

Distant Closeness: Cameraphones and Public Image Sharing

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ABSTRACT

Cameraphones and cameraphone images represent not only a new technology, but a new kind of image. Following up on our study of cameraphone use and image-sharing via the MMM2 system, we are studying new media via the intersection of cameraphones and Flickr – the dailyness and opportunism of cameraphone images combined with easy online sharing with friends and strangers. Here we talk about this in terms of multimodal communication, and in terms of issues of identity and agency. We conclude that new media of all kinds are increasing the use of multimodal communication, and the communicator’s ability to choose the most appropriate communication mode(s); but they also have important repercussions for issues of self and other.

INTRODUCTION

Cameraphones and cameraphone images represent not only a new technology (cameraphones) but a new kind of image (cameraphone images). In earlier work we identified four social uses of personal photos and reported on how these were evident in cameraphone images. Here we discuss how cameraphones have combined with the communicative capabilities of the internet to extend the social uses of personal photographic images. Currently we are studying Flickr.com users, but these observations may also apply to other public media-sharing services, such as cameraphone videos on YouTube.com.

THE SOCIAL USES OF CAMERAPHONES

In earlier work, my colleagues and I [10, 11] studied personal photographers using film and digital cameras; US cameraphone users; and users of an experimental system, MMM2 [3, 4], which combined cameraphones with automatic uploading to a web-based archiving and sharing application. We identified four social uses of personal photographs: creating and maintaining relationships; constructing personal and group memory; self-representation; and self-expression. While cameraphones were often used as simple substitutes for “regular” cameras, like other researchers [7, 7], we also found that cameraphones changed what was considered photo-worthy.

Cameraphones are always at hand, for unexpected, opportunistic, spur-of-the-moment image-making. While some people used them as their only camera, others used them as a convenient supplement. We learned that they are also often seen as not serious, and so may be used in situations in which picture-taking would not otherwise be

acceptable. Finally, they are good for unobtrusive, even surreptitious image capture.

In terms of the social uses of personal photographic images, we found cameraphones extended and changed the balance among them. We found some activities that, while consistent with the social uses identified above, were either specific to or more common with cameraphones.

First, we noticed a considerable amount of personal chronicling, a form of memory construction: people took mundane images of their daily lives, both for themselves and for others. Second, images were used for communication. Some communicative events were focused primarily on content while others were more about connection.

Third, some participants reported an increase in self-expression: artistic, humorous, experimental, “fun” image-making. Some also reported an increase in photographic seeing: seeing the world in terms of possible images. While some of these images were only for the pleasure of the photographer, many were for display or sharing with others.

Many of these activities take advantage of the easy sharing of digital images in general, and MMM2’s support for sharing. MMM2 was designed so that images could be easily sent to one or more recipients of the photographer’s choosing. Late in the project, at the instigation of a user, a public collection was added, to which photographers could contribute images that would be visible to all MM2 users.

Not all MMM2 images were shared through the MMM2 system. Many users reported integrating image-sharing with their other communicative practices and media. Images were sent as email attachments, and image URLs were inserted into instant messages or into IRC chat sessions. Images were also uploaded to blogs and to personal webpages.

We saw little phone-to-phone sharing. While part of this was due to the lack of usability of the MMM2 phone interface and other technical problems, a recent report in *The Economist* [1] says that, internationally, multimedia messaging services (MMS) have been “a flop,” at least partly for technical reasons and cost.

ENTER FLICKR

When we interviewed MMM2 users after the end of the MMM2 project, we learned that many were now using

Flickr, a free public image sharing site. Some said that MMM2 had accustomed them to sharing, for which they were now using Flickr. One characteristic of Flickr often cited as superior to MMM2 is its publicness. Whereas MMM2 images were shared with selected recipients at the instigation of the owner, Flickr images are uploaded to a publicly-accessible site where they can be viewed by anyone. (Participants rarely used Flickr's friends and family feature to limit access to designated others.) Some were using Flickr primarily for themselves: as an archive, uploading all their images, often as a back-up for their hard drives, or as a repository for their best images. But others used Flickr primarily for sharing, uploading images that they were willing to be seen publicly and that they thought others would find interesting, sometimes participating in thematic groups of people they didn't know offline.

Recently we've begun studying Flickr users, including those who upload cameraphone pictures. In this paper, we argue that the public nature of Flickr images, combined with the practice of using cameraphones for personal chronicling, communication, and self-expression, combine to radically change the uses of photographic images.

Flickr is very much about self-representation, managing one's image in the eyes of others. Pictures of oneself, but more often representing one's life, friends, events, possessions, and also one's aesthetic sense serve this purpose. Participants were quite conscious that their Flickr stream affected others' view of them.

Images are used to maintain relationships in many ways. One is using images to keep up on one another's lives. Personal chronicling images are used to keep one's friends and family up-to-date on one's life, both its daily texture and events. Participants reported appreciating this function both as photographers and as viewers. In Flickr and related applications (like blogs and MySpace.com), respondents told us that they enjoyed being able to keep others informed and to monitor others' lives without direct contact. One participant's friends got together to buy him a digital camera for Christmas, with the admonition that they wanted him to contribute Flickr images and not just view theirs. Another spoke of an obligation to her friends to keep them informed via her Flickr images explaining that she rarely calls or emails them.

Flickr is of course well-suited to another of our social uses, group and individual memory creation. Photographers would post pictures of events and send the URL to people who had been there, or to others whom they thought would like to see the pictures. In addition, Flickr combines text with the images, text by the owner or others. Owners can add titles and descriptions, but other viewers can add notes (anchored to places in the image) and comments, all of which viewable by everyone who views the image (Figure 1). Comments are often about the events and people depicted as well as the images. Comments often resulted in

a dialog. Photographers would respond to the comments posted, and sometimes a series of exchanges would follow.

Self-expressive images were also often posted, aesthetic and humorous images, and some participants reported being encouraged by the comments to take and post more such pictures.

Distant Closeness

The result is a form of distant closeness: knowing about others, keeping others informed about oneself, without direct interaction. Some participants in our earlier interviews reported using blogs and photoblogs for this purpose, but Flickr seems to have increased this kind of behavior.

However, the publicness of Flickr images is not always positive, as with other social software sites (which Flickr increasingly resembles). We heard some concerns from young women about exposing details of their lives. One woman reported that an ex-boyfriend had been monitoring her postings, and showed up on her doorstep. Another realized that images posted in real-time directly from her cameraphone made it clear when she was out of town and her apartment was empty.

Like users of social software sites, photographers engaged in various practices for concealing personal details. However, images carry an added risk because people and places may be recognizable.

Cameraphones increase the chance that a casual picture, taken with or without the subject's knowledge, will turn up on Flickr. A review of public Flickr images tagged "cameraphone" turns up images that may prove embarrassing to the subjects, who may or may not know that the pictures were taken and/or posted. These may be seen by friends, but also by authority figures, business associates, and acquaintances – whom the subject would prefer not to see these images, however innocent the image might be when seen by the intended audience. Figure 2 shows some of these images – Figure 2c might be admirable in some circles but might, for example, lead to teasing at school.

UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC CAMERAPHONE IMAGES

We can understand these uses of cameraphone images combined with Flickr in the context of two concepts that are important in understanding new media: multimodality and identity management.

Multimodality

Multimodality refers to the use of a multiplicity of modes for communication. Modes abstract, non-material, and cannot be observed directly; media are the material, observable forms in which modes are realized. Images are a mode; photos are a medium. Much of the discussion about multimodality is about text and images. The argument is made is that different modes have different representational potentials and different social practices and meanings.

People use a range of representational modes, which intermesh and interact. Kress [5] uses the phrase “aptness of mode” to describe the fit between the mode and both that which is represented, and the audience.

Digital images combined with ICTs increase the choices available to users for, other things, our four social uses: memory construction, communication, self-expression, and self-representation. Thus we see people experimenting with ways of replacing text with images (e.g., sending an image as a message, without text) or combining them (e.g., sending an image and text). We see image-based conversations.

Cameraphones, by increasing the opportunities for image-making as well as sending, increase the possibilities for multimodality. Sites like Flickr that combine images and text further engender multimodal communication.

Identity

We use images for a variety of purposes. A key issue in cultural studies is the construction and negotiation of identity, which includes our understanding of ourselves as well as our identity in the eyes of others. I argue elsewhere [9] that we use personal photos in this project. Slater [8] distinguishes between “self-presentation” and “self-representation.” Self-presentation is how we present ourselves, without reflection or intention, in the moment, such as through body-language; self-representation entails some reflection and intentionality. While images that people post of themselves (and their belongings and so forth) are likely self-representation, photos taken by others and posted without the subject’s approval are more likely to catch them in the unreflective presentation in the moment.

It is generally agreed that ICTs reduce the boundaries between various parts of our lives, and break the correlation between place and space. Similarly, personal photos were once private, posted online can be quite public. On Flickr, as many parts of our lives as we capture and post – and as others capture, post, and make identifiable – are open to scrutiny by people from various parts of our lives, and strangers. Figure 2 shows some of the dangers of this publicness.

Agency has long been a concern with photos (e.g., [6] because the subject is not the photographer. Barthes [2] talks about a portrait-photograph of himself as related to four versions of himself: the person he thinks he is, who he wants others to think he is, who the photographer thinks he is, and the person the photographer makes use of to exhibit his or her art.

The more public the image, the greater the concerns about agency because the greater the potential impact of the image. Digital cameras generally, and cameraphones in particular, combined with the publicness of services like Flickr, means that images of ourselves that we may not like, may not even know about, and may not wish to be made public, can be posted, re-posted, emailed, and take on a life

of their own. I would argue that the importance of this is how it impacts our larger projects of construction of self, self-representation, and impression management, by crossing boundaries and taking agency away from the person in question.

CONCLUSIONS

This is a preliminary discussion of issues that are arising in our study of cameraphone images on Flickr. YouTube is another online service that encourages the creation of new media by creating a public audience for what was once private. It has similar benefits to owner and audience, but raises similar issues of identity, privacy, and agency.

Our larger concern is with how the combination of easy creation of new media and easy public access affect our interactions and relationships; our self-identity and public presentations; and the relationship between new media and the social. Cameraphones, especially combined with sites like Flickr, offer us a window into this changing domain..

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Figure 1: Flickr image annotated by a viewer

<p>Title: What's this? Fight club?</p>	<p>Title: Marty, enjoying the stairs</p>	<p>Title: Pray and worship</p>
<p>Caption: Two Chinese middle school girls are fighting on street, while their classmates are looking on with folded arms.</p>	<p>Caption: I wonder if he's holding his head because of the wall or because of the bottle of El Toro. Scientists investigate, video at 11.</p>	
<p>Figure 2a: public YouTube cameraphone video</p>	<p>Figure 2b: public Flickr cameraphone photo</p>	<p>Figure 2c: public Flickr photo</p>
<p>Figure 2: Public photos that participants might not want circulated broadly.</p>		