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JOURNALISM, REPRESENTATION AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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“The smartphone is my constant companion”. Digital photographic practices and the elderly

Maria Schreiber

Abstract

This chapter attends to the question of how personal photography is practiced through and with the smartphone by the elderly. The smartphone as a networked multimedia device that is always at hand is at the heart of current changes not only in personal photography, but in the mediatization of our everyday lives. It clearly affords new possibilities, but how those affordances are used and how different ways of engaging with the same affordances are evolving, remains to be empirically investigated. One factor of variation are different generation- and age-specific technological experiences that seem to constitute different ways of engaging with media. While considerable research has been done on younger people and their digital photographic practices, the so-called *digital immigrants*, have not received as much attention. Based on an empirical example that combines the analysis of text and picture, the article shows how a sixtytwo-year-old woman adopted the smartphone as her “*constant companion*” and key device for snap photography. Her modes of showing and sharing suggest that specific configurations of hardware (smartphone) and software (e.g. *WhatsApp*) contain various affordances that she employs for diverging needs – while her family remains the main motif and counterpart of her photo sharing practices.

Keywords: Digital photography; visual; seniors; generation; smartphone

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1. Introduction and theoretical framework

Current technological changes and innovations regarding personal photography provide a broad field of research and a lot of data for media and communication studies: 400 million photos are shared via Snapchat every day, 300m on Facebook, 60m on Instagram.¹ The term “*selfie*” entered the Oxford English Dictionary in 2013, and in the same year, Barack Obama posed for such a selfie at Nelson Mandela’s funeral. The importance of empirical research on personal photography for a better theoretical understanding of everyday media practices is obvious, yet only slowly evolving.

Existing research attends to the topic primarily from a practice perspective, investigating specific cultural contexts with ethnographic approaches (Okabe and Ito, 2006; van Dijck, 2008), focussing on the complex entanglements of technologies, practices and (the mediatization of) everyday life. Photographic practices are usually studied without considering the pictures themselves in an Anglo-American research tradition. At the same time, the analysis of social relations and/or representations as they are constituted in pictures iconically is a booming field in German visual sociology (Bohnsack, 2008; Breckner, 2010; Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014), with less attention paid to the context of the interpreted pictures. Based on the assumption that the relation of both dimensions – pictures and practices – is crucial, the focus of my investigation is how personal photos show something and how they are shown and shared on the smartphone by teenagers and seniors.

Framed by a social-constructivist understanding of mediatization, the study is interested in “*the way in which technical media ‘structure’ the way we communicate or, vice versa, how the way we communicate is reflected in a technological change of media*” (Hepp, 2012: 14). In doing so, the moulding forces of the media are always to be analyzed in their netting with highly habitualised human actions (ibid. 18f.). Therefore, habitualised photographic practices are the main object of this research – this means drawing attention “*to the co-constitution of human subjectivities and the visual objects their practices create*” (Rose and Tolia-Kelly, 2012: 3). This approach resonates with the concept of double (or even triple) articulation (Hartmann, 2006; Livingstone, 2007) in domestication theory, proposing that media should become relevant in (at least) two dimensions: as material objects located in particular settings (context) and as symbolic messages (content).

The material dimension of photography has been analysed primarily in terms of the media (technologies) it is practiced in: the photo album, Instagram, newspapers, etc. Practices, bodily experiences and the senses are important aspects for analysis, and ethnography is understood as the adequate approach to understanding those material practices (Edwards, 2009; Reckwitz, 2003). How those practices and pictures are embedded in and co-constituted

by specific contexts also becomes relevant from this perspective. The analysis and interpretation of image *content*, on the other hand, is often criticised for its alleged arbitrariness and subjectivity. Nevertheless, there seems to be a consensus that a picture’s particular characteristics have to be respected methodologically, and its specific *visuality* understood and analysed (Wolff, 2012: 13). Pictures may convey meaning – but it is essential to define to what or whom this meaning is related to (Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014: 149).

In this chapter, I will further outline how these basic, interdisciplinary questions on materiality and visuality could be pursued in the evolving field of mobile communication and offer a glimpse into my ongoing empirical studies within the area.

2. Showing and sharing photos

2.1. *Continuities and changes*

If the ones and zeros did not add up to an image that massages the familiar and traditional habits of the human sensorium, it is unlikely that the digital revolution would have gained any traction at all. This is not to argue that, when it comes to images, there is nothing new under the sun. But whatever this newness is, it will not likely be well described by a binary history that separates the digital image from all that preceded it. (Mitchell, 2010: 45)

Personal photography has always had and still has various social functions, such as social bonding and communication, demonstration of identity and belonging, and preservation and retention of memories (Sarvas and Frohlich, 2011; Walser and Neumann-Braun, 2013). How bonding, representing and transmitting are practiced, however, is co-constructed by the changing technologies at hand, innovations and convergence. Through digitalisation, personal photography has become strongly meshed with computer technologies (Van House, 2011), and social media “*logic*” (Rubinstein and Sluis, 2008), ubiquity (Hand, 2012), and mobility (Villi, 2007). Current research indicates shifts from family to individual use, from memory tools to communication devices, and from sharing (memory) objects to sharing experiences (van Dijck, 2008), which goes hand in hand with a “*widening range of photographable situations*” (Schwarz, 2010: 166). Digital photography clearly affords new possibilities (Larsen and Sandbye, 2013: xxiii), but it remains to be empirically investigated how those affordances are used in particular contexts and practices (Hand, 2012: 19), and how different ways of engaging with the same affordances might evolve (Hjarvard and Petersen, 2013: 5). The relation of change and continuity in an ongoing transformation from analogue to digital photography is challenging. Pickering (2013) calls for more, in-depth empirical research, stronger differentiation, less generalisation and less extrapolation

only from the newer uses of personal photography. Nevertheless, there is an obvious shift regarding the most commonly used hardware, as the smartphone camera is increasingly used instead of the digital pocket camera, and sales of pocket cameras go down – which most probably is related to the (ongoing) qualitative enhancement of sensors, image resolution, and software in smartphones (Donegan, 2013; Payson, 2013).

2.2. *The smartphone and mediated mobilism?*

As a “*networked multimedia device that is always at hand as part of one’s everyday life*” (Larsen and Sandbye, 2013: xxiv), the smartphone is at the heart of current changes not only in personal photography, but is also an indicator and motor of the mediatization of everyday lives (Miller, 2014: 218). Research on mobile media and their networked connectivity is expanding as a crucial field in our discipline and as Wei puts it polemically, “*mobile media-supported communication appears to have hammered the latest, and perhaps the last, nail in the mass communication coffin*” (Wei, 2013: 52). Researching mobile media means researching a complex interplay of communication practices between mobile- and computer-mediated, between digital and non-digital exchange (Linke, 2013: 35), which calls for an integrative, in-depth empirical approach (ibid.). Miller conceptualises the smartphone as an interface with continuous global connectivity, engaging “*deeply personal and emotional social interaction and self-identity as well as being an irreplaceable instrument in the practical negotiation of everyday life*” (Miller, 2014: 210 f), amalgamating familiar media along with new ones (ibid.: 211).

3. Generation and age

While most of the small amount of research on digital (photographic) practices focuses on younger people, often related to their use of social media platforms (Neumann-Braun and Autenrieth, 2011; Van House, 2011), other (older) age groups are under-researched. Exactly those groups could, however, shed light on the complex entanglements of changes and continuities regarding the technological development of personal photography, as major innovations have taken — and still take — place throughout their lifetime.

There is a general lack of in-depth qualitative studies regarding the appropriation of digital and networked media in old age (Schorb, 2009: 327), and when included, old age is often analysed from a mainly deficit-oriented perspective (Schäffer, 2006: 17). At the same time, the share of the 60+ population is growing and the “*grey market*” is becoming economically relevant. Exist-

ing findings concentrate mainly on practices related to TV and radio, showing that retirement is often a break within media biographies, and that there is a variety of ways in which media are integrated in everyday lives, dependent on, for example, education, milieu, media biography and preferences (ibid.). Still, generation-specific similarities regarding habitual media practices can be reconstructed empirically (Schäffer, 2003), and seem to be grounded in a “*naturalisation*” of media practice during youth, which is a predisposition for the adoption of new media technologies throughout lifetime (ibid.)³. Shared layers of experience (Mannheim, 1998) become decisive for collectively similar practices, but also regarding habits of seeing and generation/age-specific visual conventions (Baxandall, 1972), which might become visible in photos that are shared on the smartphone.

The underlying question is if – and if yes, how – generation-specific media cultures determine the showing and sharing of personal photos through the smartphone; the aim is to understand how two contrasting age groups integrate the showing and sharing of personal photos through smartphones in their everyday lives, and how such practices become meaningful in various contexts.

4. ‘The elderly’ - an empirical glimpse

4.1. Methodological approach

The aim of the empirical study is to reconstruct how teenagers and seniors use smartphones for showing and sharing personal photos. In my fieldsite Austria, nearly all teenagers use smartphones, but only a third of the elderly do⁴. Both teenagers and seniors are included in the study, participating in in-depth case studies. Each group is interviewed and observed, and participants provide some of their own pictures that they have shown and shared with the smartphone. This triangulation of ethnographic field (also online) observations, group discussions, and picture interpretation reflects the theoretical dimensions of analysis that seem to be crucial for understanding pictorial practices. Data collection and interpretation is conducted within the framework of the Documentary Method (Bohnsack, 2008; Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014), a qualitative, reconstructive approach that is based on the analytical differentiation of explicit and implicit meaning. The method aims at reconstructing habitual orientations, making explicit otherwise implicit layers of meaning that are coalesced in text and image (Bohnsack, 2008). For interpretation of texts, this has already been elaborated, while the systematic interpretation of pictures for social scientific analysis is a quite young phenomenon.

Why use photos as empirical data? A photograph can be understood as a visual document of (1) the photographer's habitus⁵, the site of production, (2) the visible, represented scene, person or context, the site of the image, (3) the site of audiencing, and a specifically defined context beyond production or image⁶ (Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014: 147; Rose, 2012: 19). The researcher has to define what kind of evidence photographs constitute within a specific study, and reflect on how she or he co-constitutes the production, authorisation, and choice of photos as empirical data (ibid., Tinkler, 2013, p. 2). Through photos, we are capable of gaining access to socially and visually constructed slices of life and especially to embodied and incorporated aspects of sociality, as they are shown rather than verbalized (Goffman, 1987: 10).

In my study, the photographs that are provided by the participants are understood as documents for their habitus as photographers but also as a visual account of something that they find relevant to share with someone through their smartphone, which is then further investigated in the interview.

4.2. *The case of Poldi*

Poldi is a 62-year-old woman from a small town close to Vienna, Austria, whom I interviewed together with her photography-savvy husband Otto. Poldi got her smartphone as a Christmas-present from her husband, and getting used to the new device was "*not natural*" for her; she frames it as a relatively slow learning and change process, describing the smartphone as "*certainly a different league*" compared to her old "*normal*" cellphone. She did not use the camera from the beginning on: "*I didn't need it. I didn't use it. For me taking photos in everyday life just was not, was not a topic*". The birth of her two grandchildren changed her smartphone photo practice drastically: She spends a lot of time with them and started using her smartphone for taking their pictures and showing/sharing them on a regular basis.

Important for Poldi is the combination of the instant possibility of taking photos but also "*because you just always also have the photos with you. To show them.*" Asked about situations in which she shows photos, the thematic focus is again confirmed: "*children's pictures, when someone asks you: how tall are they now? – [performing her reaction to the question, M.S.:] well, wait I have a picture with me.*" Showing photos to others on her own device is her main mode of showing and sharing. Poldi also uses the messaging service *WhatsApp* to receive and share photos either with colleagues, her husband or her children, but "*only sporadically, if I really like something and think maybe that is interesting for them and them;*" though her husband Otto added that Poldi once sent him mouth-watering photos of a nice dinner she was having while Otto was on a diet and therefore at home. Communicating her location

visually is one main feature of how Poldi shares photos via *WhatsApp*: “*you send it to someone whom you want to show where you are*”. The mediation of presence and creation of proximity is perceived as one crucial affordance of interpersonal visual communication through the smartphone (Hjorth and Pink, 2013; Villi and Stocchetti, 2011). Poldi uses this instantaneous possibility of communicating her physical location mainly with people who are very close to her anyway – emotionally and geographically.

Her non-networked digital pocket camera is described as something she would mainly take on holidays, “*it is not my constant companion, but my constant companion is the smartphone.*” Poldi distinguishes between different kinds of pictures that she takes: with the smartphone she mainly takes pictures that she labels as everyday snapshots, a mode of photography that has become easily accessible for Poldi, mainly because she always has the device with her.

Fig. 1: Picture provided by Poldi (left), formal composition of picture drawn in by author (right).



The picture that Poldi provided shows an intimate family moment; the interaction of her own daughter with her grandchildren on a wooden bench in an outside setting. The framing and composition of the picture emphasizes the circular arrangement of the group, who are turned to each other; the woman on the left turns towards the children – but does not hold them and they are not clinging to her. The inner circle sets itself apart from the straight dark fence and the straight white houses in the background. The children employ

the wooden bench as a little stage, but they are under secure supervision; the mother is visible in the photograph, and also the grandmother's gaze is visible in the photograph: Grandmother Poldi is looking down on the situation from a top down perspective. As oldest present member of the family she reiterates the mother's supervision of the situation from a standpoint outside the frame. The photograph makes visible how the depicted mother acts towards the depicted children: she creates a free, but finite space for the children on the bench. This attitude is mirrored in the way in which Poldi as mother and grandmother depicts the scene: she lets them be, but positions them in an enclosed surrounding.

The photo shows the unison and intimacy of inter-generational family relationships. Moreover, this visual document is not only something Poldi wants to keep for herself, but also something she show to others. While the documentation and construction of family life has been a typically female task in analogue photography as well (Rose, 2003), the added value of smartphone photography seems to be the *constant companionship* of the smartphone, ubiquity, and mobility not only of the camera, but also of the storage device. It easily allows for photos that are intimate snapshots of routine practices rather than staged line-ups at special occasions. Nevertheless, the social function and meaning of the showing/sharing practice in this social context does not change dramatically. What remains to be investigated more thoroughly is how the ubiquity and mobility of the smartphone camera might change how the device is embedded in the scenery and which kind of aesthetics are created on a visual level, maybe allowing for a specific instantaneity, intimacy, and closeness of the smartphone snapshot compared to the (analogue) camera snapshot⁷. To summarize, Poldi's mode of showing and sharing is strongly framed by the urge to constitute instant intimacy through (showing) and with (sharing) her loved ones. The smartphone facilitates and enforces this practice conveniently.

5. Further research and future perspectives

Poldi's case is a first step and starting point for further in-depth case studies, as only through comparative analysis with other seniors, on the one hand, and teenagers, on the other hand, can similarities and differences of sharing and showing photos on the smartphone be worked out and analysed. First findings show that an in-depth qualitative approach is capable of reconstructing the fine distinctions of how specific software (Apps) and hardware (Smartphone) configurations become relevant. There seem to be differentiated *picture politics* regarding what to show where and to whom. Also, the content of visual communication seems to be strongly related to age-specific challenges and developmental tasks (Paus-Hasebrink, 2010): the peer-group, for example, is

the main motif and communicative counterpart for teenagers, as is the family for seniors. Based on further case studies, it will become possible to outline *photo-media-cultures* and question their alleged age-specificity in a field that is undergoing major changes. New findings will be generated regarding the relation of pictures and practices and their pivotal point, the smartphone.

Notes

- 1 Medium.com, data for 2013, <https://medium.com/social-media-and-business/a51d76038c6e> (28.5.2014).
- 2 Hartmann 2013.
- 3 Or as Douglas Adams (2005, p.111) puts it: “Anything that is in the world when you’re born is normal and ordinary and is just a natural part of the way the world works. Anything that’s invented between when you’re fifteen and thirty- five is new and exciting and revolutionary and you can probably get a career in it. Anything invented after you’re thirty-five is against the natural order of things.”
- 4 People who used the internet on their smartphone outside their home or work: 89.5% of 16–24-year-olds, 38.3% of 55 – 64-year-olds and 27.3% of 65 – 74-year-olds. % of people who used the internet within the last three months. Statistik Austria 2014. Downloaded 28 October 2014 from http://www.statistik.at/web_de/statistiken/informationengesellschaft/ikt-einsatz_in_haushalten/022210.html
- 5 “The group places this practice [photography, M.S.] under its collective rule, so that the most trivial photograph expresses, apart from the explicit intentions of the photographer, the system of schemes of perception, thought and appreciation common to a whole group” (Bourdieu, 1996: 6).
- 6 For example, when a framed photo of a grandchild is given to the grandparents as a present, a photo of a beach is posted on Facebook, or a Justin Bieber poster hanging above the bed is admired by a teenager, etc.
- 7 A historical comparison with older photos from this family could be done in order to take a closer look at this question.

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Biography

Maria Schreiber is a PhD student at the Department of Communications of the University of Vienna. She holds a scholarship of the Austrian Academy of Sciences as part of the interdisciplinary DOC-team project “Picture Practices”. In her dissertation she studies practices and aesthetics of smartphone photography, comparing teenagers and seniors. Maria has previously worked in corporate communications, as a research assistant in a methodological project on Iconic Communication, and as a lecturer at the University of Applied Sciences for Management and Communication.

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