotation, as demonstrated in research undertaken by Nancy Van House and others, has implications for digital photography generally and more specifically for mobile photography (see, in particular, Van House et al., 2004). This will be discussed in more detail below. For now it is enough to note that photography is integral to the creation and maintenance of social relationships and that these relationships are reinforced by activities such as the narration of stories that accompany face-to-face photosharing.

Self-expression and Self-presentation

As an expressive medium, photography has been both celebrated and condemned. While artistic photography has had to fight against the prejudices of the art establishment to become accepted as a legitimate artistic practice, personal photography has been more heartily embraced as an important mode of self-expression. As Susan Sontag notes: '[n]obody takes the same picture of the same thing', so 'photographs are evidence not only of what's there but of what an individual sees, not just a record but an evaluation of the world' (Sontag, 1978, p. 88).

Individuals are engaged at all levels of personal photographic production—from the taking of the snapshots and now, with digital photography, to their processing and dissemination. The emphasis on user control is a long-standing feature of personal photography of all kinds. Ease of use was a key selling point for Kodak Eastman in the early twentieth century and remains so for all kinds of cameras today. Kodak Eastman advertising assured its customers that anyone could be a photographer—even women and children! (for examples of the 'Eastman version', see Collins, 1990).

What do the photographs we take tell the world about who we are? Presumably, that our view of the world is unique and interesting and that, by virtue of this, so are we. At least that is what we hope. This is related but different from the use of personal photography for self-presentation. Self-presentation relates more to those photographs we take or display of ourselves, our family, our friends, our possessions, our pets, and so on. Photographs which are taken or used for self-presentation reflect the view of our selves that we want to project out into the world.

The Impact of Camera Phones on the Social Uses of Personal Photography

Camera phones participate in the same kind of economy of photography as that just discussed. They can be used to take photographs that help to construct personal and group memories, that maintain and develop social relationships and that allow their users to express and present themselves to the world. However, there are certain affordances which are specific to the camera phone that mean that these functions are somewhat altered and that allow for new forms of photographic practice. By examining each of these categories separately we may be able to discern the ways in which camera phones reinforce and extend existing photographic practices and the ways in which they create new practices.

Constructing Personal and Group Memory

The fact that we tend to carry our mobile camera phones with us wherever we go means that we now have increased opportunities for taking photographs. As Dong-Hoo Lee notes in her study of the use of camera phones by women in Korea, 'with camera phones, taking pictures is experienced as an everyday activity' (Lee, 2005, website). However, there are certain features of mobile imaging that have prevented the camera phone thus far from becoming the imaging device of choice at important moments in our lives that we may wish to memorialize. The poor resolution of camera phone images has, until recently, meant that significant life events such as weddings, births and so on are still photographed using cameras rather than camera phones. As many images from events such as these end up as prints that can be archived or shared, image resolution is important.

Mobile camera phones suffer from similar problems to digital cameras—the very immaterial nature of the technology works against our usual ways of working with personal photographs. If personal photographs operate as a medium of communication, enabling shared conversations and storytelling, then digital camera technologies work against some of the enabling techniques of this practice. For instance, sharing photographs, even when they are in albums, is often a tactile and sensual experience. Photographs are passed between participants who are invited to inspect them more closely. As Sit et al. note:

These forms of interaction are well supported with printed photographs in communal spaces, such as gatherings around the kitchen table or the living room sofa. In contrast, this naturalness of interaction has not been duplicated with

digitally formatted photos published online. (Sit et al., 2005, p. 1)

Creating the same kinds of interaction with digital images on mobile devices is made even more difficult by their location in a highly personalized device. While we may show photos to people on our mobile devices, we are usually reluctant to hand the device over to someone who may not understand the interface and so we keep them at a distance from the images under examination.

The construction of personal and group memories through photography is inscribed within an oral tradition which, ironically given its primary function, is not facilitated as yet by the mobile camera phone. Efforts are currently being made to allow users to annotate their camera photos and send them to online repositories or directly to family and friends. Nokia's Lifeblog offers users a commercial and domesticated version of the moblog—as Gerard Goggin points out, Nokia itself carefully avoids the term 'moblog' because of its association with technical digital culture, preferring instead to use phrases such as 'mobile sharing' and 'life sharing' (Goggin, 2005). Nokia is keen to promote Lifeblog as a family-friendly platform and its advertising emphasizes the family connection. Expounding the benefits to consumers, Nokia's publicists write that:

Nokia Lifeblog provides a simple method of capturing your daily experiences and unforgettable moments, like a child's birth or a friend's wedding and storing them all in one place. The memories you want to share can be easily posted to the web. The blogs can be accessed by the family, friends and colleagues via a password-protected area, or can be available for general access. (Nokia, 2005) However, even annotated Lifeblogs are unable to promote the kinds of two-way conversations that are integral to the popularity and endurance of personal photography as a social practice for the construction of personal and group memory.

Creating and Maintaining Social Relationships
While any form of photosharing is bound to assist in the creation and maintenance of social relationships, the kinds of photos that are most often taken with mobile camera phones are those that reinforce the user's individuality rather than their ties to other groups. Research conducted by Daisuke Okabe and Mizuko Ito clearly supports this idea. They argue that:

the social function of the camera phone differs from the social function of the camera in some important ways. In comparison to the traditional camera, most of the images taken by camera phone are short-lived and ephemeral. The camera phone is a more ubiquitous and lightweight presence, and is used for more personal, less objectified viewpoint and sharing among intimates. Traditionally, the camera would get trotted out for special excursions and events—noteworthy moments bracketed off from the mundane . . . The camera phone tends to be used more frequently as a kind of archive of a personal trajectory or viewpoint on the world, a collection of fragments of everyday life. (Okabe & Ito, 2006)

This supports Daniel Palmer's argument that the Nokia moment is far more intimate than the Kodak moment (Palmer, 2005). It is also reflected in the kinds of images that are captured using mobile camera phones. Okabe and Ito have observed that '[w]ithin

the broader ecology of personal record-keeping and archiving technologies, camera phone images occupy a niche that is more personal, fleeting, and commonplace' (Okabe & Ito, 2006). Camera phones and other mobile multimedia, according to Ilpo Koskinen, tend to participate in aesthetics of banality. That is, the images captured with these devices tend to focus on the mundane, trivial aspects of everyday life. Koskinen argues that '[p]eople capture ordinary things in immediate life and share them with friends and acquaintances in monadic clusters that become even more emotionally and relationally more self-reliant than before' (Koskinen, 2005, p. 15). Other studies have pointed to a distinction between captured camera phone images that are affective and captured camera phone images that are functional (Kindberg et al., 2005). Under the taxonomy that they developed as a result of their research, Kindberg et al. argue that affective images can be taken to enhance a mutual experience or to share an experience with someone who is absent, either in the moment or later.

Affective images can also be taken to be used for personal reflection, rather than to share with others. Interestingly, almost half of the photos taken by the participants in their study fell into this category, something which supports Okabe and Ito's assertion that the camera phone is primarily a personal imaging device. Similarly, functional images could be divided into three categories: images that support a mutual task, images that serve as a reminder either to the self or others to perform a remote task, or images that serve as a personal reminder to perform a practical, individual task. Regardless of whether images being captured on camera phones are affective or functional, most researchers studying camera phone use agree that the images themselves are far more individualized, mundane and everyday than much of the personal photography that preceded it.

While the images may be more individualized, the connectivity of camera phones presents us with new ways to maintain our social relationships through photosharing. Instantaneous photosharing can lead to a practice that is peculiar to mobile camera phones and which Ito describes as 'intimate, visual co-presence' (Ito, 2005). Just as text messaging has allowed people to remain in perpetual contact, Ito argues that by keeping in touch through picture messaging camera phone users are able to create a shared visual space—a sense of presence created through visual intimacy. Mark Federman takes this argument one step further by claiming that:

One of the most important effects of massively multi-way, instantaneous and ubiquitous communications is pervasive proximity. We experience everyone to whom we are connected—and conceivably everyone to whom we are potentially connected—as if they are exactly next to us. The effect is that of hundreds, or thousands, or millions of people coming together in zero space, so that there is no perceptible distance between them. (Federman, 2006)

As appealing as this may seem, reality suggests that this kind of scenario is not widespread. In fact, sharing images through services such as MMS (Multimedia Messaging Services) has not taken off as yet in most parts of the world. In fact, much of the sharing that takes place with camera phones still takes place in face-to-face situations rather than through the sending of images. This is partly because of the

cost of sending MMS. However it is also because users are unclear about such things as handset compatibility and how to send the images (see, for example, Kindberg et al., 2005).

Self-expression and Self-presentation

While intimate, visual co-presence may yet be some way off, there is no doubt that the increasing pervasiveness of personal camera technologies, which are exemplified by the mobile camera phone, is leading to a change in the way in which we visualize the world. As Van House et al. argue: 'Ready access to imaging encourages people to see the world "photographically"—as images, and to see beauty and interest in the everyday. And easy internet-based sharing creates an audience' (Van House et al., 2005).

Mobile camera phones certainly increase our ability to express ourselves and to present our unique view of the world to others. However, the transitory nature of camera phone images means that self expression is shifting away from 'this is what I saw then' to 'this is what I see now'. The photo message in particular participates in this economy of presence. As Mark Federman argues, '[p]hotographs, clippings, scrapbooks, and even works of art and sculpture as forms of cultural memory give way to ephemeral artefacts that exist for a brief instant in the span of time, as a sharing of experience itself' (Federman, 2006, p. 5).

Seeing the world photographically is also, as Susan Sontag points out, in itself somewhat problematic. As she reminds us, '[w]hile there appears to be nothing that photography can't devour, whatever can't be photographed becomes less important' (Movius, 1975). Translated to aspects of public life such as news and current affairs, the increasing use of mobile camera images by mainstream media organizations, which in itself is an interesting phenomenon, serves to remind us that the term 'newsworthy' has now become interchangeable with the term 'pictureworthy'. If an event is unable to be captured by an imaging device, its value is diminished. Hence the somewhat perverse desire that appears to have developed in Western cultures to document all aspects of our lives lest we are deemed not to exist.

This point leads us to ask what kinds of resistances have appeared to the use of such pervasive imaging devices. Despite its incredible popularity as a medium, misuses of photography and intrusive photographic practices have long been of concern to people with an interest in both personal privacy and the public sphere. Huhtamo reminds us that this goes back as far as the introduction of portable cameras in the late nineteenth century:

Their activities developed into a kind of distributed panopticon—anybody anywhere could be the target of a snapshot. Caricaturists often interpreted such intrusions as sexually motivated (the pleasure beach being a favourite setting), but the camera also seemed to have a de-humanizing effect on the person carrying it. In a telling cartoon a group of ladies are seen pointing their cameras at a man hanging from a branch of a tree over water, struggling for his life. Instead of terror

or empathy, the faces of the ladies show excitement about the photogenic event; as can be expected, none of them makes the slightest effort to run for rescue. (Huhtamo, 2004)

This distrust of the roaming photographer and his/her panoptic technology is resurfacing today in the current distrust of the mobile camera phone. While phone and camera manufacturers scramble to find ways to promote the use of mobile camera phones for the documentation of private life, public concern about the inappropriate use of these technologies is escalating. These two competing discourses are set to shape the evolution of the mobile camera phone and its attendant practices and software.

Finally, revisiting Koskinen's argument with regards to the banality of mobile imaging, one might also argue that the intensely intimate nature of camera phone imagery leads to a reinforcement of a movement towards what Richard Sennet has called the 'tyranny of intimacy' (Sennet, as quoted in Palmer, 2003). Drawing on Sennet, Palmer argues:

We are permeated with narcissism, not as self-love but in terms of the exclusive reference to ourselves, which asks: What does this event mean to me? The narcissistic subject searches for and expects 'real' and intense experiences only within the framework of their own needs and expectations. (Palmer, 2005, p. 163)

By reinforcing the intensely personal, camera phones may also participate in this narrow economy of self, one that becomes almost asocial in its emphasis on the individual and its refusal of the more broadly social.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that mobile camera phones are having an impact on the established ways in which we record and archive our personal and group memories, create and maintain social relationships and express and present ourselves to our friends, family and the world. As camera resolutions improve and as users become more comfortable sharing their photographs through MMS, photosharing sites and camera technologies such as Bluetooth, we will undoubtedly see many more changes to the ways in which we undertake these activities. Research in this area is, at best, nascent. Solid empirical work needs to be undertaken if we are to really understand the current and potential impacts of camera phone technologies on our culture and our lives. For now we can say that camera phones are set to extend our way of looking at the world photographically and in doing so bring changes to how we understand ourselves and that world.

Note

[1] According to a published report by ABI Research, by 2008 more than one billion camera phones will be in service in markets throughout the world. While sales numbers in Australia are difficult to locate, analysts have noted that four years after Sharp and J-Phone introduced the first camera phone to the Japanese market, 85 per cent of handsets sold in Japan in 2005 have a built-in camera. In Korea, the number is closer to 99 per cent. See 'Mobile phone imaging: opportunities for driving usage of camera

phones through click/send/print' (ABI Research, 2005, http://www.abiresearch.com/products/market_research/Mobile_Phone_Imaging), 'Camera phones: disruptive innovation for imaging' (Market and trend report, 5th Version of 11 Oct. 2004, <http://www.eurotechnology.com/store/camera-phone/>) and 'Camera phones to get 99% of local market in 2005—Korea' (Camera Phone Reviews, 22 Nov. 2004, [http://www.livingroom.org.au/cameraphone/archives/camera_phones_to_get_99_of_lo cal_market_in_2005_korea.php](http://www.livingroom.org.au/cameraphone/archives/camera_phones_to_get_99_of_local_market_in_2005_korea.php)).

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