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That the compositing of camera and mobile phone has proven to be highly popular should come as no surprise to anyone interested in both the history of mobility and the history of photography. As media archaeologist Errki Huhtamo recently asserted, the first mobile medium proper was amateur photography (Huhtamo, website, 2004). An examination of the correspondences between the reception and promotion of early amateur photography and the current fascination with (and revulsion of) mobile camera phone practices is instructive in terms of trying to understand our contemporary moment. In particular, the long association between amateur or snapshot photography and the family appears to be rapidly extending itself to the mobile camera phone. Camera phone marketing is awash with images of children, pets, family events and ritualised personal experiences. This raises a couple of interesting questions that this paper will seek to address. Firstly, what impact will camera phone imaging have, if any, on the existing practices of capturing, collecting and the distribution of family photographs? And secondly, how does the promotion of the family as a legitimate subject for mobile camera photography play out against the increasingly hysterical response to the use of mobile camera phones in public spaces?

The introduction of celluloid film and easy-to-use box cameras in the late 1880’s sparked what Huhtamo describes as a ‘camera epidemic’ in Victorian society. (Huhtamo, website, 2004) But this epidemic was far from spontaneous. As Pierre Bourdieu observed in his now famous sociological study of 1965, *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*, the desire to photograph is not a given – it is socially constructed and culturally specific. Writers who have tracked the evolution of amateur photography seem to concur that the rise in its popularity can be directly attributable to the emergence of a correlation in the public imagination between photographic practice and private memorialisation. Leading this change in public perception was Kodak
Eastman – the premier manufacturer of portable photographic devices in the late 19th and early 20th century. As Liberty Walton notes:

By the turn of the century, Kodak no longer promoted the camera’s instantaneous capabilities that were a novelty in the 1888 promotions. Instead, the idea of the snapshot’s value as an aid to memory was promoted. The idea that photography could be used to capture and save moments is evident in Eastman’s advertising campaign, containing such slogans as “…a means of keeping green the Christmas memories.” 1903: “A vacation without a Kodak is a vacation wasted.” 1904: “Where there’s a child, there should the Kodak be. As a means of keeping green the Christmas memories, or as a gift, it’s a holiday delight.” 1905: “Bring your Vacation Home in a Kodak.” 1907: “In every home there’s a story for the Kodak to record - not merely a travel story and the story of summer holidays, but the story of Christmas, of the winter evening gathering and of the house party.” 1909: ”There are Kodak stories everywhere”. (Walton, 2002: 26 – 38)

Amateur or snapshot photography took off on the back of such rhetoric. As Bourdieu notes, “As a private technique, photography manufactures private images of private life...Apart from a tiny minority of aesthetes, photographers see the recording of family life as the primary function of photography”. (Bourdieu, 1990: 30) Evidence of the importance of photography to private memorialisation is all around us – in our own collections and albums. It can also be heard in the often told story of survivors of natural (or unnatural) disasters – after securing the children and the pets, one must also ensure that the family photographs are rescued as well.

Perhaps the most important function of family photography, beyond its existence as a material prosthesis for family memory, is the role it plays as an aid to storytelling. As Richard Chalfen argues, it is “primarily a medium of communication” (Chalfen, 1991: 5). He defines the family album as a “site of cross-generational exchange and cultural continuity, transformative and moderating as family members are exposed to the external pressures of acculturation” (Langford, 2001: 4). Family albums function by virtue of presence. Not only do they make the subjects of the photographs present to us in the form of their image, as Barthes famously noted, but they require, if they are to enact their primary function, the presence of a narrator and a listener. [2] The performative act of showing and telling is integral to the ritualised use of family photography. Not that this, as we all know, is always a pleasant experience. As Martha Langford points out:
Looking at another person’s snapshots, slides, home movies or tapes can indeed be killing: presentations are rarely of short duration, and repetition seems endemic to the genre. The real-life domestic experience is loaded with compensatory pleasures – intimacy, conviviality, emotional investment and perhaps a slice of cake. Inside stories frame the pictures, animating even the most stilted of studio portraits with family secrets and subversive tales. (Langford, 2001: 5)

In this way, family photography operates as a form of what Daniel Palmer has called ‘participatory media’ whose relations are “productive of ‘performative’ subjects whose ruling forms– what can be called the prevailing ‘media imaginary’ – elicit increasingly individualised exchanges”. (Palmer, 2005)

Participation in the production of narratives from family photography is not just limited however to the performative display of the family album. Individuals are engaged at all levels of its production – from the taking of the snapshots and now with digital photography to their development and dissemination. The emphasis on user control is a long standing feature of amateur photography of all kinds but particularly pertinent for the family photographer. Ease of use was a key selling point for Kodak Eastman in the early 20th century and remains a key selling point for all kinds of cameras today. Kodak Eastman advertising assured its customers that anyone could be a photographer – even women and children! [3]

However, the rapid expansion and acceptance of family photography in the 20th century was not completely untroubled. Resistance to amateur photographic practices revolved around the same axis as it does today – that is, the effects on the public sphere of such private activities. As Errki Huhtamo notes, the positive ideals of user control and participation were not wholeheartedly embraced by late Victorian society (Huhtamo, 2004). He notes that many observers complained of a ‘camera epidemic’ where amateur photographers were seen to transgress existing social rules, particularly those related to privacy and decency. [4]

Their activities developed into a kind of distributed panopticon - anybody anywhere could be the target of a snapshot. Caricaturists often interpreted such intrusions as sexually motivated (the pleasure beach being a favourite setting), but the camera also seemed to have a de-humanizing effect on the person carrying it. In a telling cartoon a group of ladies are seen pointing their cameras at a man hanging from a branch of a tree over water,
struggling for his life. Instead of terror or empathy, the faces of the ladies show excitement about the photogenic event; as can be expected, none of them makes the slightest effort to run for rescue. (Huhtamo, 2004)

This distrust of the roaming photographer and their panoptic technology is resurfacing today in the current distrust of the mobile camera phone. While phone and camera manufacturers scramble to find ways to promote the use of mobile camera phones for the documentation of private life, public concern about the inappropriate use of these technologies is escalating. These two competing discourses are set to shape the evolution of the mobile camera phone and its attendant practices and software.

In terms of their application to the lucrative family market, mobile camera phones suffer from similar problems to digital cameras – the very immaterial nature of the technology works against our usual ways of working with family photographs. If, as I’ve suggested family photographs operate as a medium of communication, enabling shared conversations and storytelling, then digital camera technologies work against some of the enabling techniques of this practice. For instance, sharing family photographs, even when they are in albums, is often a tactile and sensual experience. Photographs are passed between participants who are invited to more closely inspect them. As Sit, Hollan and Griswald note:

These forms of interaction are well supported with printed photographs in communal spaces, such as gatherings around the kitchen table or the living room sofa. In contrast, this naturalness of interaction has not been duplicated with digitally formatted photos published online. (Sit, Hollan & Griswald, 2005)

Creating the same kinds of interaction with digital images on mobile devices is made even more difficult by their location in a highly personalised device. While we may show photos to people on our mobile devices, we are usually reluctant to hand the device over to someone who may not understand the interface and so we keep them at a distance from the images under examination. The kinds of photos that seem to be most popular on these devices are those that reinforce the user’s individuality rather than their ties to other groups. Research conducted by Daisuke Okabe clearly supports this idea. She argues that:
the social function of the camera phone differs from the social function of the
camera in some important ways. In comparison to the traditional camera,
most of the images taken by camera phone are short-lived and ephemeral....
Traditionally, the camera would get trotted out for special excursions and
events – noteworthy moments bracketed off from the mundane...The camera
phone tends to be used more frequently as a kind of archive of a personal
trajectory or viewpoint on the world, a collection of fragments of everyday
life. (Okabe, 2004)

Despite these limitations on the use of mobile camera phones as a tool for the
collection and distribution of family photographs, camera phone
manufacturers and software developers are still looking for ways to transform
Kodak moments into Nokia moments. Nokia’s Lifeblog, HP’s PLOG software
and Kodak’s mobile imaging service are all examples of the ways in which
companies are trying to extend family photographic practices into the mobile
arena. Their attempts focus on the same two main features that Eastman
Kodak identified as vital to the promotion of photography as an important
instrument of family memorialisation. They are ease of use and the
preservation of special family moments. The barriers to success are, however,
somewhat different to those faced by Eastman Kodak.

The first barrier is the nature of the photographic devices themselves. While
the camera functions as a private media device it is still not as personalised as
a mobile camera phone. As Daniel Palmer points out, “the Nokia moment is
far more intimate than the Kodak moment and the mobile phone a further
material support for ‘networked individualism’” (Palmer, 2005). Despite the
private nature of family photography, its function is to provide its practitioners
with a sense of shared, familial, collective identity. Cameras, similarly, can be
used, and often are, by many different members of the family –camera
phones tend only to be used by the actual owner of the phone.

Secondly, family photography situates its practices around storytelling.
Traditional family photography relies on the show and tell associated with the
family album or archive. It is inscribed within an oral tradition which, ironically
given its primary function, is not facilitated as yet by the mobile camera
phone. Efforts are currently being made to allow users to annotate their
camera photos and send them to online repositories or directly to family and
friends. Nokia’s Lifeblog offers users a commercial and domesticated version
of the moblog – as Gerard Goggin points out Nokia itself avoids carefully the
term ‘moblog’ because of its association with technical digital culture
preferring to use phrases such as ‘mobile sharing’ and ‘life sharing’ (Goggin, 2005) Nokia are keen to promote Lifeblog as family friendly platform and its advertising emphasises the family connection. Expounding the benefits to consumers, Nokia’s publicists write that:

Nokia Lifeblog provides a simple method of capturing your daily experiences and unforgettable moments, like a child’s birth or a friend’s wedding and storing them all in one place. The memories you want to share can be easily posted to the web. The blogs can be accessed by the family, friends and colleagues via a password-protected area, or can be available for general access. (Nokia, Press Backgrounder, 2005)

However, even annotated life blogs are unable to promote the kinds of two-way conversations that are integral to the popularity and endurance of family photography as a social practice. The kinds of technical competences that programs like Lifeblog assume also undercut the ease of use rhetoric essential to the promotion of the product.

Finally, the resurgence of mistrust around the use of private cameras in public places is impacting on how people feel about using these technologies. A father of one of my son’s friends told me recently that he would never use his camera phone to photograph his children in the local park as he was worried that people would mistake him for a paedophile. However, irrational this man’s fear might be, it highlights the escalating ‘privacy panic’ that we are currently experiencing and that looks not very dissimilar to concerns raised in relation to popular photography in the early 20th century. Mobile camera phones are being banned in all kinds of public spaces where lives actually take place – at swimming pools, at schools, at gymnasiums and at some beaches, to name a few. Add to this the Federal government’s recently drafted but yet to be debated legislation whose aim is to ban the publication of photographs of children on the internet and the future of mobile imaging for family photography looks somewhat bleak.

It would, of course, be foolish to write off the possibility that mobile camera phones will have an impact on the established ways in which we record and archive our family memories. However, if our current practices are going to be transformed it will be a slow transformation. The mobile camera phone and its attendant software and accessories has some way to go before it will replace the album or the shoebox full of photos under the bed – two
underrated and overused media technologies that exemplify the principles of ease of use and familial endurance.

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Endnotes

[1] According to a recently published report by ABI Research, mobile phones with embedded digital cameras will outnumber non-camera phones in worldwide sales volume by 2006. By 2008 more than one billion camera phones will be in service in markets throughout the world. While sales numbers in Australia are difficult to locate, analysts have noted that four years after Sharp and J-Phone introduced the first camera phone onto the Japanese market, eighty-five percent of handsets sold in Japan in 2005 have a built-in camera. In Korea, the number is closer to ninety-nine percent. See “Mobile Phone Imaging: Opportunities for Driving Usage of Camera Phones through Click/Send/Print” (ABI Research, 2005, http://www.abiresearch.com/products/market_research/Mobile_Phone_Imaging) "Camera phones: disruptive innovation for imaging" (Market and trend report, 5th Version of October 11, 2004 http://www.eurotechnology.com/store/camera-phone/) and “Camera Phones to Get 99% of Local Market in 2005 – Korea” (Camera Phone Reviews – November 22 2004 http://www.livingroom.org.au/cameraphone/archives/camera_phones_to_get_99_of_local_market_in_2005_korea.php)

