
Flickr and Public Image-Sharing: Distant Closeness and Photo Exhibition

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Abstract

This paper presents an empirical study in progress of the use of Flickr.com™, part of an on-going research program on personal digital media, including images. Two new kinds of image-sharing with Flickr are “distant closeness” and “photo exhibition.” We are seeing changing uses of images in social interaction and increased multi-modal communication.

Keywords

digital photos, distant closeness, Flickr.com, photography, photo sharing, social networking

ACM Classification

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous

Introduction

The popularity of image-sharing sites like Flickr.com™ allows us to observe what “ordinary” users do when given the ability to more readily incorporate images in their everyday activity. More generally, we are seeing large numbers of people engaged in the creation and sharing of new media, in the context of a long tradition of media use, in this case, personal photography. In

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this paper, we report on early findings of a study of Flickr and put these findings about the uses of new media and technologies in the context of photographic practices more generally.

Earlier Work

Work in visual studies has addressed personal film photography (e.g., [3]). Research in HCI has addressed the transition to digital [2, 12] and cameraphones[8]. In our own work [14, 15, 16, 17] we have studied personal photographers using film and digital cameras; cameraphone users in the US; and users of an experimental system, MMM2 [4, 5], which combined cameraphones with automatic uploading to a web-based archiving and sharing application. We have found no other published studies of Flickr *use*; other Flickr studies have addressed tagging (e.g., [10]).

The Social Uses of Personal Photography

From our own empirical work and an extensive review of the literature on personal photography in visual sociology and visual studies, we identified four social uses of personal photographs [17]. First is *memory, narrative, and identity*. Narratives are critical to the ongoing construction of identity [9]. Personal photos not only help us to remember, but to *construct* narratives of our lives and our sense of self, individual and collective.

Second, both the content and uses of personal photos has traditionally reflected and sustained *relationships*. Photos of people and of shared places, events, and activities are important for “togetherness” [13] Photos are given as gifts. The telling of stories with and around photos reinforces relationships both in the content of the stories and the act of viewing photos together.

Third, photos are used for *self-representation*. People seek to present themselves in such a way as to ensure that others see them as they wish to be seen [7]. Photos (self-portraits, images of one’s friends, family, possessions, activities, and so forth) are a form of self-representation, as are images that demonstrate the photographer’s aesthetic sense, humor, or skill.

Fourth, photographic images are used for *self-expression*, reflecting the photographer’s unique point of view, creativity, or aesthetic sense. While these images may also play a role in self-representation (when posted for public viewing), some respondents talked about taking images purely for their own enjoyment or for the act of image-making.

In our earlier work on cameraphones [14, 15, 16, 17] we found that, while cameraphones were often used as simple substitutes for “regular” cameras, they were also used for different kinds of images and uses. We argued that cameraphones extend and change the balance among these social uses. With cameraphones we saw considerable personal chronicling, a form of memory and identity construction. With cameraphones, people often captured mundane images reflecting the texture of their daily lives. Second, images were used heavily for relationships. Personal-chronicling images were used to share one’s life with intimates. And images, often without text, were sent as a form of communication. Some messages were about content while others were about connection. Finally, some participants reported increased self-expression and self-representation: cameraphones encouraged artistic, humorous, experimental, “fun” image-making, as well as opportunistic images of unexpected events and sights, some of which were used for self-representation.

In sum, the cameraphone (and, for MMM2 users, its combination with easy uploading and sharing) allowed users to more readily make and share images, which were then used in ways both consistent with pre-existing practices but also new and unexpected.

Flickr

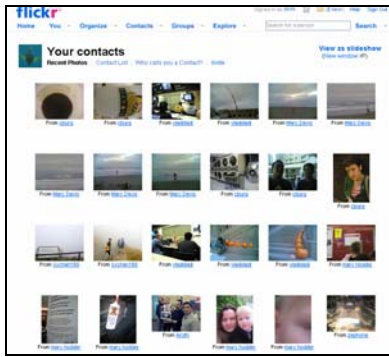
Recently we have begun studying Flickr users, with and without cameraphones. Flickr.com is a public image storing and sharing service (free with limited uploading and storage, or unlimited for a modest membership fee). Flickr allows owners to title, tag, and describe images, and organize them into sets.

Respondents noted two major differences between Flickr and other photo-sharing sites (including MMM2, photo-sharing sites like PhotoBucket, blogs, and social networking sites like MySpace), and image sharing via email. Flickr images designated as “public” are viewable by anyone. This pull technology was seen as less intrusive on intimates, as well as opening one’s images to strangers – which some users found particularly desirable. Second, Flickr is mostly about images, not images as adjuncts to text.

Method

Our method is an extension of our earlier work [14, 15, 16, 17]. To date we have interviewed 12 Flickr users, a convenience sample of acquaintances and campus Flickr users, students in a variety of programs at UC Berkeley, mostly graduate students in their 20s and 30s.

Our method combines interviews and photo elicitation [15]. We interview participants at our location with a computer connection to their Flickr accounts. Interviews last one to two hours and are videotaped.



We ask about prior and current photographic practices, including the kinds of images they take and why, and what they do with them, which are uploaded to Flickr and why, and other methods of image-sharing (including other social software sites) and archiving. We view their public Flickr images with them and ask about specific images, as well as their tagging and commenting practices, their balance of public and private images, their interactions with other Flickr users, and other image-based interactions with people.

Findings: The Social Uses of Flickr

While these findings are preliminary, they appear to be fairly stable. Following grounded theory’s tenet of theoretical sampling [6], we are analyzing and theorizing about our data as we proceed, and making decisions about next steps (including interviewees) based on our developing theory.

Memory, Identity, and Narrative

We said above that photos help to create a coherent narrative and sense of identity over time. With Flickr, like our earlier study of MMM2, we are seeing increased posting of ordinary pictures of daily life as well as exceptional images, creating an easy chronology of images for memory, identity, and narrative.

However, while some people are using Flickr to archive their image collections, most participants see Flickr as a social site, a place for sharing images. They described their Flickr collections as transitory, ephemeral, “throwaway,” a stream, not an archive. Their primary interest was in recent images, their own and their contacts’. Images are archived elsewhere.

A lot of what I do is letting people know what's going on in my life. I feel very responsible to old friends, to people who I know would be interested in how I'm doing...I feel like I need to keep uploading pictures so that they know what's going on in my life, because I'm a terrible e-mailer, I never call, so I better give them something.

I do not review [my] photos often because I know what I shot so I'd rather look at someone else's.

Since they rarely searched back over their own images, tagging was almost exclusively for others. One participant said it's "what you're supposed to do – a community thing." The images most likely to be tagged were of particular interest to others, or ones the owner wanted to be findable by specific people. (As of this writing, 7,641 images are tagged CHI2006.)

Maintaining Relationships

Many images' *content* is primarily social: images of friends or social events. Other images' *use* is social: respondents posted pictures of things they wanted to show or talk about with their friends, or that they thought their friends would find amusing or interesting.

Most interviewees reported that the primary audience for their photos was people they knew, especially people in the photos or at the events pictured. Several said that they joined Flickr as a result of pressure from friends. One man's friends got together to buy him a digital camera for Christmas, saying that they wanted him to contribute Flickr images and not just view theirs.

The contacts, groups, and commenting functions of Flickr are overtly relationship-oriented. Flickr allows users to designate others as "contacts" and to create and join "groups" (either private or public) to which users can post images to create a shared pool. Most people reported that their contacts were primarily people they knew in offline life, though not always well. Some reported an obligation to reciprocate when others designated them as contacts.

While many respondents rarely make comments, most like getting them. One woman said that comments had substantially increased her photographic activity.

Comments are rarely substantive; most are positive remarks about the image or the subject. While some Flickr groups hold substantive discussions, participants reported that otherwise Flickr was not the place for discussions. Commenting is often dialogic, with the image owner feeling a need to respond.

Many respondents log on daily or several times a day to view their contacts' newest images. The Flickr image stream is often seen as a substitute for more direct forms of interaction like email. Several have given up on blogging because it is too much work, and upload images to show friends what they are up to.

Self-Representation

Respondents are very aware of using Flickr to manage their image in the eyes of viewers via pictures of themselves, their lives, friends, events, and possessions, as well as those demonstrating their aesthetic or humorous sense. The subjects as well as the photographers may see their Flickr images as self-representation. One participant frequently posts images of his friends hamming it up in front of the camera. When we asked whether they minded, he said: "I think people perform for the camera and my friends are fun people...[they see it as] a chance to show themselves as funny in front of an audience."

We present different views of ourselves and tell different stories to different audiences [7]. Many participants maintain a careful distinction among, for example, Flickr, password-protected photos sites, blogs, and social networking sites like MySpace. The content of each site was carefully calibrated to present the appropriate image (including the appropriate *images*, kinds of photos and poses) to each audience.

On Flickr, I'm constantly gorging myself on these rich and intense, beautifully-done photos.

Self-Expression

We've been discussing participants who use Flickr mostly to communicate with friends. However, another group values Flickr's publicness. Public access to personal photographic images is a radical departure from past practice and from most other photo-sharing sites. For some, the major draw of Flickr is the ability to display their own aesthetic images and view others'. We call this *photo exhibition*. Their Flickr interaction is largely with people they don't know whose work they admire or who admire theirs. They use the contacts function to bookmark collections they found appealing. One respondent mostly uses Flickr to check "Everyone's Photos", an ever-changing set of images. While respondents tended to emphasize either aesthetic images for unknown others or content-oriented images for friends, most participants posted a mix of these.

Discussion

With Flickr, as in our previous work with cameraphones, we find that new technology both replicates and extends prior social uses of personal photos. Flickr is used for life chronicling, for oneself but often for others, as a way of keeping others informed about one's own life and following developments in others' lives. Linde talks about the importance in close relationships of staying informed of significant developments in one another's lives. While people have long sent prints or emailed digital images, Flickr differs in its temporal immediacy and varied social distance. Images tend to be posted quickly, of topics of immediate interest, significant and mundane. New technologies like Zonetags™ [1] are making real-time uploading from cameraphones to Flickr possible. Viewers may be intimates, acquaintances, or even strangers. This mediated, asynchronous interaction does not require direct

contact. We call this *distant closeness*, staying close to, informed about, people who may be distant physically and/or socially.

The publicness of Flickr also means that it is a domain of self-representation. Few respondents used Flickr's privacy classifications to restrict access to images, but they were well aware of the privacy threats to themselves and to their subjects. They managed their spheres of relationships by distinguishing which images were posted where: to Flickr, to MySpace, to their blog, or emailed, or not posted anywhere. They were also careful of the images that they posted of others.

In both these areas, the power of images is important, their "magic" or "surplus value," their quality of aliveness and layers of meaning [11] that make images much richer and more affecting than mere text.

Any casual perusal of Flickr will show many images of self-expression, of art and humor: finally, any photographer can have a public show, her own gallery. In this domain, Flickr relationships tend to be less connected with the offline world, focusing more on the images themselves. We believe that there is much more artistic photography now that Flickr and other online sites are showing people others' work and giving them a place to exhibit their own.

More generally, with Flickr we are seeing people incorporating images in their lives and their social relationships in ways that were not possible before; experimenting with images and with multimodality; and finding ways to use new media and in both traditional and new ways. They are using their own images, but also others: thanks to the wealth of image resources on

Flickr and their searchability through metadata, many treat Flickr as a photo pool available whenever an image will serve their purposes, facilitating increased use of images for all kinds of purposes.

Our continuing research will include more kinds of Flickr users and uses. Currently we are investigating unexpected uses of Flickr, individual and collective, such as for archaeological images and for real-time reporting.

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