A Snapshot of Social Media: Camera Phone Practices

Larissa Hjorth and Natalie Hendry

Abstract

This paper provides a short summary on some of the key debates emerging around visual social media. In particular we discuss the role of camera phones in issues of intimacy and co-presence.

Keywords

cell phone, social media, mobile media

Social media is one of the most dynamic, interdisciplinary, and evasive fields—it is both the barometer and scape-goat for contemporary popular culture debates and practices. For some, social media is defined by the key modalities and platforms like Facebook and Twitter which feature participatory, collaborative user-created content (UCC). For others, social media is a recombination and a remediation of other, older forms of communication.

As José van Dijck (2013) argues in *The Culture of Connectivity*, all media have always been social. Here, it is important to remember that all forms of sociality have always been mediated—if not by technologies, then by language, memories, and gestures. Contemporary social media just compress and spread ideas in a more accelerated and data heavy manner. However, as Graham Meikle (2014) rightly warns, often, the social media rubric is used interchangeably with "online contemporary media" (p. 1059). For others such as media activists like Geert Lovink (2012), social media disconnects the social from its historical and political contexts. For Christian Fuchs (2013), understanding social media requires us to read it through critical theory. Among these highly contested terrains, one issue remains clear—the importance of social media within contemporary cultural, political, and social life. This significance of social media has been spearheaded by the establishment of the *Social Media + Society* journal. In this commentary, we reflect upon one of the most abundant and yet still under-theorized areas, camera phone practices. In this short provocation, we seek to contextualize the phenomenon from first-generation "networked visuality" to second-generation "emplaced visuality." We argue that camera phone practices *in* and *as* social media link us to earlier remediated media and social practices (pinning on the bedroom wall) as they do lead to emerging visualities.

Within the copious social media sharing, camera phone images feature. The oversharing of images of everyday banalities fill the Internet with many haunted and unwatched images. After all, if everyone is taking pictures, who has time to contemplate others! Random "likes" are interwoven into the rhythms of everyday life. Unlike first-generation camera phone practices whereby images were often uploaded onto the computer and the sites like Flickr, second-generation camera phone practices are characterized by smartphone apps like Instagram. These apps afford for in-house editing—filters often evoking a nostalgia or what Nathan Jurgenson (2011) called "nostalgia for the present"—geotagging, and almost instantaneous dissemination across Twitter, Facebook, email, and Tumblr. In particular, smartphone apps like Instagram are both romanticizing older remediated analog practices while creating new ways in which images can be linked to place as a practice on the move.

While first generation of camera phone sharing was characterized by "networked" visuality (Ito & Okabe, 2006), second generation camera phone apps can be understood in terms of "emplaced" visuality (Pink & Hjorth, 2012). Emplaced visuality puts a theory of movement at the center of our understanding of contemporary media practice. Rather than movement being between nodes in the "network," movement needs to be understood as central to the way people and images become emplaced. Emplacing involves the entanglement of movement and placing across temporal, geographic, electronic, and spatial dimensions. From nostalgia filters that

RMIT University, Australia

Corresponding Author:
Larissa Hjorth, RMIT University, GPO Box 2476, Melbourne, Victoria 3001, Australia.
Email: larissa.hjorth@rmit.edu.au

evoke and emplace another time to geotagging which emplaces the image to a geographic location with fixed times, camera phone app images constantly emplace as they move through places, space, and socialities. According to Hochman and Manovich (2013), "the most prominent element that underlies Instagram's structure is its reliance on geo-temporal tagging: the geographical and temporal identification of a media artifact" which "suppresses temporal, vertical structures in favor of spatial connectivities" (n.p.). The overlay between the geographic, temporal, caption, and image provides new ways in which to narrate a sense of place with sociality.

The entangling of camera phone practices not only remediates earlier analog photography aesthetics (i.e. Instagram as a networked polaroid) but they also evoke earlier identity rituals, especially as rites for passage for youth. The bedroom, as one example of an "intimate public" (Berlant, 1998), becomes reblogged, rather than pasted, onto Tumblr feeds. Just as young people collaged fanzines or decorated their bedrooms with posters, they also use platforms like Tumblr to creatively visualize and "circulate everything": their intimate, consumer, and aesthetic desires; personal politics; and endless animated gifs (Fink & Miller, 2013, p. 3). Although limiting, the bedroom wall metaphor points to the ways that young people continually "renovate" their spaces and, in turn, their identities and relationships (Lincoln & Robards, 2014). Tumblr becomes an unstable, transient bedroom wall, as young people predominantly use camera phones to reblog content out of boredom in the mundane places: waiting rooms, school buses, and shopping queues (Heine, 2014). Fading photos on bedroom walls feature on Instagram too to disrupt linear streams of the present, as childhood pasts are hashtagged with "throwback Thursday" #tbt, or "flashback Friday" #fbf.

The camera phone affords bedroom walls and intimate practices to become entangled with changing environments of surveillance and protection. For example, the boundaries of bedrooms, schools, shopping centers, and hospitals become blurred as camera phones bring, alongside new ways to teach and learn, last week's party images, and shared porn videos into the classroom. The histories of young people as a population under surveillance are remediated through camera phone practices as new anxieties and moral panics are revealed. The selfie as one such barometer of moral panic not only comes to represent narcissism and disengagement from the self (Wendt, 2014) but also visualizes intimate communication between friends when text and emojis are inadequate, and exposes legal and political challenges to how we understand the relationship between young people's identities, bodies, and camera phones (Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013). Photos exchanged through Snapchat, Instagram, and Kik convey a sense of being *with* each other and reinforce shared emotional experience across time and place. These connective practices are especially vital for marginalized young people, whose camera practices cannot simply be pushed aside as consumer-driven or self-gratifying.

Conclusion on the Move: Emplaced and Entangled

As Daniel Palmer (2014) notes in his study on iPhone photography, cameras have colonized the mobile phone over the past decade. Nokia has reportedly put more cameras into people's hands than in the whole previous history of photography (Palmer 2014). Rather than just being about networked visualities in which movements through space, time, and place are frozen into a networked snapshot to share, emplaced visualities are about an embracement of camera phone images as a co-present part of movement through place and spaces. Spaces like trains are no longer about a transitory "in-between" space whereby the destination is the most important place; rather, spaces like trains become incubators for emplaced visuality. They become about *co-presence* rather than *co-location*. These emplaced visualities in turn highlight the ways in which cartographies of the social, spatial, and geographic are being emplaced and entangled in new ways. Through these changes, we need to adapt models for analyzing such media practices as part of emplaced cartographies that see location, representation, and experience being transformed through mobile and social media convergence. *Snapshots on the move*.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

References

Berlant, L. (1998). Intimacy: A special issue. *Intimacy*, *24*, 281-288.

Fink, M., & Miller, Q. (2013). Trans media moments: Tumblr, 2011–2013. *Television & New Media*, *15*(7) 611-626.

Fuchs, C. (2013). Social Media: *An introduction*. London: Sage.

Heine, C. (2014, October 20). 16 months after acquisition, Yahoo hasn't made Tumblr uncool. *Adweek*. Retrieved from http://www.adweek.com/news/technology/16-months-after-acquisition-yahoo-hasnt-made-tumblr-uncool-160867

Hochman, N., & Manovich, L. (2013). Zooming into an Instagram city: Reading the local through social media. *First Monday*. Available from http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/4711

Ito, M., & Okabe, D. (2006). 'Everyday Contexts of Camera Phone Use: steps towards technosocial ethnographic frameworks', in J. Höflich and M. Hartmann (eds) *Mobile Communication in Everyday Life: An Ethnographic View*, Frank & Timme, Berlin, pp. 79-102.

Jurgenson, N. (2011, May 14). The faux-vintage photo: Full essay (parts I, II, and III). *The Society Pages*. Retrieved from http://thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/2011/05/14/the-faux-vintage-photo-full-essay-parts-i-ii-and-iii/

Lincoln, S., & Robards, B. (2014, October 8). Being strategic and taking control: Bedrooms, social network sites and the narratives of growing up. *New Media & Society*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1177/1461444814554065

Lovink, G. (2012). *Networks without cause: A critique of social media*. London: Polity.

Meikle, G. (2014). Book reviews: Social media. *Media, Culture & Society*, *36*, 1057-1060.

Palmer, D. (2014). Mobile media photography. In G. Goggin & L. Hjorth (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook to mobile media* (pp. 245-255). New York, NY: Routledge.

Pink, S., & Hjorth, L. (2012). Emplaced cartographies: Reconceptualising camera phone practices in an age of locative media. *Media International Australia*, *145*, 145-156.

Ringrose, J., Harvey, L., Gill, R., & Livingstone, S. (2013). Teen girls, sexual double standards and "sexting": Gendered value in digital image exchange. *Feminist Theory*, *14*, 305-323.

van Dijck, J. (2013). *The culture of connectivity: A critical history of social media*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Wendt, B. (2014). *The allure of the selfie: Instagram and the new self-portrait*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Institute of Network Cultures.

Author Biographies

Larissa Hjorth (PhD, University of Melbourne) is a Professor in the School of Media and Communication. Her research interests include the socio-cultural dimensions of mobile social media and play in the Asia-Pacific region.

Natalie Hendry (MEd, University of Melbourne) is a PhD candidate in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University. Her research interests include youth mental health, sexuality, visual cultures, affect and embodiment, and visual research methods.