

Digital cameras and the reproduction of photography and family

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In this contribution, we focus on the implications of digital technology for the shape of mundane photographic practice and the location of photos in the reproduction of friendship and family.

We draw upon interviews with people who use digital cameras with a range of experience and motivations. Our respondents talked about the disruptive, destructive and transformative consequences of 'going' digital. At the same time, their accounts show how much has stayed the same. Although the range of potentially photogenic situations continues to expand, new methods of image capture and management were used to reproduce remarkably consistent conventions of visual representation. These elements of continuity were as important for those who revelled in the new-found opportunities afforded by digital technology (photoshop, click-and-delete, etc.) as for those for whom 'going digital' made little or no difference to established photographic habits.

The novelty of 'digital' lay not in the kinds of pictures taken, but in what happened to them next. While some approaches to digital image storage had much in common with 'traditional' methods of archiving prints (e.g. we identified the digital equivalent of pictures stuffed in a shoebox), our interviewees faced a range of decidedly 'new' issues to do with file size, quality, circulation, archiving and sharing. Many also confronted the challenge of handling and moving between multiple cameras, either of their own or available within the household.

In negotiating and navigating between these possibilities people were apparently generating and reproducing a number of increasingly differentiated forms of photographic practice. The 'classic' family album – a fixed archive of shared memory, typically maintained by women – and the forms of social interaction that circulate around it are clearly threatened by these developments. At the same time, new forms of photo collection and display sustain similar but not identical practices and modes

of sociality. Children are busy collecting photo-archives of their own, often sharing them with friends and doing so in ways that were quite unrelated to the 'official' cataloguing of family life. Meanwhile, laptops are to be found with screen savers running through more shots of holidays, birthdays and Christmases than could ever fit into a standard sized 'album'. The digital photo frame, itself a fine blending of novelty and tradition, exemplifies what seems to be an also intriguing development in the reproduction not only of photography but also of family life.

Rather than thinking about how people 'use' photo technologies, we conclude by wondering about how digital photographic

practices – especially forms of sharing, archiving and storage – might be changing both the representation and the reality of social relations, at the same time as these relations remain a consistent and conventional 'subject' of amateur photographic attention.

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