

Shaping Inquiry in Culture, Communication  
and Media Studies  
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# Images, Ethics, Technology

Edited by Sharrona Pearl

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## Facebook photography and the demise of Kodak and Polaroid

Marita Sturken

In December 2011, Facebook introduced Timeline, a restructuring of Facebook user pages that reformatted their content – personal posts, photos, and videos – into a chronological framework. In the process, Facebook users were forced to have their pages shaped into personal histories, organized, like photo albums, yearbooks, and diaries, from birth to the present (the switch was voluntary for a period of time, and then mandatory). In the process, Facebook “conveniently” filled in the personal information that it had on users from their personal profiles, such as date of birth, hometown, schools attended, etc., producing a fair amount of discomfort in demonstrating the extent of their “knowledge” of users for whom privacy had become an increasing concern. Facebook has sold Timeline to its users as a kind of multimedia self-narration of one’s “life story.” Importantly, Timeline rearranges all previous Facebook activities into a format that is particularly photo-friendly, thus creating a context for personal histories to be narrated through photographs. The rolling text of Timeline was thus greeted in the technology press as Facebook claiming the terrain of photographic memory and the family album. “Like it or not, Facebook is the new Kodak,” writes K. Kelleher. “For many Facebook users, Facebook is becoming the photo album of the 21st century.”<sup>21</sup>

Facebook needed to sell the concept of Timeline to its users, and so it produced an ad to convince users that Timeline would facilitate the creation of personal photographic histories. In the ad, Andy Sparks, apparent Facebook employee, is born in 1974, grows up, graduates high school, meets a girl (“in a relationship” in Facebook parlance), gets married, and then has a little girl of his own. Along the way certain themes are established: Andy singing badly at a microphone; Andy as a cut-up; Andy as a goofy yet loving father. The ad races along Andy Sparks’ life story as if we are flying over it, winging into the present (Figure 7.1).

The Facebook Timeline ad directly recalls one of the most famous television ads ever made, Kodak’s “Turn Around” ad. The 1963 ad, set to the accompaniment of a Harry Belafonte–Malvina Reynolds song (sung by Ed Ames), is now considered to be a classic in the history of television advertising. It traces the childhood of a young girl, through an imagined photo



Figure 7.1 Still from the Facebook Timeline ad, 2011.

Source: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=mR8x\\_xp4zhU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mR8x_xp4zhU).

album (the name Judy embossed on its cover), as she grows up and then, exiting childhood, “has babes of her own.” At the end of the ad, the viewer is told that, “you can do it too, all it takes is a camera, Kodak film, and thoughtfulness.” (It’s worth noting what is really being sold here product-wise is apparently not a Kodak camera – just “a camera” – but Kodak film.) Like Andy Sparks, Judy is a real person, in this case Judy Ellis Glickman, whose father, Irving Ellis, took the photographs.<sup>22</sup>

“Turn Around” gained its place as a classic of television advertising because of the ad’s capacity to depict emotional and familial bonds and then to establish the crucial role of the Kodak brand in maintaining those bonds. The ad thus succeeds in affirming that Kodak is the key conduit through which memories and familial relations are maintained, and it tugs at the viewer’s emotional registers in order to align Kodak with the affect of family memories. This situates it within a longer history in which many communication technologies have aimed to self commodify as the means through which individual relationships are reified, exemplified by such slogans as AT&T’s well-known “Reach Out and Touch Someone.”

The aim of a massive corporate entity such as Facebook (with over one billion users)<sup>23</sup> to become the photo album of the digital generation coincided with the demise of the two giants of the photographic industries of the twentieth century: Kodak and Polaroid. Polaroid declared bankruptcy several times between 2001 and 2009, and, in true ironic fashion, Kodak’s declaration of bankruptcy in January 2012 was a mere month after the

introduction of Facebook Timeline, and a few months before, in April 2012, Facebook paid \$1 billion for Instagram. Instagram's iconography references both Kodak (the Instamatic) and Polaroid (the Instagram logo plays off the Polaroid camera and its most popular filter style – "1977" – looks like an SX-70). Around the same time, Google launched a campaign for Google Chrome that marketed it as an ideal format for family memories. In 2012, the technology press was thus replete with articles about how social media has become the new photo album. Yet, as a social-media platform, one that retains ownership over the content that is posted on its site and that profits from access to consumers and their personal data, Facebook's aim to position itself as the keeper of personal and familiar memories raises complex ethical issues about the intersection of capital and affect.

My aim in this chapter is to trace the intersection of these business histories (Kodak, Polaroid, Facebook), the family and personal photograph, and the selling of a particular set of personal and family photographic practices in order to consider the ethical issues raised by the relationship of corporate marketing to the very affective practices of family and personal photography. I thus aim to examine the history by which Kodak quite effectively shapes a set of technology practices of family photography throughout the twentieth century, which is then followed by the Polaroid Corporation with a different set of aims (the photo as instant and as entertainment) yet with equal market dominance and influence, and, with the demise of these two companies, Facebook then aims to shape personal photographic histories. It is at the juncture of sentiment, marketing, business strategy, and technological history that I would like to pose a set of questions about the ethics of corporate ownership and shaping of personal and family photographs.

One of the key business principles that shapes the history of Kodak and Polaroid, which has particular implications for the shift from analog to digital in the photographic industries, is the business model of the "razor-blade strategy." The razor-blade strategy refers to the ways that corporations sell consumers devices at low cost (or give them for free) that then allow these companies to sell over-priced products that are needed for continued use of those original devices. So, a razor is relatively cheap, but the replacement razor blades are expensive and constitute a substantial part of the company's profits in ways that are relatively hidden from consumers. The "razor-blade" business strategy can be seen in evidence today as the profit basis for contemporary products such as digital printers (cheap or often free with overpriced ink cartridges), cell phones (low-cost phones with high-cost calling plans), or console-based video games (inexpensive consoles, expensive games).

Kodak and Polaroid were some of the primary beneficiaries for many decades of this business strategy. They sold cheap cameras to consumers and then made the majority of their profits on film and (for Kodak) film processing. The profitability of this was quite extraordinary throughout most of the twentieth century. But when the digital emerged, effectively eliminating the cost of film and making it "free," this model could no longer hold, and

neither company could adjust fast enough – as if each were a larger ocean liner unable to turn quickly to avoid the iceberg. While Kodak's effective demise has been more spectacular, given that its brand value was so deep, Polaroid suffered the same inability to be a flexible-enough company to survive the demise of the photographic-film business. In a 2008 talk at Yale School of Management, Polaroid's former CEO Gary T. DiCamillo famously said: "We knew we needed to change the fan belt, but we couldn't stop the engine. And the reason we couldn't stop the engine was that instant film was the core of the financial model of this company. It drove all the economics."<sup>4</sup>

The razor-blade strategy may seem quaint, but it has proven to have a certain kind of longevity in the digital age – one could chart this from the very early revelation by nascent e-mail providers such as Hotmail (in the mid-1990s) that they could give users free e-mail accounts in order to tap into their personal networks. Today, the "free" services of social media such as Facebook or platforms such as Google with Google Chrome and gmail, take the razor blade further, redefining it not as the value of the "secondary" product that consumers are sold to keep their devices functioning (such as film) but as the value of delivering users and their data to marketers and corporations. The service is "free" with the price of loss of privacy and the agreement to be under the gaze of marketers, constantly available to consumer messages. So, one could say that the cheap razor, the Instamatic, or SX-70 camera, and the Facebook and Google platforms are all product *portals*, intended to deliver consumers into an ongoing relationship with the brand and to create a bond that will then root consumers in a sentimental and affective relationship to a product or brand. The difference with social media is that the shift is from the value of the film needed to make the camera function to the value of the integration of brand messages into users' social-media lives. We thus go from razor blades to consumer data. With the increased role of photographs in social media, and the advent of platforms such as Facebook Timeline that intend to shape consumers' personal photographic histories into online photo albums, personal images are thus increasingly owned by corporations in the digital cloud.

In order to understand the implications of the terrain of social media's emergence as the key platform for personal and family images, it is necessary to make sense of how Kodak and Polaroid established a particular set of photographic practices. Thus, before turning to examine photographs in Facebook and Instagram, I would like to look more closely at the history of the success and demise of Kodak and Polaroid, and the different models of photographic practices that each company marketed and sold.

## Kodak

The name Kodak itself has come to signify so many aspects of a particular history of photography: a modern name, created for the brand, a company founder and patriarch (George Eastman), a company town (Rochester, New

York), a brand so dominant that it defined an entire set of practices, and a set of familiar slogans that were so influential that they became catchwords of American culture: the "Kodak moment," "To Kodak," "You Press the Button, We Do the Rest," and so on.

The origins of the mass market of photography can be found in 1888, with George Eastman's patenting of the name Kodak and developing the Kodak No.1 camera. Kodak's history forms a parallel history to that of amateur photography, integral to it, with an arc of about 123 years until Kodak's declaration of bankruptcy in January 2012 and the dramatic transformation of amateur photography over the last decade in particular. As late as 1976, Kodak commanded 90 percent of film sales and 85 percent of camera sales in the US.<sup>5</sup> It has had a faint-hearted corporate afterlife, largely based on its valuable holdings of patents and intellectual property, but its effective demise is irrevocable.<sup>6</sup> There are business stories to be told here (the last few decades of Kodak's business profile has been told as a cautionary story about bureaucratic obstacles, misguided management practices, complacent business strategies, brutal downsizing, and lack of innovation or foresight aided by outmoded corporate structure),<sup>7</sup> stories of business philosophy (the razor-blade model based on the belief that film would continue to be a crucial consumer product),<sup>8</sup> personality stories (Kodak founder George Eastman, an eccentric inventor and a key patent holder, committed suicide in 1932 in a strangely meticulous fashion after accessing his potential future as an invalid and shooting himself in the heart),<sup>9</sup> and stories of technology (the development of each new Kodak camera from the Brownie to the Instamatic can be seen as a defining feature of the structures of feeling of each era). Within this history, Kodak played a significant role in establishing the practices of amateur photography as defined by family photography in particular.

Kodak's early campaigns introducing the concept of photography by the masses spoke to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century consumers within the emergent values of modernity – as mobile citizens who had leisure time. With leisure as a newly understood category for modern workers, and with the growing population of young women moving through and working in urban centers, Kodak sold the idea of photography as freedom, thrills, and access to the great outdoors through its Kodak Gilmore Girls, who populated its early campaigns. In her insightful book, *Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia*, Nancy Martha West makes clear that the idea of "Kodakery," the notion that the Kodak photograph was a tool of self- and family documentation, took longer to take hold.<sup>10</sup> She argues that Kodak succeeded, through its market monopoly and its hold on the public imagination, in helping to shape not only practices of amateur photography but also *actual practices* of remembrance and nostalgia themselves. Thus, Kodak begins with slogans that embrace leisure ("Kodak as You Go," "Take a Kodak With You," "All Outdoors Invites Your Kodak") and then, as it began to understand the role of women consumers to its product, it moves to slogans about family unity

("Let the Children Kodak" (Figure 7.2), "The Brownie Family," "Let Kodak Keep the Story").

Kodak also provided a radical new sense of image abundance. In the late 1880s, Kodak began manufacturing film with 100 exposures, which, as West writes, "was probably over ten times as many photographs as the average middle-class American family owned at the time."<sup>11</sup> This simple technological development transformed the practices of amateur photography by tapping into the "dominant hope of American culture since the early nineteenth century: effortless abundance."<sup>12</sup>

Kodak had such a dominance in the market that its influence on the emerging set of practices of consumer photography was considerable.



## Let the Children Kodak

Enrich the home life with pictures of them and by them. There are opportunities at every moment of their busy little lives. They pose for you a hundred times a day and do it the more gracefully in that they do not know it. In every moment from "Good Morning, Papa," to "Now I Lay me," they invite the camera. And turn about is fair play. Let the Children Kodak. The mystery of photography appeals to them and with a simple little Brownie they soon learn to make good pictures.

There's no dark-room in photography by the Kodak system. Every step has been so simplified that the merest beginner can now make good pictures from the start. Kodak means photography with the bother left out.

Kodaks \$5.00 to \$100. Brownie Cameras (\$2.00 to \$12.00)

EASTMAN KODAK COMPANY,

ROCHESTER, N. Y.

Figure 7.2 "Let the Children Kodak" ad, 1909.

Kodak was a key factor in teaching consumers the practices of amateur photography. In his analysis of snapshot photographic culture, Richard Chalfen refers to the "home mode of pictorial communication" as "Kodak Culture," acknowledging the dominance of Kodak in shaping the practices of the snapshot.<sup>13</sup> By the early twentieth century, Kodak had focused its attention on encouraging the production of abundant photographs of families and children, all within a glow of nostalgia. Thus, Kodak helped to define the key role of amateur photography as domestic photography with its concept of "Kodak moments" – birthdays, childhood gatherings, family gatherings, and rituals that could form the *platform* for nostalgia. The culture of photography initiated by Kodak was thus not only about the capacity of the camera to produce an "abundance" if not an overproduction of images, but also about the broader implication of this concept of the "Kodak moment" – the structuring of life to create photographable moments and, by extension, the definition of difficult moments as the unphotographed, the forgettable. As West notes, Kodakery produced a narrowed view of what the snapshot photograph should do, instilling the notion that amateur photography was about the nuclear and private family: "it ensured that the nuclear family and the events that help maintain its survival – births, marriages, vacations, holidays – would form the dead center of photographic culture and, indeed, of culture as a whole."<sup>14</sup> Not only did Kodak establish this as the realm of photography, but also it encouraged and ultimately influenced consumers to effectively structure their lives with "Kodak moments" that were orchestrated and arrested in time, preserved in anticipation of nostalgic reflection. Hence, the genre of the photo album emerges with a collective cultural sense of the kinds of family pictures that should be taken and preserved within it.

### Polaroid

If Kodak established the role of domestic photography in the consumer market of amateur photography, Polaroid was its hip counterpart. Polaroid began its company arc in 1937 and ended it with declaring bankruptcy several times from 2001 to 2009, eventually ceasing the production of film. Importantly, while Kodak's brand dominance and meaning about family pictures and Kodak moments were retained throughout the twentieth century, Polaroid was defined by instantaneity and later by art. This was not about the domestic sphere of Kodak moments, but about photography and parties, swinging culture, sex, and hipsters.

The concept that drove the development of the instant photographic camera, first invented by Polaroid's legendary founder Edwin (Din) Land in 1948, was that of "one-step."<sup>15</sup> The initial idea came from the combination of developing chemicals and celluloid in a single package. A camera roller would squeeze the chemicals onto the exposed film as it was processed out of the camera and, after a short moment, the consumer would peel off the chemical

sheet in order to reveal the final image. The awkwardness of the Polaroid model – messy chemicals, the necessary and complex components of the camera to both take and process the picture, the excess garbage produced – points to the radical nature of its invention. This is intensely engineered instantaneity (*despite* rather than because of the technology), not the instantaneous ease of the digital image. Yet, in its values of instant (and sharing, as I will discuss) the Polaroid camera is prescient about the values of the digital image. Initially, the instant cameras were marketed as a means to improve image-taking – "Improve your pictures on the spot!" – but the values of entertainment and thrill soon emerged as Polaroid's marketing concepts – "there's no thrill like seeing your pictures 60 seconds after you shoot them."

The Polaroid SX-70, which hit the consumer market with immediate success in 1972–1973, was the product that most personified the Polaroid ethos and effect. The signature white borders of the SX-70 frames the instant photograph with a certain aesthetic. The SX-70 image develops over several minutes before the viewer's gaze (rather than under foil in the original film), thus creating an experience of suspense as it is gradually revealed. The SX-70 thus transformed the process of development (normally an inconvenience in which consumers – Kodak consumers – dropped film off and then waited days or weeks for its return) into something fun, potentially collective, if not titillating. "Take and show party pictures while the fun is going on," early Polaroid ads proclaimed. The connection of the Polaroid image to parties, celebrations, youthful gatherings, and collective viewing was thus both an intended and unintended consequence of its technological design and key to its cultural meaning as hip in the 1960s and 1970s.

Nowhere was Polaroid's aim for hipness clearer than in its campaign for the aptly named Polaroid Swinger in the 1960s (launched in 1965), which featured the camera as a kind of mod accessory (with a white plastic model and a viewfinder that lit up with "yes" when there was enough light for the picture). Here, the camera, as the portal to the expensive film, was sold for both its cheap price and its mod style – the lyrics of the ad jungle promised, "It's more than a camera, it's almost alive! It's only nineteen dollars and ninety-five." The ad for the Swinger featured (as did many ads in that era) young people frolicking on a beach and taking pictures of each other (Figure 7.3). The instant photograph was thus marketed as a youth product, one that was more about the social interactions and activity the camera produced than the pictures it took (the Swinger's photos were small and not particularly good).<sup>16</sup>

Edwin Land was a dominant inventor-CEO who had an obsession for product perfection at the level of engineering and a flare for product launch in ways that made him the prototype for Steve Jobs of Apple. Land introduced the SX-70 at a shareholders' meeting in April 1972 with a ten-minute film created by Charles and Ray Eames. Interestingly, at one point the film states that the "hope" of the SX-70 was to "change the person who takes pictures

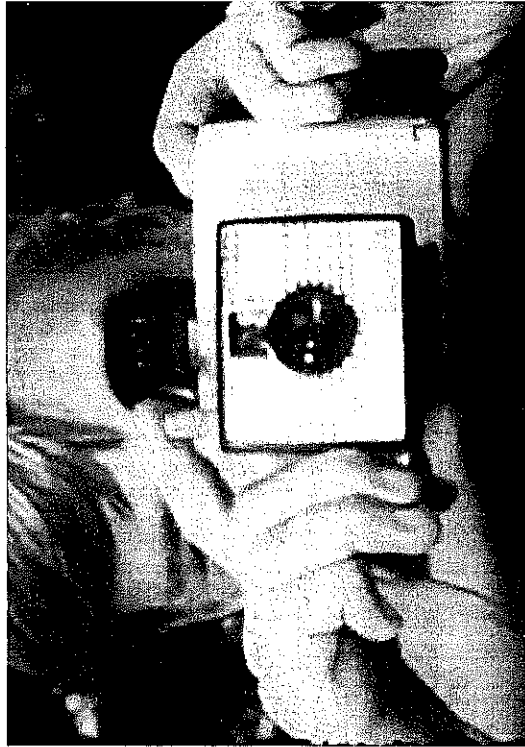


Figure 7.3 Still from the Polaroid Swinger TV ad, 1965.

from a harried off-stage observer into someone who was a natural part of the event.<sup>17</sup> For Land, the SX-70 was the culmination of the instant-image experience, one that had the potential to bring together people in new relationships – a kind of techno-optimism that intersected with the happening culture of the 1960s and 1970s. In a small booklet he wrote in 1974, he states:

[A] new kind of relationship between people in groups is brought into being by SX-70 when the members of a group are photographing and being photographed and sharing the photographs: it turns out that buried within us – God knows beneath how many pregenital and Freudian and Calvinistic strata – there is latent interest in each other; there is tenderness, curiosity, excitement, affection, companionsability and humor. . . . We have a prehistoric tribal competence for a non-physical, non-emotional, non-sexual satisfaction in being partners in the lonely exploration of a once-empty planet.<sup>18</sup>

Land may have wanted to couch the instant image in a vocabulary of human consciousness and spirituality, but the Polaroid instant camera was much more about hipster youth culture than it was about finding spiritual connection. The instant image is not only hip, it is also about sex – sold by the company not directly so much as in veiled terms, with the use of code words, such as “intimacy.”<sup>19</sup> The Polaroid is a more private image – no need to

send off those potentially embarrassing images to a photo lab, they can stay within the home (or the party). So the equation of the Polaroid with sex and titillating images (instant ones at that) happened early on.

Artists began to experiment with Polaroid images from the beginning and took to the SX-70 rapidly; many used multiple SX-70 images to create collages (notably David Hockney and Chuck Close) and to experiment with instant images (Robert Mapplethorpe, Andy Warhol, William Wegman) and rock musicians such as The Talking Heads used SX-70s on album covers. Polaroid began early on to acquire a corporate collection of photographs, with Land collaborating with Ansel Adams to choose work, and then over the years provided free film to photographers in exchange for some of their work. Polaroid would develop a large-scale 20 (multi) 24 instant camera in 1974, out of Land's desire to create a larger Polaroid, and these cameras would become legendary with artists for their very distinctive physical quality and resolution. Five of these cameras were distributed to urban centers around the world, such as New York, Prague, and San Francisco, and created ad-hoc art Polaroid studio laboratories where artists would come to produce images.<sup>20</sup>

Ironically, while Kodak achieved its brand dominance by selling an equation of photography and nostalgia, Polaroid has spawned a nostalgia culture for itself – for the instant image in the form of the white-bordered SX-70. A project in the Netherlands, led by former Polaroid employees, called The Impossible Project, resurrected instant analog film and created a kind of sub-culture of Polaroid image-makers who share images on its website.<sup>21</sup>

## Facebook

Now it's 2015. Kodak is bankrupt, attempting with its intellectual property of patents to reinvent itself as a smaller company. The Kodak Theater of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in Los Angeles (home of the Oscars Ceremony) has been renamed the Dolby Theater. Polaroid is twice bankrupt, and its reinvention, after being sold a few times, is in doubt. Yet the cultures each spawned are now embodied in the practices of digital images. The razor-blade business strategy that created an overdependency on film in both these companies has been transformed into the digital photograph *platform*. With the rise of the mobile-phone camera, the practices of amateur photography have been dramatically transformed. In this new, rapidly changing realm, Facebook and Google (among a host of other companies) aim to establish themselves as the primary platforms through which user-consumers will self-document and share images.

This shift has been characterized by cultural commentators and the technology press as the death of the analog photographic-film industry, replaced by social media as the future of photography. What are the implications of the transference of a set of photographic practices from the analog photograph

to not only digital imaging but also to social media and smart phones? Certainly, one could argue that smart phones and mobile-phone cameras are increasingly making digital cameras obsolete. The mobile-phone camera changes photographic practices through two very specific features: first, users tend to carry them with them all the time, thus dramatically increasing camera availability, which has the immediate impact of increasing the number of photographs taken; and, second, the linkage of the phones to websites, blogs, Facebook accounts, and other social-media venues means that images taken on mobile phones can be instantly shared. In this context, we could easily say that the concept of the Kodak moment is increasingly obsolete, as mobile-phone cameras encourage constant self-documentation and photographing rather than the unique photo moment. The Kodak moment was unique, planned for, and orchestrated for the camera as a means to produce ritualized memories. The mobile-phone image is, by contrast, the instant image that is shared in an accumulation of images.

The "effortless abundance" initiated by Kodak is thus taken to new levels in this context of digital-photographic practices. As technology writer Alexis Madrigal has written, "what could describe our current world of shareable digital photography better than effortless abundance?"<sup>22</sup> The ease with which large numbers of images can be produced, uploaded, and shared (if not instantly "curated") with minimal effort has shifted the demands of life documentation. Documenting one's life has been reshaped as a practice that constitutes a much more time-consuming and demanding process — one is asked to photograph every day, to share images constantly, to "update" regularly, and to curate one's own mundane moments for one's friends (and Facebook "friends"). Hence, there have emerged numerous weblogs and Facebook walls that are about ritually photographing everyday activities (such as documenting meals, logging hotel rooms, etc.). Importantly, then, the effortless abundance of nineteenth-century early domestic photography is transformed into a vast output of images of the mundane, if not images that celebrate the mundane. Here, we can see the shift away from the Kodak "moment" that was special not only because it was a ritual or a moment of social gathering but also because it did not happen very often.

The new set of digital and mobile photographic practices are not only about abundance, mobility, and accumulations of the mundane; they are also about deploying pastiche to play with the styles of photography throughout history. Thus, contemporary imaging-making practices include a lot of play with historical image styles in the creation of faux historical images. Nowhere is this clearer than it is with the enormously popular Instagram. Its very name referencing (in postmodern ironic fashion) both the telegram and the Kodak Instamatic, Instagram quite self-consciously charts its ethos to the legacy of Polaroid. Indeed, its logo is a facsimile of the Rainbow SX-70 OneStep Land Camera (originally released in 1978). Instagram states its primary aim as a mobile-phone application is to compensate for the poor

quality of most smart-phone photographs by using filters to make them look better and by allowing users to share their images on multiple platforms with ease. Thus, in the short time since the app has been available, Instagram has acquired millions of users and its signature style of a sepia or faded-color image (called 1977), or its SX-70-like framing white border. Hipstamatic, its competitor, sells itself with the slogan, "digital photography never looked so analog."

It is thus not surprising that these new photo apps have also produced a culture of nostalgia in which huge numbers of digital images circulate via social media that look like aged snapshots. For many users, the faded color of photographs from several decades ago, or the faded sepia tones of black-and-white images, evoke an immediate sense of loss and desire to dial back the clock. The instant-nostalgia style that is created by Instagram, for instance, turns even banal images into something immediately meaningful, resonant, and evocative. These images enfold the present into the past, giving contemporary snapshots the constructed style of the relic, the album, the held-on-to image. As Nathan Jurgenson has written, "the faux-vintage photo is an attempt to create a sort of 'nostalgia for the present,' an attempt to make our photos seem more important, substantial, and real. We want to endow the powerful feelings associated with nostalgia to our lives in the present."<sup>23</sup>

Pastiche in the context of social-media photography also extends to the highly networked relationships that social-media sites encourage. Thus, for many users, in particular those who are older, Facebook can constitute a kind of continuous reunion, encouraging users to find former high-school and college classmates and connecting users via past experiences. As Susan Dominus writes:

In its early days, media pundits hailed Facebook as the social application of the future, and yet what it really does is change our relationship to the past. Facebook makes contact so casual that it allows people to leapfrog back instantly to a former you, one you thought you had left behind—maybe one you had worked hard to put firmly in the past.<sup>24</sup>

The practice of photo tagging on Facebook and rituals such as TBT ("Throwback Thursday") can also have the effect of pulling users (willingly or unwillingly) into their pasts through the nostalgic posting of older photographs. This sense of simultaneously inhabiting several selves from one's life (for one's Facebook friends from high school, for instance, one may be frozen in that former persona) is a common response to the Facebook experience.

Behind these practices lies the notion that we are curating our activities for future viewers, including ourselves. Just as the photograph evokes mortality (a future death) and continuity (future viewers of the images), the documentation practices of social media affirm for users that they have a future that

they are documenting toward. The accumulation of images that creates a personal database of one's life on social-media sites such as Facebook, has the effect of increasing the stakes of users' relationship to social media, and of equating activity with connectivity.

Rob Horning argues that Facebook is emblematic of the rise of the "data self" that emerges after one generates a sufficient quantity of online data. He writes:

And though Facebook wants "the Timeline to be a place for self-expression: A way for users to reveal who they are and what their lives are about," it has provided a tightly controlled and highly formatted medium for it that emphasizes standardization. . . . It imposes the metaphor of life and memory as a stream, which . . . is not some natural, neutral reflection of how we remember but a reshaping of life into narrative, which suits Facebook's ends. The more work we put into making a coherent story out of the data Facebook collects, the more useful, marketable information we give them.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, in this context, selfhood is only derived through documentation and the accumulation of data – it is not self if it is not a part of the abundance of posted updates and images. A typical young user of Facebook (such as a high-school student or a college undergraduate) has many thousands of images on their Facebook Timeline. The increment to constantly update (often embodied in the constant changing of one's Facebook profile thumbnail image) can be traced to a sense that one is constantly changing, and that digital practices demand vigilance and constant activity. As Susan Murray has written, this means that digital photography signifies *transience* much more than the photographic image, which has long been understood to signify loss.<sup>26</sup> She writes that "there is an implicit acknowledgement of the inability of photos to hold onto certain moments. Rather than interpreting this as a type of death, in the display of digital photography in social network sites (and photoblogging sites) there is an already accepted temporariness to one's sense of publicly present self in all of life." The self cannot be established by the rituals of Kodak moments; it is ever moving, ever changing, ever in need to the affirmation of an update. The *update* is its primary mode.

This transience of the self (the self in need of constant updating) can be seen not as a kind of remaking of the photo album but in fact about the importance of the concept and valuing of *sharing* to notions of the self. Thus, the self does not exist alone, but rather only through sharing. It's worth noting that while photographic albums are often understood as that most precious of family objects, the first household item grabbed in moments of disaster, most studies show that people rarely look at them. As Don Slater has written, the family album "in a concrete or metaphoric sense – is hyper-valued yet plays little part in everyday life. . . . We need to know they are

there (and in a persistently existential sense) but they are not part of the everyday practices which involve images."<sup>27</sup> We have only to reflect on the common stereotype that for non-family and family members alike, the emergence of the family album or slide show is often greeted with dread and seen as an ordeal to suffer through. Thus, there seems to be little valuation of the idea of sharing the family album within the everyday.

Yet sharing is the essence of social media, not only in its practices but also in the business strategies of social-media companies – they generate income through the sharing practices of their users. The photo in social media is valued primarily because it is shared and thus helps to affirm information networks that provide avenues of brand messages and the reservoirs for consumer profiles. This redefinition of the practice of photographic documentation has implications both for consumer privacy and for the ways in which consumer data have become the essence of postindustrial capitalization (of which social media is perhaps quintessential at this moment in its development). Put simply, if Facebook is becoming the platform for personal photographic histories, it is, by extension, the owner of those photographs and Timelines. It establishes the rules by which users construct and share those photographs, and it guides the practices by which these images are circulated through social networks. Facebook thus stands (with its more than one billion users) to play the dominant role once played by Kodak to actually guide cultural practices of photography. Its corporate values are thus crucial to the shaping of photographic practices as linkage, network, and sharing, even extending to sharing beyond personal networks.

Much has been made of Facebook's shifting privacy policies and the challenges of what networked privacy might mean.<sup>28</sup> Helen Nissenbaum has argued that rather than understanding privacy in terms of control and access, we must look at privacy in context in order to understand how contemporary digital-media practices, for instance, produce claims of privacy violation and the extent to which these are legitimate. In arguing for a concept of contextual integrity, through which expectations about privacy can be framed and understood, Nissenbaum states that we must use contextual analysis as a means to move beyond simple notions of public/private and categories of "sensitive information."<sup>29</sup> The personal photograph would seem to constitute a particular kind of challenge to changing concepts of privacy, in particular in relation to the capacity of sites such as Facebook to retain the content of personal pages.

Yet, it is on the question of the platform that Facebook's aim to establish itself as the photographic album of the future raises a set of paradoxical concerns. Here, the replication of the razor-blade strategy in the model of the platform is crucial. Christian Fuchs writes that the business model of a corporation such as Facebook produces surplus value not only through its programmers and marketers, but also through the users and "prosumers" (producer-consumers) who produce its user-generated content. He writes:



A widely-used accumulation strategy is to give the users free access to services and platforms, let them produce content, and to accumulate a mass of prosumers that are sold as a commodity to third-party advertisers. No product is sold to the users; the users are sold as a commodity to advertisers. The more users a platform claims, the higher the advertising rates.<sup>30</sup>

In this context, sharing is converted to capital and the photographic practices being nurtured by the Facebook platform – linking, circulating, posting, tagging – form the foundation of the Facebook business strategy. As I noted before, the Facebook platform follows from the Instamatic or SX-70 camera as a product *portal*, establishing an affective relationship between the brand and the consumer. In social media, however, the value is shifted from film to consumer data.

Finally, though, if we look at these business histories and photographic practices together, we can see that there may be many reasons to wonder about the precariousness of our digital-photo albums. Facebook retains a dominance in the realm of social media by presenting itself as the primary portal for all social interaction, the means through which users will connect to their networks, share their images, and construct their identities. Yet, looking at the business histories of Kodak and Polaroid should remind us that most companies cannot dominate markets for very long, that the features of market dominance make it hard for them to see outside their bubbles. Kodak and Polaroid could not see outside the bubble of dependence on the photographic-film market, and Facebook cannot see a world in which it is not the only or the most dominant platform. But history tells us that Facebook's world is transient; its model for photography will be, inevitably, subject to change.

## Notes

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- 10 *Ibid.*
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- 17 It can be seen at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=5jaiq\\_ZZ\\_eM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5jaiq_ZZ_eM).
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- 19 *Ibid.*, 71.
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## Chapter 8

# Forgiving without forgetting Contending with digital memory

Ira Wagman

One of the achievements of the "information revolution" is the Internet's increased capacity to record, store, and disseminate embarrassing things about people. Indeed, the Internet abounds with videos of people doing embarrassing things, often without their knowledge. We are tagged in photos that end up on Facebook that may make us cringe. Things marked as "#fail" highlight attempts that have missed their marks. At one end of the scale we have "bloopers" of various kinds, while at the other end the situations are much more serious. Here, photographs of genitalia intended for a single viewer end up circulating online, tricks or dares become data, or a night of drunkenness ends up on Facebook. In between, we have a range of social behaviors, such as slips of the tongue, inappropriate asides, leering stares, or lapses in judgment that we are unable to take back. The popularity of virtual private networks that mask the IP address of your computer, such as Tor or Hotspot Shield, or the "private browsing" option on Firefox, does not stem entirely from a concern over government spying but as a kind of insurance against embarrassment, a way to protect ourselves from having our online forays made public to our various social networks.

Feelings of embarrassment, guilt, fear, and shame are prominent emotional characteristics of living in and through media technologies, what Mark Deuze has characterized as "media life."<sup>1</sup> In this chapter I want to think about online embarrassments as way to explore ethical questions associated with interpersonal relations – how are we to live with each other against the backdrop of the presence of embarrassing things and persistent concern about the management of future embarrassments?

In a recent essay Luke Purschouse explained that embarrassment "seems to occur only in situations where a subject views himself as actually coming into contact with other human beings." It may also arise, he explained, from "imagining situations involving contact with other people, rather than really being in one."<sup>2</sup> This neatly explains some of present concerns about online privacy, namely that information about us will return at some future point to haunt us, whether that is true or not. It is perhaps not surprising, then,