

## **RES-000-22-0869 - Photographs Leave Home: a Study of the Impacts of Personal Photography Online**

This study explores the implications of the recent proliferation of personal photographs on the Internet, a phenomenon that radically increases the visibility and importance of a type of photography that has previously been relatively invisible. The researcher further investigated the 'public' effects of posting personal photographs on the Internet. In other words, how public access to highly personal photographs shifts the balance of information which exists in the public sphere towards the intimate, the personal and the ordinary: qualities which are often pointedly excluded from the public sphere.

### **Key Findings**

#### **Two opposing views on online photography**

- The emergence and increasing popularity of blogs (personal web-based 'diaries') and photoblogs (a blog with personal photographs and with or without text) raise two opposing reactions. Some hail these activities as potentially transformative for democracy and the media ie a new venue for public speech, a new grass roots movement of the people to speak back to power, to media and to government. Others vilify blogs, bloggers and online photographs for polluting the Internet with information which is no better than narcissistic cries for attention.
- These two opposing views aside, it is clear that an outpouring of personal photographs onto the Internet is provoking a new kind of public conversation whose terms are larger than those normally encompassed by discussions of photography and whose effects are registered by neither advocacy nor vilification.

#### **Online photography and the public sphere**

- The presence of personal photographs online, and in culture generally, alters both how intimacy looks and functions in public life. Indeed, online photography is forcing society to face the presence of new forms of intimacy.
- Most people see photography as an essentially private practice with the photographs existing primarily in the home ie within photo albums, in picture frames, in shoe boxes. However, going public with photos leads people to re-conceive the home as a space of 'stranger relations'. Hence, the home appears increasingly a site of public life.

#### **Online photography and political transformation**

- Personal photography has the potential to be politically transformative. Certainly, photography underpins three recent and dramatically important political scandals: 1) Abu Ghraib, where an officer smuggled a CD of soldiers' personal photographs (including pictures of prisoner abuse) out of Iraq and showed them to authorities 2) the American military ban on photographs of the coffins of dead American soldiers returning from war in Iraq and the subsequent battle by one of the dead soldier's mothers for the right to publicise photographs from her son's military funeral 3) the American military's attempt to shut down a 'porn-for-gore' website, on which American

soldiers were exchanging personal photographs taken on the battlefield in Iraq for access to pornography.

### **Online photography and personal transformation**

- Research suggests that public action, broadly defined (eg uploading photographs), generates surprising and productive results, carrying the potential to transform public discourse as well as individual lives. The researcher investigated this further this by providing digital cameras to women living in a shelter for young homeless mothers in London. The aim is to discover how these young women make use of these technologies and test the research findings about the transformative potential of public action.

### **About the Study**

Mr Kris Cohen undertook this study while based in the INCITE research group at the University of Surrey. The project is based on: 1) interviews with 50 people who put their own photographs online (25 of whom publish their photographs on personal weblogs, and 25 who publish their photographs on a popular photosharing service called Flickr.com). Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via instant messaging or email. Project participants ranged widely in age, were evenly distributed in terms of gender, and represent a wide spectrum of photographic expertise. 2) 'google-sampling' in which the researcher visited a large number of photoblogs on a daily basis 3) a project blog kept by the researcher as a public and ongoing record of the research process.

### **Key Words**

Personal photographs, blogs, photoblogs, Internet, World Wide Web, public sphere theory, publics, intimacy, personal, ordinary, everyday

## ACTIVITIES AND ACHIEVEMENTS QUESTIONNAIRE

### 1. Non-Technical Summary

A 1000 word (maximum) summary of the main research results, in non-technical language, should be provided below. The summary might be used by ESRC to publicise the research. It should cover the aims and objectives of the project, main research results and significant academic achievements, dissemination activities and potential or actual impacts on policy and practice.

"Photos Leave Home" set out to understand some of the implications of the recent eruption of personal photographs onto the Internet and into the public eye (by "personal photographs," I refer broadly to photographs which are not taken as part of someone's paid employment). The project seeks to contribute to two distinct fields of inquiry: 1. the history of photography, in the context of which the recent proliferation of personal photographs on the Internet radically increases the visibility and importance of a type of photography that has always been relatively invisible, if not privatized; 2. the history of the public sphere, in the context of which the proliferation of personal photographs in the public eye shifts the balance of information which exists in the public sphere towards the intimate, the personal, the ordinary: qualities which have not only been absent in the public sphere, but often pointedly excluded. The main results from the project cluster around these two poles, each of which represents a distinct set of theoretical and historical concerns. The investigation was structured centrally around 50 interviews with people who put their own personal photographs online. Project participants ranged widely in age, were evenly distributed in terms of gender, and represent a wide spectrum of photographic expertise, from "snapshot" photographers to semi-professionals (people who have been paid for their photographs). Half of the participants organise their photographs online in blogs, or photoblogs. The other half use the popular photo sharing service called flickr.com. The research questioned people about their own photographic practice, but also about their practices of viewing other people's photographs.

In the exploratory phases of research, one popular reaction to the emergence and increasingly popularity of blogs and online photography was impossible to ignore. It was clear that the presence of blogs and photoblogs (the two are often associated for their similarly intimate content) had become the source of a widespread social anxiety: many hailed these new activities as a harbinger of a revolution in democratic society, of a renewed energy for public discourse, of the presence of new venues for public speech, as representing a new "grass roots" movement of the people to speak back to power, to media, to government. An equal number of responses vilified blogs, bloggers and online photographs for polluting the Internet with information which was no better than narcissistic cries for attention ("narcissism" was the term most often invoked in these responses). For whatever the opinions on either side, it seemed clear that an outpouring of personal photographs onto the Internet was provoking a new kind of public conversation whose terms were larger than those normally encompassed by discussions of photography. An early paper explored these issues, arguing that what all such

responses converge upon is a debate about the boundaries of the "public" in contemporary society; a debate which not only discusses boundaries, but attempts, where it can, to expand or contract those boundaries. The wider frame of this paper was a discussion of how popular reactions to new (emergent) technologies often provoke a debate about the "proper" boundaries of the public sphere. The paper was presented in December 2004 at the Cultural Studies Association of Australasia (CSAA) conference in Perth, Australia, and will be subsequently published in the June 2006 issue of *Continuum* (vol. 20.2)

After completing the 50 interviews, it was possible to begin to specify the terms in which I thought it relevant to talk about the public sphere in relation to photographs. In its classical formulation (Habermas), the public sphere was conceived as a space of "rational-critical" discourse, meaning discourse which was impersonal and impartial, which strove towards objectivity. This way of thinking about the public sphere (especially for politics) is still very much in evidence today in discussions, for instance, about the Internet. This conception of public speech requires an act of delamination (a kind of performance), whereby an impersonal version of oneself is separated from a personal or self-interested version. If we are willing to call the conversations which take place online (in, for example, personal photographs) public conversations (and what counts as "public" has always been definitionally elastic), then photographs appear to be participating in something like an expansion of the public sphere, and of the kinds of conversations it is possible to have there. Photographers who put their photographs online also present (construct) a public face for themselves, but the valued terms of this face appear to have changed: it is not the impartial voice that is valued so much as the intensely partial one, the voice which claims to represent nothing larger than one's own interests, talents, activities. To the consternation of blog detractors, and the delight of blog supporters, such conversations, based explicitly in self-interested discourse (this research finds), do not devolve into solipsism or narcissism. But neither do they inevitably produce radical or transformative discourse, as some of the most extreme Internet utopians hope. What photographers continually find is that public activity (e.g. posting a photograph online, leaving a comment on someone else's photograph) produces surprising and motivating, which is to say, productive outcomes. This discovery on the part of photographers articulates very closely with one of Hannah Arendt's central ideas about publics, viz. that public "action" always held the potential for radical transformation. The paper which follows this line of thinking (and which, at the time of writing, is ready for submission to journals) uses the work of photographers to re-think the history of the public sphere, from Arendt's and Habermas's beginnings to Michael Warner's recent writings, focusing specifically on how personal photographs online are changing the role of the personal, the intimate, the ordinary in public life.

A third and final paper extends these themes into an analysis of three recent events, each triggered by an eruption of personal photography into public life. Abu Ghraib became a scandal when an officer smuggled a CD full of soldiers' personal photographs out of Iraq and showed them to authorities. Similarly, the coffin photo scandal erupted when a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit forced the US military to release photographs of dead soldiers, returned from war, and when a mother of a dead U.S. soldier subsequently fought for the right to publicize photographs from her son's military

funeral. A final scandal, involving a website called "nowthatsfuckedup.com," began when the U.S. military noticed that some of its soldiers were uploading photographs they had taken on Iraqi battlefields in exchange for access to a U.S.-based porn website. Each of these events centrally concerns the role of the Internet and digital photography in the contemporary public sphere. The paper (in progress at the time of writing) uses project findings about the new relevance of intimacy in the public sphere to re-assess the potential for photographs to be politically transformative (in this, it takes up the recent work of Susan Sontag).

## ESRC End of Award Report

### 1.6 Research Report

Photographs Leave Home: A Study of the Impacts of Personal Photography Online  
Small Grant Award RES-000-22-0869

#### 1. Background

*Including, for example, relevant previous or parallel research. Theoretical positions and hypotheses where relevant.*

The Principal Investigator (Kris Cohen; NB: I will refer to myself subsequently in the first person, as I was the P.I. and sole researcher on the project) has a Masters degree in Art History, and has a long standing interest in photography and the theoretical literature which addresses this medium. My move, in 2002, to the Department of Sociology at the University of Surrey, UK, and involvement there with the sociology of new technology and new media, got me interested in more popular uses and discourses of photography (i.e. the sociology of photography).

I had an opportunity, as part of a previous research grant, to begin talking to bloggers, with a particular focus on photobloggers, or people who put their personal photography online in the context of a weblog. Having done approximately 25 interviews with photobloggers between 2003 and 2004, I had become keenly interested in the social dynamics of a new public face for personal photography and the ways this might be impacting two areas of theory and practice: 1. the historical/theoretical discourse on photography and 2. the formation and operation of publics.

The important background literature on photography and, especially on the sociology of photography, tended to conceive of personal photographs (defined broadly as non-professional, i.e. non-art, non-commercial photographs) as a private media, and as such, analyses of photography centered around the circulation of photographs as either commodities (Don Slater), signs of identity and class distinction (Bourdieu), or intimate artefacts (Jo Spence). On the other hand, more Humanities-based analyses of photography and digital photography tended to ignore social practice altogether, in favour of a focus on the technology itself (Lev Manovich, W.J. Mitchell) or on visuality and images (WJT Mitchell, Joel Snyder). Most of this work favours art world photography.

My working hypotheses for this project were the following:

- the Internet had become a new, active and important site for photography, and especially for personal photography
- the Internet was transforming a formerly privatised medium (personal photography) into a relatively public one (without, at this point, specifying the meaning of "public;" simply marking the contrast)
- people were more and more interested in publishing their personal photographs to the Internet
- these practices were necessarily commenting upon, and potentially transforming 1. our understandings of and uses for photography and 2. our thinking about and existence within publics.

## 2. Objectives

*Aims and objectives of the research and any changes to these. You should state clearly how each objective has been addressed and whether the objective has been met or not, referring to other parts of the report as required. Where an objective has not been addressed or has not been met successfully, you should state the reasons for this. This will ensure that genuine difficulties faced in the course of the research are recognised and taken into account by the evaluators.*

Below, I list the original "aims and objectives" of the research (in italics) and respond to each in turn.

*1. To understand what happens to the use of photographs, and to the economies in which photographs circulate when a substantial number of personal photographs are posted on the world wide web.*

The outcomes of this objective show up most directly in the currently untitled paper (described in the "Results" section below). To the extent that I believe this paper addresses some of the most important current political events, I believe this objective has been met perhaps more effectively than any of the others; to the extent that this paper is still very much in progress, I have to say that my attempts to meet this objective are still themselves in progress.

I address this objective by bringing my project's focus on everyday photographic practice into confrontation with prevailing theories and histories of photography (which, by and large, are indifferent to popular practices of photography). My focus on actual practice, on what people do with their photographs, and how they talk about those activities, created the foundation for thinking about photographs in terms of publics, a framework which is often obscured by a focus on social groupings more relevant to art practice, e.g. audience, viewers. And this re-focusing of the conversation around publics, I think, is important because it directs our attention to the way that photographs now circulate between people, practices, media, and discourse.

The one potential in this objective that I feel is currently unfulfilled is a new way to analyse the visual content of individual photos. The ubiquitous and public nature of personal photographs, their promiscuous circulation, seems to make any focus on the iconography of an individual photo hopelessly narrow, hemmed in by familiar analytics likes style, form, colour, genre, etc., none of which seem adequate to the task of describing the iconography of the networked, ubiquitous public photograph. This is a problem I haven't yet been able to solve, but which I am starting to work out in my "untitled" paper.

*2. To understand how the presence of personal photographs online alters the landscapes of privacy and publicity through which people routinely move, e.g. how these changes impact issues of ownership and IPR.*

The outcomes of this objective show up most directly in the paper entitled "Going Public" (described below, in the "Results" section), which both confirms the relevance

of public sphere theory as an analytic framework for thinking about the sociology of photography, but also begins to re-formulate the literature on publics through the lens of contemporary photographic practice. This, I think, is a good start. Where this objective is still inchoate is in the specificity of its thinking about publics and public sphere theory. This is a huge and ever-growing field of literature; just as actual public spheres are themselves always changing and responding to changes in other areas of society. The project has found that the presence of personal photographs online, and in culture generally (e.g. Abu Ghraib photos), begins to alter the terms in which we currently understand publicity and privacy by altering what intimacy looks like, and how it functions in public life (for more detail on these findings, see the "Results" section below). This is important, as far as it goes, but from my reading of public sphere theory, and my witnessing of recent events which seem to change the terms of public life, what is most needed in this literature is greater specificity: specificity in terms of the spatiality and timing of public life, specificity in terms of how publics register more microscopic historical changes (public sphere theory tends towards the grand, towards large sweeps of time, towards totalising theories). In my own work, I would like to be able to better respond to questions like: what role, specifically, does photography play in the contemporary public sphere (i.e. how is a photograph different than a blog post in this regard)? What role does digital photography, or digitality itself, play with regard to public life? In what specific modes of intimacy does the presence of personal photography register changes (and conversely, what forms of intimacy do personal photographs obscure or overwrite)?

I believe what I've accomplished to date is to outline a new framework for thinking about the sociology of photography, for connecting the sociology of photography to the visual/textual analysis of photography, and for connecting activities in the realm of online personal photography to major political events like Abu Ghraib. What I think needs to happen next is to get below the generality of "public" as a space for analysis, and start to think about a public's component parts. This is perhaps less a failing than it is unfinished business. And to the extent that it's unfinished, it is less the case that the data I have collected can't answer these questions, and more the case that it hasn't been pushed as far as it can go.

I just haven't been able to answer them yet.

*3. To understand how domestic and non-domestic spaces are transformed when personal photographs circulate between them.*

This objective strikes me now as untenably broad (is there a kind of space this is not either domestic or non-domestic? did I really set out to address all forms of space?), but I take it that the goal here is to assess the continued relevance of sociological theories of photography which tether photographic practices to the home and theories of domesticity. My project's analytical re-direction, away from the home, and toward public sphere is, itself, an implicit response to this objective. But both the untitled paper on recent photographic/military scandals and "Going Public" (see "Results" section below) articulate more direct responses to this objective. While the home, and domesticity as such, were not explicit points of reference in my conversations with photographers, it emerged as a topic in relation to people's feelings about going public with their photography. Photography, conceived originally by most people I interviewed as a privatised practice, was therefore conceptualised as existing primarily,



almost definitionally within the home (and more specifically, in photo albums, in non-shared hard drives, in picture frames, in shoe boxes). Going public with their photographs led most people to re-conceive the home as a space of "stranger relations" (or intimacy among strangers, see Michael Warner), but also to literally go public with their photographic practice itself, e.g. to carry their cameras more often, if not all the time; to take more photographs in public; to appear in public with a camera, as a photographer, etc.

None of my papers, at the time of writing, explicitly address domesticity as such, except insofar as they pose public sphere theory as an alternative framework of analysis. But as the work of Lauren Berlant (among others) shows, the home is more and more a site of public life (e.g. sharing photos with the world from the home; television as a different site of public or shared life) and deserves to be articulated in these terms. Indeed, the classical formulation of public sphere theory (Jurgen Habermas) describes the public sphere as emerging specifically out of domestic life, the "intimate sphere." My research begins to describe the ways in which our ideas about domesticity and domestic spaces are expanding, i.e. becoming newly present in and relevant to public life; it does not articulate itself in the terms by which the home and domesticity are currently theorised.

*4. To assess which sociological frameworks for analysing personal photography are still relevant, and to propose new frameworks which account for the present context where significant numbers of personal photographs exist publicly, online.*

The outcomes of this objective show up most directly in the paper entitled "Going Public" (see "Results" section below), where I propose public sphere theory as an alternative to the reigning theories of social class, production/consumption, identity, and domesticity. This objective is probably both the best served and the most neglected. It is best served in that public sphere theory leaves room for thinking about all of the aforementioned sociological theories (rather than negating or invalidating them), but I do very little of the work of directly synthesising these theories. Instead, I try, as carefully as I can, to formulate an account of personal photography which both draws upon and alters the terms of public sphere theory. I believed and still believe that this is an important perspective (especially in light of events like Abu Ghraib, which so forcefully highlight the public life of personal photography), not least because of its relative absence in the sociology of photography.

It is probably the most neglected objective because I do not address existing "sociological frameworks for analysing personal photography" on their own terms. Instead, I try to shift the terms of this debate, which leaves the work of reflecting on, updating, or invalidating existing theories to others (who are perhaps more personally invested in the terms of those debates).

*5. To work with designers of new technologies to translate research findings into new design methods and product ideas for future photographic products and services.*

This is the objective that changed most substantially over the course of the project. As described in detail below (see section on "Impacts"), it changed primarily in response to

the research findings, which suggested that public action (i.e. helping the residents of Havengrove to make photographs and post them to the web) might be a more generative outcome than presenting the findings to designers. The change was further motivated by a desire to sample a broader range of research participants, and to disseminate the findings to fields outside of academia and design. Thus, the translation talked about in the objective—from findings into methods, practices, and services—has and will be met, but will take place over the course of the next year, as Havengrove residents begin to learn about photography and the Internet.

But this objective was served in the terms of its original formulation in the week-long collaboration between the RCA and INCITE (see below, sections on "Activities" and "Impacts"), where I worked with interaction designer George Grinsted (and many of his colleagues) to produce a photography-based website which attempted to make the results of a previous sociological study (usefully) public. I was extremely happy with this collaboration for the way it transformed the original idea of merely presenting the results of my research to designers into a substantive collaboration, wherein I was able to work closely with a like-minded designer in the context of a project which synthesised and expanded our respective projects. This was a generative project, not a simple application; it was emergent rather than programmatic; and it produced a concrete result (the website, URL given below), whereas the proposed design sessions probably could not have done the same in the course of a week. This collaboration had a lasting impact on my work as well as on George Grinsted's work in interaction design; and it will continue to have an impact on whomever finds and responds (negatively or positively) to the site we created.

### **3. Methods**

*Specific reference to methods used, including survey design, special equipment, new methods and analysis of results.*

I proposed three primary methods, which I list below and comment upon in turn:

#### *1. Interviews with Bloggers*

I interviewed 50 people in total, all of whom put their photography online in one way or another. These 50 people were segmented in several ways, not all of which constituted separate interview schedules (that is, some of the categories overlap). I interviewed 25 people who publish their photographs on personal weblogs, and 25 people who publish their photographs on a personal Flickr.com website. Flickr.com emerged in the course of the research as a new and popular photo sharing software, one which most of my initial participants had become recently familiar with, and one which contrasted usefully with photoblogs. I believe that this contrast was the most important feature of the research sampling methods I used, as it allowed me to contrast photoblogs, in their emphasis on text-based interaction and narrative, with flickr.com sites, in their emphasis on photographs as a medium for interaction. The contrast sensitised me to something that became an important element of my findings: the particular way that photographs allow people to be personal, or intimate in the (often) impersonal spaces of the Internet, and at other times, to be impersonal in the context of surprisingly intimate online interactions. I consider this distinction between the personal and the impersonal in relation to photography on the one hand and to publics on the other, to be a major

research finding (e.g. essential to understanding the role that personal photography has played in the Abu Ghraib scandal).

I made a further distinction in that 25 of the interviews were conducted face to face (with meetings in London or nearby cities in the UK) and 25 were conducted via instant messaging (IM) or email. The goal of the IM/email interviews was to retain the Internet as the interface for interaction, as this is how online photographers themselves interact with internet publics. And while the method accomplished this goal, it did not produce findings *about* the difference between face to face interaction and web-mediated interaction. One reason is that the project did not have explicit methodological goals; my interest, rather, was to investigate photographic practice. However, I did feel that the IM interviews allowed the interviewee to more effectively set the terms of the conversation. In many cases, this was because the interviewee was far more comfortable with IM communication than I was; in other cases, this was because they could conduct the conversation from their home, on their own time, without the (sometimes unsettling) presence of the researcher. I think the IM and email interviews, for this reason alone, are very good and I would consider using this method exclusively in future projects. In a way that I've experienced with no other method, I felt that IM interviews (especially; more than email interviews, which necessarily lacked some detail) ceded a lot of control to interviewees. By contrast, face to face interviews, for all their advantages, tend to be heavily determined by the interests, language and habits of the interviewer.

I used a traditional tape recorder to record all the face to face interviews, and subsequently had these transcribed. The main problem here (unsurprisingly) was sound quality. I conducted almost all of the interviews in public places, for the comfort of the interviewees, and some public spaces are inevitably noisy. My office at the University of Surrey was not a viable alternative because it was too far from London, where most of the interviewees lived. Even so, only a few interview transcripts were significantly impacted by poor sound quality.

## *2. Interviews with Audiences*

Of the above 50 interviews, 25 were focused on people's practice as photographers while 25 were focused more on people's experiences as an audience (or public) for other people's photography (the latter 25 being a mix of photobloggers and Flickr.com users). By thinking syncretically about people's production and consumption habits, the goal here was to be able, ultimately, to comment upon one of the most popular theoretical frameworks for thinking about contemporary culture and photography, viz. production/consumption. But more importantly, as my hunch was that this framework would not be adequate for describing a practice which so thoroughly mingles production and consumption, the making and viewing of photographs (what act of making a photograph is not also and at the same time an act of looking, of consumption?), the goal was to gain a perspective on two important modes of participation in publics for photography: 1. making and sharing one's own photographs, and 2. viewing and commenting upon other people's photographs. The results showed an even more thorough intermingling of making and viewing than I had first hypothesized, to the extent that the practices were practically indistinguishable. This was itself a significant finding in that it began to show how an old distinction often made with regard to publics (that some people are suited to be the voice of a public, while

others are happy to be "merely" represented) begins to break down (or, indeed, was never as relevant as it once seemed) in the context of online photographic practice.

### 3. "Google-Sampling"

This was the least successful method, but its failure led to at least one significant outcome. I began the project by reading as many photoblogs as I could, accumulating over the first months of the project a larger and larger list of photoblogs I visited daily. In parallel, I began to track the themes which appeared on popular search engines and blog search engines: [www.Google.com](http://www.Google.com), [www.Technorati.com](http://www.Technorati.com), [www.Blogdex.net](http://www.Blogdex.net). But in practice, it was extremely difficult to follow themes as they moved from the space of individual photoblogs to those of popular search engines. In part, this was due to the fact that most of the themes registered on the major search engines are political in nature, while most of the people and practices I was observing veered (in their own words) towards the personal and away from the political. But the more important factor in this divergence stemmed from a naive belief which motivated me to propose this experimental method: viz. that the most important cross-cutting themes (the ones most relevant to my project) would be registered in explicit discourse, in the things that people said in text and pictured in images, in the things that could be searched. But in fact, cross cutting themes, themes which connect individual to individual, and individual to public, exist in many more registers than explicit discourse. For example, the importance of unpredictability in people's experience of public action (their own and others') never came up in text, and therefore was not trackable through search engines. Most of the themes which became important to me were similarly unsearchable, but nonetheless significant. Here, it was extremely important that I had proposed to pair social science methods (interviews, ethnography) with more Humanities-inflected methods (semiotic analysis, textual and visual analysis), a pairing which broadened the range of phenomena that the research was able to register and track.

### 4. Project Blog

This was the first time I had kept a public and ongoing record of my research process and I would venture that it became the most important component of my research methodology. It served several, intersecting purposes:

- it encouraged me to create a public and semi-formal record of my thoughts as they progressed over the course of the project. The semi-formal nature of these records, motivated by the possibility that the text would be read by others, was key here, as it helped me to see analysis as an ongoing process and one that was intimately connected with data collection;
- it gave my project a public face; this was extremely important for building trust with potential interviewees, all of whom were themselves active participants in some sphere of online culture;
- as the research blog was also a photoblog, and eventually became attached to my own Flickr.com photography site, it gave me invaluable first-hand experience with both taking photographs (something I had never done in an intensive and day to day fashion) and with making photographs available for a public audience;
- it put me in contact with sympathetic researchers in other countries and other fields; many of the comments left on my blog were encouraging and sparked ongoing conversations with other researchers, both academic and non-;
- when it came time to begin writing the papers that would document my research

findings, the blog served as a thematically and chronologically organized record of not just my thoughts, but the development of my thoughts over time.

-it broadened the dissemination of my research results far outside the narrow sphere of academic journals and academic discourse

-it served a meta-discursive purpose for the project in that the blog, itself, became a way to test the major finding that public action is unpredictable and, in this, highly motivating.

I can't state strongly enough the (methodological, analytical and social) importance of giving one's research a public face as the research is being conducted. I will do this for every future research project.

#### **4. Results**

*A report of the results of the project and analyses to date.*

I am in the process of writing three academic papers on the basis of this research, each of which addresses a different audience and a different set of theoretical concerns. I will organise the following section around a description of each paper.

1. "A Welcome for Blogs:" this paper is the outcome of initial exploratory research I conducted on the wider culture of blogs, photoblogs and popular photography. The paper considers new photographic practices in the context of the emergence of new technologies. Based in a historical investigation of the emergence of new technologies, and some of the literature which examines these moments of emergence (e.g. Walter Benjamin, Gilles Deleuze) and the popular reactions that those technologies provoke, it argues that one of the driving instincts in these moments of emergence is for people to *recognise* the new technology or the new practices that it engenders. In other words, the instinct is to assimilate the new form to existing knowledges and ways of knowing. In the context of photography and blogs, we can see this dynamic in the two main popular reactions they tend to provoke: 1. the emergence of blogs and photoblogs signals a radical transformation of democracy and the Media; 2. the emergence of blogs and photoblogs signals the further devolution of society into a debased narcissism (the favourite epithet of blog critics). For whatever their differences, both reactions try to tether emerging forms of self-expression and of public life to familiar existing forms, one effect of which is to render us less able to perceive the changes to knowledge and to knowing that these new practices might otherwise motivate. Using Althusser's notion of interpellation, updated with Jodi Dean's and Slavoj Žižek's definition of ideology, I argue for a new mode of critical reception for emergent technologies like blogs and photoblogs. This paper was presented in December 2004 at the Cultural Studies Association of Australasia conference in Perth, Australia, and will be subsequently published in the June 2006 issue of *Continuum* (20.2)

2. "Going Public: Looking at Personal Photographs Online:" This paper address the sociological writing on photography and photographic practices. Taking issue with sociological accounts which tie photography to the home (Don Slater, Jo Spence), to a capitalistic distinction between production and consumption (Slater) and to social class (Pierre Bourdieu), the paper presents a framework for thinking about personal photography online which draws from theories of the public sphere. It then draws upon contemporary photographic practice to comment back upon public sphere theory,

arguing that new photographic practices are forcing publics to reckon with the presence of new modes of personality and impersonality (new forms of intimacy). That is, I argue that the photographic practices I have been investigating are making new modes of subjecthood available to people which, in turn, force publics to conceive and propagate themselves differently than they have in the past. But the paper's main concern is to argue for the relevance of public sphere theory (most especially the work of Hannah Arendt, Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant) for thinking about new photographic practices in a sociological framework. At the time of writing, this paper is nearly ready for submission. It has been presented to the CRESC conference in Manchester (2005) and to the Department of Sociology at the University of Surrey, UK.

3. [Untitled Paper]: As my most recent effort, this paper is currently untitled, but I believe that it will be the most important outcome of the project. It uses the research as a foundation for thinking about three recent, and dramatically important political scandals: Abu Ghraib, the American military ban on photographs of the coffins of dead American soldiers, and the American military's attempt to shut down a "porn-for-gore" website, on which American soldiers were exchanging personal photographs taken on the battlefield in Iraq for access to pornography. All of these events have major historical and political significance in relation to the conduct of war, of foreign policy, of racist governmentality (Foucault), and all hinge on the eruption of personal photographs into the public eye. The paper uses my ethnography of ordinary photographers to help us understand the American government's reaction to these photographs, arguing that the eruption of photographs into the public eye is a distinctively modern, political event. The central argument here will have to do with how the proliferation and ubiquity of personal photographs is registering a change in the roles that personality and impersonality, privacy and publicity, intimacy and generality are playing in public life. The paper works with Susan Sontag's most recent work on photography and political change to extend our thinking about how and under what conditions photographs become political instruments. Its main intervention will be in the history and theory of photography, and so it addresses itself as much to Humanities as to Social Sciences audiences. But it brings to Humanities disciplines (English Literature, Art History, Cultural Studies) an interest in social practice in relation to the politics of violence and publics.

## **5. Activities**

*To include related activities such as conferences, networks etc.*

1. Lectures to PhD students, Oxford Internet Institute (OII), 2003 and 2004  
Presented the emerging findings of my research on public photography as the basis for lectures on new media, blogs and publics.
2. Lectures to MA students in Visual Studies, University of Westminster, 2004 and 2005  
Presented the emerging findings of my research on public photography as the basis for lectures on new media and publics.
3. Cultural Studies Association of Australasia (CSAA) Conference, 2004

"Everyday Transformations: The Twenty-First Century Quotidian"

Presented "A Welcome for Blogs" in a session which I co-organised (along with colleagues Jane Simon, Melissa Gregg and Jean Burgess)

4. Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change (CRESC) Inaugural Conference, 2005

"Culture and Social Change: Disciplinary Exchanges"

Presented "Going Public: Looking at Personal Photographs Online"

5. INCITE/RCA collaboration, April 2005

([http://www.studioincite.com/activities/events/rca\\_incite\\_collab/index.htm](http://www.studioincite.com/activities/events/rca_incite_collab/index.htm))

The INCITE/RCA collaboration was a week-long event during which interaction design students from RCA Interaction design unit collaborated with sociologists from University of Surrey and Goldsmiths College. I used my work as the basis for a week-long collaboration with interaction designer George Grinsted, the goal of which, for us, was to think about the conditions under which something like an effectively public sociology might emerge. In this, we drew on, extended and tested my project results about how to make things public (some of the results can be seen here: <http://flickr.com/photos/publicsociology/>).

6. Department of Sociology, University of Surrey, September 2005

Presented an expanded version of "Going Public: Looking at Personal Photographs Online"

## 6. Outputs

*Publications, other dissemination, datasets (with confirmation of deposit at the Data Archive where applicable), software etc. These should not duplicate the ESRC 'Society Today' return but may be used to highlight particularly important outputs.*

1. [www.photosleavehome.blogspot.com](http://www.photosleavehome.blogspot.com)

Research blog, maintained throughout project.

2. <http://flickr.com/photos/publicsociology/>

Experimental output from collaboration with interaction designer George Grinsted at the Royal College of Art, London (RCA/INCITE collaboration)

3. "What Does the Photoblog Want?" (2005) *Media Culture & Society* vol. 27 (6)

The research for this paper was preliminary to my ESRC grant, but my subsequent research under the ESRC grant significantly informed the final version of this paper.

4. "Better the Data you Know..." (2005) Catalogue essay for art exhibition "Day to Day Data" (also available here: [www.daytodaydata.com](http://www.daytodaydata.com))

5. "A Welcome for Blogs" (forthcoming June 2006) *Continuum* Vol. 20.2.

Two further papers to be submitted to journals early in 2006.

A slightly longer term goal is to use these outputs as the basis for a book proposal on

the subject of personal photography and publics.

## **7. Impacts**

*Are there instances of the research results being used or applied outside of the project, including commercial exploitation, either actual or proposed? Please detail any links with, or interest shown by, users of the research.*

Two impacts stand out:

1. The aforementioned collaboration with the Royal College of Art and George Grinsted (see: <http://flickr.com/photos/publicsociology/>): this was important for its attempt to put into practice certain emergent themes of the research having to do with the transformative potential of making things public. At an early phase of my ESRC research, this collaboration gave me to the opportunity to mobilise my findings in the context of a project concerned with new forms of popular creativity, copyright (and copyleft), and new forms of public life—topics which both elaborated and expanded my own interests. The project was not only a test of findings, but an attempt to put certain findings into practice.

2. Ongoing collaboration with Havengrove: Havengrove is a shelter for young homeless mothers living in West London. My relationship with Havengrove emerged out of an attempt to disseminate the results of this project more broadly, but also to more broadly test my findings about public action in the context of a very different population of users than I had been studying. The women at Havengrove tend to be under 25 years old, with most clustering around 20 years old, and many are recent immigrants. They all (at the time of writing) have mobile phones, but none have their own digital camera, and very few have any experience with using the Internet. The goal of the project, worked out in collaboration with Wendy Simpson, the Support and Education Manager of Havengrove, is to provide cameras, training and encouragement to the residents. In this ongoing effort, the women in the house become users of the research (what uses might they find for making their photographs, and elements of their lives, public?); they also become further participants (I will work with Havengrove over the next year to see how the women use their cameras and the Internet to publish their photos). Havengrove currently has the four digital cameras purchased by the project, but at the time of writing, the women haven't yet received any training. In early 2006, they will begin their training and start to create Flickr sites (if they want to) for their photographs. I expect my work with Havengrove's residents to continue over the next year, and to produce further public talks and publications.

## **8. Future Research Priorities**

*Are there lines of research arising from this project which might profitably be pursued (not necessarily with ESRC funding)?*

Absolutely, yes. After completing my ESRC grant, I entered the PhD programme in Art History at the University of Chicago. There, my PhD research considers the intersection of particular art practices with particular technologies over the course of the past century (e.g. when film first emerged, it did so in the context of vaudeville theatre), and looks at



how these intersections register small but important changes in publics and public life. This project is clearly indebted, in most of its guiding questions, to my ESRC research, and at least one chapter (one case) of the thesis will continue my work on personal photography, the Internet and digital cameras. I have a four year fellowship which began in October 2005, so this work will continue over the coming years.

Currently, I most excited by the ways my work under the ESRC grant has prepared me for thinking about recent political scandals involving personal photographs (described above in the "Results" section). In these phenomena, personal photographs seem to sit at the very heart of today's most important political transformations, and to (somewhat spectacularly) affirm both the hunches that led me to formulate this project as well as the ESRC's willingness to fund it.

## Interview structure

- Your Photography
- Other People's Photograph
- Your Photoblog
- Community
- About Your Site

### YOUR PHOTOGRAPHY

Do you have any models who you look to? Favourite photographers (famous or otherwise)? Favourite styles of photography?

How would you say, in general, that you learn how to be a better photographer? Or is getting "better" not relevant to you? If not, what is important to your about your photography?

### OTHER PEOPLE'S PHOTOGRAPHS

Where do you see other people's photographs (whether "professional" or "amateur")? Mostly online? Mostly offline?

If you look at photographs online, do you feel that it is different to encounter them there than anywhere else (e.g. in books, in galleries)?

If you don't look at photographs online, why?

### YOUR PHOTOBLOG

Has having a photoblog changed your photographs or your practice of photography (from taking, to viewing, to storing, to showing/displaying)? If so, how?

How would you characterise your practice of photography before starting your photoblog (if "practice of photography" is not too formal a phrase for it—I don't mean it as a formal thing, I just mean taking photographs, storing them, having them printed and shown, etc.—all the things you do with photographs)?

### COMMUNITY

Are you in touch with a lot of people through your photoblog or your blog? Either through comments or through offline email, IM, or etc? If so, how does this happen: how do they contact you and/or what kinds of comments do you get? And do you like this aspect of having a photoblog/blog? Is it important to you?

### ABOUT YOUR SITE

Why "..."

Does this have some relationship to either the way you take photos or to the photos you create?

Taken from Photosleavhome33PD

Who do you think of as your audience? Do you have one? Do you know them personally? And if so, are they offline friends, or friends you met online, either through your blog or some other way?