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Digital Photographic Storytelling

Abstract

In this paper, I discuss how stories of everyday life are currently told with digital photographs. The paper is based on qualitative empirical data collected in Finland and in Japan on the use of digital photographs, taken with digital cameras and mobile camera phones. I present different story forms that appear in my data and argue that to a large extent they follow conventions of analogue photography. I also discuss new forms of digital photographic storytelling that are emerging at the same time. The main question of this paper is, with increased possibilities for interacting and communicating with the digital snapshot, why are certain possibilities for interaction taken advantage of, others not? I look for the answer in conventions of home photography, customs of using digital media, and characteristics of digital photographic technology itself to discuss what influences the use of digital photographs.

1. Introduction: Digital Photography and Interactivity

It has become common to carry digital pocket cameras and mobile camera phones everywhere. Digital photographs are distributed by e-mail and the world wide web to audiences outside the circle of friends and family. The increased visual documentation of everyday experiences often finds the form of a story.

These stories resemble those previously told in diaries, letters, postcards, anecdotes, and print photo albums. However, digital photography also introduces new forms and material for storytelling. In this paper, I explore how the familiar and the new forms appear in my data, asking, what makes people transfer ways of analogue photography to the digital, on one hand, and invent new ways, on the other.

In detecting new forms of digital photographic storytelling, I turn particularly to interactivity, in contrast to linear ways of presentation. To me, interactivity is the novelty that that digital information and telecommunications technologies (computers, the internet, and mobile phones) bring to making and using images. In the context of digital photography, interactivity means immediate viewing of and reacting to one's photos (perhaps deleting and taking new ones), editing them, viewing the photos in different terminals from the camera to the television, and in the context of this paper particularly, exchanging photos over the phone, e-mail, or the web. With my focus on and definition of interactivity, I try to find out aspects of using digital photographs that have not been common or even possible before with analogue photography.

Based on my data, it seems that not much interactivity is taking place in digital photographic storytelling so far. To explain this, I will approach digital photography and communication with digital photographs as both a cultural and technological phenomenon, involving the both conventions of photography and the use of ICT.

2. Data and Methods

My findings are based on three studies. In the autumn 2002, I interviewed nine Finnish art students of age 22-29 who had been sponsored to use mobile camera phones for three months. They were preparing an exhibition to the Finnish National Modern Art museum with the aim of exploring and innovating with the medium. After the exhibition had opened, I interviewed the students on their works and their leisure time use of the camera phone during the project.

In the spring 2004, I interviewed and collected photographs from ten Finnish digital camera users, 28–57 years of age, residing in Southern Finland. In the autumn 2004, I carried out a similar study among twelve digital camera and mobile camera phone users, 21-45 years of age, in Tokyo, Japan. Before the interviews, I collected recent photographs from the interviewees, representing their practices both common and uncommon. Based on the pictures, I carried out semi-structured interviews varying in length from one to two hours, an hour and a half being the most common duration. In Japan, three of the interviews were interpreted, the rest were carried out in English.

3. Results

Taking up my study, I suspected people photographing digitally with cameras and phones would have many new ways of interacting with and with the help of their photographs (compared to analogue photography). After all, they could now take as many photos they wanted, size and transform them themselves, watch them in many more ways but paper prints, and send and publish their photos easily over the internet. In the case of mobile camera phones, the users would be able to immediately communicate their images to others, who could in turn reply with an image. I was eager to find out what these new practices would be and how they formed in the context of digital and telecommunications technology and conventions of photography.

3.1. New Technology, Old Conventions

However, I found out that although new practices emerge, they do so slowly. Most of digital photography still serves to support practices of recounting one's experiences in a linear, one-directional manner. People narrate their holidays, birthdays, weddings, and other special events, anecdotes of children and pets, experiences after moving to a new town, and so on, as before to friends and family, with only the format of the photograph changed. Digital technology has not transformed the way these stories are told: As print photographs before, digital photographs simply serve as a visual support for the account. Only now, the snapshot, in its original form, is shown and transmitted as a digital file more often than a print photograph. The role of the recipient is to look, listen, or read.

3.2. From “Special Events” to the Fun of the Banal

Although this is the majority of digital photographic storytelling, new forms do appear. The most obvious change compared to analogue photography appears in subject matter. A theme, everyday life, that has previously remained little documented and communicated in home photography, now becomes photographed and recounted

to others. People make use of the small size of their compact cameras and mobile camera phones, as well the low cost of the photographs by carrying their photographic devices around and indeed using them.

While many of the digital everyday photos are kept for personal archives only, many find their way to friends and family through e-mail (desktop or mobile), through websites, or directly from the camera screen. People express their emotions, report surprising incidents, document fun sights in their everyday environment. These are new narratives of the everyday. A Japanese girl writes in her mobile log, with a picture of the site of the event, about being afraid of falling down in a steep underground escalator after a night of partying. The same girl reports enjoying delicious desserts with a friend. A Finnish girl uses her digital camera and e-mail to inform a cottage neighbour that the ice on the sea is thick enough to walk to the cottage and check for damages. A Finnish woman takes pictures of her twin babies daily, and in the evening, she shows them to her husband, telling about the events of the day. Boys both in Finland and Japan spontaneously involve absent friends in a meeting or a night out by sending out pictures of the event from their mobile camera phones.

These photographic narratives stem from passing moments, most of which would previously have gone unreported, at least photographically. Especially the mobile camera phone generates pictures in the genre of the trivial. Its users commonly describe it as “a toy”, not “a real camera”. Therefore, it is considered suitable to use for snapshots of events and objects that are not of pictorial or historical value. With the help of communications technology, these stories are now also told to others either at or immediately after the event (through mobile e-mail) or some time later (through a weblog or show-and-tell from the camera screen). In Japan, weblogs and especially mobile logs have become very popular, whereas in Finland, the photo exchange is more person-to-person oriented using desktop or mobile e-mail.

All the techniques mentioned above allow easy interactivity, sending and responding to the pictures, but what is perhaps more significant is that the subject matter of the photographs is easier to respond to than what are called special events. The city streets, stations, and cafeterias in Tokyo, cottages, forests, and back yard gardens in Finland and pets, funny haircuts, and big desserts anywhere are topics that anyone can recognize and relate to one's own experiences.

3.3. Photographic Messages, Written Comments

However, responding to the messages happens mostly with text, not with images. The interviewees systematically report sending more pictures than what they receive. In weblogs, comments are most often written, instead of sending a photo as a response. This practice resembles the convention of browsing print photos from an album or a stack of photos, the photographer framing the pictures with a little background information, and the viewer reacting with brief comments or questions. A Japanese interviewee told about her experiences of mobile camera phone weblogging:

Interviewee: “It’s fun. It’s fun to have some kind of reactions from my friends.

Interviewer: “How do they react?”

Interviewee: “ They say like for example like he [a friend next door] looked at this picture [of a dessert] and he said ‘That looks real sweet!’ You know, really naive trivial comments but.”

4. Discussion: Towards Interaction with Digital Photographs

People clearly like to tell stories to each other and remember their experiences with the help of digital photographs. Today’s digital photography has preserved the analogue conventions in terms of documenting special events such as holidays and festivities, and the one-direction manner or showing of the photos to others. New forms of digital photographic storytelling also emerge: documenting the everyday, sending photos to others from or soon after the event, and receiving immediate responses. Photographic documentation and communication has increased, but it is still mostly one-way: the photographer sends out her photos but the response tends to be verbal. In other words, there is interaction in digital photographic storytelling, but it does not seem to be photographic.

Reasons for this can be found in properties of technology, the recipients’ varying situations, and attitudes towards the photograph. It is not simple to respond to a photograph with a photograph using a laptop computer but it takes time and many stages, and the mobile camera user may be in a situation where she cannot respond to a photo message right away. Even if it was possible, we are not used to responding to photos with photos spontaneously. Perhaps the photos received are still taken as part of the sender’s experience world that she shows and tells about, not part of a common experience field that you can respond to with your own spontaneous picture. It can also feel like a chore to give a quick, witty, and creative photographic response, because we are educated into the norm of “good photographs” which are of certain aesthetic quality. Consequently, you might prefer sending a quick written note.

In addition, advertising and publicity around digital photography support these features – one-directional picture messaging, wittiness, and photography skills, taking your own snapshot and sending it to others as a surprise, practical joke, or greeting. There is surprisingly little support or inspiration for visual interaction, and it is easy for us to adhere to the old notion of photographs as something expensive and valuable that you work with with sufficient time and dedication.

Although we can now take and send digital photographs infinitely, anywhere, of anything, photos are still not generally interacted with, “traded“ or exchanged as general visual material for stories and anecdotes. It does happen on some websites, which share a fun kinship not with the photo album but for example with albums little girls have fostered along generations: albums that are filled with little shiny paper pictures, or nowadays, stickers, of various, arbitrary kinds. The stickers or pictures are looked at, discussed, told stories of, and traded or given to each other. Future will show which form of storytelling, the print photograph album or the sticker album inspires our digital photographic storytelling more.