

Photo album practices between analogue and digital technologies

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I. Introduction

Digitalization, the internet and more recently social media had clearly changed our lives. Only by looking at our actual habits, they are so much different than what we were used to five years go. The way our life “upgrades” may seem natural, but there is a need for more in depth research about these new cultural practices. This paper is based on my bachelor thesis and takes an ethnomethodological approach to the changes in photo albums practice that occurred within the transformation from analogue to digital.

My supposition is that if the traditional, analogue photo album had more a function of remembering important moments from the past in a familial context, nowadays digital photo albums are more about constructing your identity online. The theoretical background is mainly provided by McLuhan’s view on the influence of media on our lives and on the transformation from one medium to the other. The other main theoretical influence comes from Pierre Bourdieu’s study in the ‘60s on French practices towards photography. My paper tries to actualize a part of his findings in the new media context of today.

The ethnographical case study consisted in interviewing six people from different categories: the ones that only have traditional albums, people that made the transition from analogue to online albums and people that have had only digital albums.

II. Theoretical background

1. Media studies

The two theoreticians that shaped my view on media theory are Marshall McLuhan and Raymond Williams. The former is maybe the most known media theoretician, with his famous aphorism “the medium is the message” (McLuhan, E. and Zingrone, F. (ed.) 1995). Medium, or better said, technology influences people’s way of perception: the shift from analogue to digital has changed the way we perceive photographs and the way we relate to them

Raymond Williams is a British sociologist who offers a different point of view: he claims that media effects are produced in existent social structures and processes, reproducing using patterns. While McLuhan emphasizes the power of media technologies to structure social relationships and forms, Williams thinks of man as the only change agent. It’s not media that changes our life, but we are the ones that shape technology according to our needs (apud Lister, M., 2005, 80).

Even if I don't totally agree with McLuhan's technological determinism, if we look around in today's informatized society, it is difficult not to admit that his prophecies came true. We really live in a global village, as we can easily connect with people all around the globe. There are "centers everywhere, margins nowhere", as everybody can become a broadcaster, not only a receiver. For the present study, McLuhan's theory is very relevant, as my hypothesis may find an explanation in the influence of new media on social practices. The only amendment to his theory is the influence of socio-cultural context, as Williams explains. Even if internet changed our lives, these changes have different shapes according to each society.

Another thesis of the Canadian writer with which Williams agrees is that the new medium doesn't replace the old medium, but it includes it in the way that the content of new media is represented by old media – it remediates it.

Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin (2000) analyze the concept of "remediation" in the 21st century. Their thesis is that remediation happens in both directions: new media remediate old media as well as older media adapt to the new media features. Media history is not a linear one, but a "genealogy of affiliations" (Bolter, J. and Grusin, R., 2000, 55). Just as television had its inspiration from movie, today movies are reshaping after real virtualities, and television looks more and more like the internet.

2. Pierre Bourdieu's study

„In a large family, everyone knows that even good understanding cannot prevent cousins, uncles and aunts from sometimes having stormy or wearing conversations. Whenever I feel that tempers are fraying I take out our family photograph album. Everyone rushes over, everyone's amazed, and they rediscover themselves, as babies and teenagers. There's nothing like it for calming them down, and everything settles down again" (Bourdieu, P., 1996, 13).

Pierre Bourdieu starts his book with this extract from a lifestyle magazine. I reproduced this quote as it illustrated perfectly the role of photographs in the 20th century: that of gathering the family, to reminisce childhood moments, seaside holidays or relatives long forgotten. Bourdieu's study from 1965 revealed the fact that the vast majority of photos have a familial function. The context of the pictures is either the one of summer vacations or of family celebrations (birthdays, weddings, baptizing). Family albums represent a veritable family tree, which the wife/mother constantly actualizes with the pictures of new members in the group.

The development of tourism led to the growth of touristical photography. Susan Sontag (2005) observes that even if photography is a way to certify our experience, in the same time it limits it. Anytime we discover a beautiful landscape, we want to take pictures of it and in this way we do not live the moment in its fullness. Experience becomes a mere picture, a souvenir.

Traditional photography eliminates what is accidental, what doesn't obey the social constraints. If we would compare two photo albums we will find many similarities: the newly weds photo, the happy tourists in front of a famous monument. The characters in the picture are copies of an Ideal: the Tourist, the Lover, the Mother and so the photographs become atemporal in its symbolism. The role of photography is not to surprise us, but to conform to reality, or better said to our perception of reality.

3. Digital shift

Coming back to the 21st century, photographic albums have extended over new media. According to Jose Van Dijck (2008) photographs don't mediate just the ceremonial moments and rituals anymore, but also illustrate daily experiences. For the "generation Y" pictures are thought to be experiences rather than objects. Sending an image from a concert from your mobile phone to your friends communicates the fact that "I'm right here, right now". The snapshot loses its value with time, matter which happens in reverse when it comes to analogue pictures.

Digitalization has two very important characteristics: editing and interactivity. The possibility to easily edit any type of data in a digital form brushed off the clear differences between author/reader, performer/spectator, leading to the "disappearance of the signature" (¹). The feature of editing is closely connected to the concept of interactivity of new media: the ability of the users to directly intervene and edit the images and text they access (Lister, M. et al., op.cit, 20). This transforms a "viewer" into a "user", an active participant.

As new media include many technologies and techniques, in this paper I will focus solely on social media, and more specific to the Facebook network. I chose this in particular because it is especially used to stay in contact with friends and family, but also to meet new people or discover long-forgotten friends. Furthermore, uploading photo albums represents an important activity on

¹ Pierre Levy, *The aesthetics of cyberspace* in *Electronic Culture*, New York, Aperture, 1997, p.366 apud Martin Lister et al., *New Media: A critical introduction*, editura Routledge, Londra, 2005, p.16

this social network². That is why I think Facebook is the best candidate for the virtual correspondent of the analogue photo album.

III. Methodology

In my ethnographical research, I aimed at studying the main stages of photographic practice, from the moment in which the photograph is taken, then developed or uploaded in the computer, selecting the pictures, editing them, arranging the pictures in albums and until the moments where the albums are opened in order to look at the photographs.

As I previously stated, I interviewed six participants, which I selected on the basis of their relationship to photography. The three categories represent people that never had a digital camera or uploaded pictures online, then there are the ones that made the switch from analogue to digital cameras and the last group includes people that had always uploaded pictures on social networks.

The two people in the first category were M (46, f) woman and B. (73, m). My interviewed are quite familiar with the internet, having an e-mail address and accessing daily websites. Still they have never accessed a social network. The second category of informers is represented by D (24 years, woman) and E (26 years old, woman) and lastly N. (21, f) and R (20, f).

The interviews took place in June 2009 in Bucharest. Each group was interviewed according to a specific interview guide.

IV. Results

1. The moment of photography

Photographs are mostly made in the same moments: holidays, special occasions such as birthdays or parties. D. acknowledges that in holiday the responsibility if the photo camera is very important – you have to be patient, to know how to make a good picture and plus you need the authority to gather everyone in the picture.

The digital camera is used in other situations as well. R. makes photographs of herself when she is home alone, and E. makes pictures of her dog. So this is a first difference between analogue and digital cameras. It is also important to mention that for the digital camera owners the idea of *sharing* is very important, to exchange photographs with friends, to send them pictures in which they appear and to collect all the pics from an event they participated.

² Today the site has over 200 million active uses, that upload over 850 million pictures every month - <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>, accessed on 10.05.2009

The will of having memories is a common reason to make pictures for everybody, because as E. says: „I live very much through my pictures. When I run back over pictures I made for a certain occasion I live again those moments.” Also D. is very keen on putting tags and descriptions for a picture, so as that she can remember as many details as possible.

A second reason is the need to show pictures to friends and family, even though the way in which they end up seeing the pictures is different (from reunions, in the traditional case to Facebook, for digital albums). In the same time, each has individual reasons for making photos, such as wanting to show their photographic talent (M.), using them as a desktop image on their computer (N.). When R. makes photo of herself at home she does it because “I do them to see how I look. If I dyed my hair or I changed my look, I make a picture. Or if I’m bored I make auto portraits”.

I also noticed that right after the acquisition of a photo camera, everybody is very eager of making pictures, but in time this interest fades away: „when you get your camera, well then you really start making pictures, but after that it’s not that you get bored, but you slow down. There is this feeling... of acting as the Photographer, to catch interesting snapshots” (B.).

All the interviewed agree that it is much easier to make photographs with a digital camera „The digital one is much easier... I mean you make them instantly, click clack, you download them on the computer, you look at them, take out the ones you don’t like” (D.). Also the ones that already use a digital camera as well as the analogue users agree that editing is an important feature, as you can „take out what’s the best from a photo” (E.). E., R., and D., enjoy editing pictures and think of it as a fun activity, *entertaining*, where they can play with all kinds of editing programmes.

N. mostly appreciates the fact that on a digital camera you can see the pictures right away; you don’t have to develop it. On the other hand, R. talks about the excitement she associates with developing. Because you had to wait for a few days until you could see how the pics are like, the curiosity became more and more intense and it was a real joy when you finally saw the photographs and hold them in your hand.

D. connects the large memory of a digital camera with freedom, as you are no longer limited to a film of restricted positions. But in the same time she states a disadvantage – „With digital photos you make a lot of whatever pics because it doesn’t matter, you can erase them anytime anyway. But you don’t really get to delete them and so you’re stuck with them in the computer, and out of 300 pics that you make in 2 days, practically you only like 50-100... you value them less, that’s the idea. I mean when you have a film with 32 positions you start thinking:

should I take this picture or not?" This is how economic laws also apply in the case of photography: the availability of digital pictures has diminished their value. On the other side, traditional photographs are seen today as valuable items.

For R., looks is very important. That is why for her a big memory means that she can make as many pictures until she looks the way she wants – „[usually that’s how it happens] at parties: let’s make a picture; wait `cause I don’t know who has his eyes closed, wait `cause I didn’t know, wait for I don’t know what reason..”. R. develops her idea, claiming that there is an entire perfect picture mechanism, an agreement between all participants in a picture to redo it until everybody looks good. Because of the memory but also the display, you can delete the pictures in which your image is not according to your expectations. Both R. and D. delete „ugly” pictures in order not to have memories in which they look bad, but also so that their friends don’t see them. On the other hand, E. doesn’t delete bad pictures, but she has a separate folder with the most beautiful ones. Traditional photographers developed all the pictures on the film, and threw away only technical fails, such as blurred photos.

I asked D. and E. what changed since they have a digital camera, and their answers were very similar. Firstly, they make more pictures than they did before and secondly, now they also make pics without a special occasion, because they enjoy spontaneous snapshots that remind them of a moment even if it doesn’t seem like a special one.

M. and E. also consider a disadvantage of the digital camera that once you download them on the computer you don’t develop them anymore. Not being obliged to develop, all the pictures remain in the computer. D. thinks that classical photographs have a longer life span because they are printed on a material support, whereas digital ones remain suspended in the cyberspace, lacking a physical form.

2. Analogue photo album

The traditional photo album is associated with pleasant memories, family and childhood. B. defines the album as a collection of pictures with a certain theme. D. dovetails him saying that photographs from the album are important ones, „good pics”, which were thought, selected and arranged to look nice. For her the layout of an album is an important feature, because the pictures are arranged so that on each page all the images correspond, resembling with a story book. The other interviewed arrange pictures chronologically. Regarding the types of albums, they are either organized around an event (the parents’ wedding), or contain a longer period from one’s life (high

school, last summer). A common element to all the informers is the moment in which they look at the album. Most often they stumble upon an album and „without knowing it, you open the album and one page is enough to make you want looking at all the rest to live again those moments” (B.). Also at family reunions it happens to open the photo album. For M. and R. the album is a way to feel better when they are feeling sad or depressed.

3. Digital photo album

When comparing the digital photo album with the traditional one, D. associates it with chaos – many pictures that are not organized at all. Also E. agrees that a digital photo album is just a folder, with a lesser impact on the viewer: „you sit in front of the computer and just browse picture after picture, it’s different... You go faster, don’t look so closely, because there are so many pictures that you don’t have the patience to sit and analyze them all”. E., N. and D. think that rather the pictures on Facebook represent photo albums because there intervenes a selection process, and these are organized in a logical order. D. notes that it often happens that on a computer folder there are pictures from more than one camera, and they all get mixed up. In this way it is hard to follow the story behind the images. Still, Facebook photo *albums* are organized in the same way as traditional albums: special moments or longer periods of time. A new category is albums with a general theme such as „Friends” or „Random”. Here are uploaded all the pictures that don’t fit in the either categories.

The main reason for the interviewed to upload their pictures on Facebook is to share them with friends so that they know „what they have been doing”. It is also an easy way for their friends to directly download them from the internet. N. thinks that Facebook albums are a way of communicating about yourself: „[once with the development of the internet] you can communicate more easily about yourself to more people, and not always in a conscious way”.

Regarding the selection of pictures, this is a very important step as each person knows their pictures will be seen by a lot of people. The four interviewed choose only the pictures they like and their friends would like to see. For example N. is careful not to put too many landscape pictures, even though those are her favorites because she is afraid not to bore her friends with „artistic pics”. She prefers to post pictures with her and her friends that also have a Facebook account.

Facebook has the option of tagging the pictures that appear in a picture. A square frames the face of that person, and under it his/her name appears. If you click on the square or the name you are sent to the person’s profile page. Also on that profile page you can see besides his/her own

information and pictures, all the other tagged pictures. D. sees tagging as a „recommendation” – you can connect with friends of your friends. All the interviewed check out the pictures in which they were tagged so that they can detag themselves if they don't like it how they look in the picture. D. thinks that she looks more natural in the pictures in which she is tagged, and might represent her more than her own selected photographs. N. considers that on social network people choose to show a certain part of their personality and they select their pictures accordingly. In her case, she mostly uploaded funny pictures, because what she wants to tell to her friends is that she is a person with a sense of humor. R. selects her pictures in accordance to her self-image – „at a certain point you create this image of yourself, and then of course you put pictures on Facebook that you consider, like look, this picture shows the way I want others to see me and how I see myself [...] for example if you're dressed more funky one day and you want to impose this image then you usually upload a picture in which you look funky or cute and you're with your friends and it's like wow, what a social life you have. Usually, people probably don't think these are pictures that really represent you but you somehow try to impose this and that is why I think you select the pictures. And especially because you can make a thousand pictures until it looks like you want to...”

Another difference between a digital and an analogue album is the possibility to comment the photographs. That is how the interaction between the album's author and the viewers is born, just as N. explains: „[if] he sees that you looked at his album, he starts to remember you”.

Interviewers look at their friends' albums on a daily basis. In this way they can see how are they, where have they been traveling, in other words „how's their life” (D.). N. also regards albums to see how it's like in different places: „I've been looking lately at the albums of friends that are in foreign countries to see how is life out there.” Also because she is traveling to a summer school, R. visited the Facebook profiles of the other participants. Looking at their albums she thinks she has an idea of how they are in reality. D. also enjoys seeing other people's pictures, even though in reality she doesn't speak with many of them, „because they are there and you can look”.

In the question of privacy, all Facebook users have set an option that only their friends can see their photos. They did this because their photographs are a part of themselves, and they don't want to expose themselves to the whole world. B. and M. never uploaded pictures on the internet but they wouldn't like to do that because photos are intimate things.

E. is the only one that printed digital photos and then arranged them in an album and she also scanned traditional photos that she later uploaded on the internet. Because both types of

pictures are part of her life, E. wanted to have them in both formats, to keep them safely but also be able to share them with friends. The others gave up either because they don't know how to print digital photos or to scan, or out of comfortableness. N. believes that each type of photograph corresponds to a specific medium, and developed digital photos or scanned analogue pictures are some kind of „second-hand”.

4. Conclusions

The traditional photo album occupies an important role in the interviewer's life, as it represents the gateway to happy moments from the past. They are attached to this object both because of the pictures inside but also to the practice itself: you grab the photo album, sit comfortable in a chair and open the first page of a storybook. The analogue photo album is therefore associated with memories from the past.

It is important to make a distinction between digital and online albums. Digital pictures that are downloaded in the computer and arranged as files in a folder are not an album, but archives with thousands of pictures, that must go through a selection, organization and arranging process in order to be named an album. These albums are uploaded on Facebook and represent the present. Those photographs speak about who I am, where do I go, with whom and why. It offers my self-image. Other tagged pictures with myself complete my self-image through complementary perspectives.

The user of the photographic album has now two instruments: the traditional album and the digital one. Each of them fulfills another need. The analogue album represents our link with our past and our family, whereas the digital one addresses to our online community of friends, illustrating our present self. In other words if we want to dive in the past, we blow the dust off the traditional album and relive moments from other times. If instead we want to see how our friend from England doing is, we access her Facebook profile and have a taste of her life, illustrated in images.

I have structured the differences between a traditional and an online digital album in the following chart:

	Traditional album	Digital album
Temporal space with	Past	Present

which it is associated		
Audience	Self, family and very close friends	Online community of friends
Level of interaction with the audience	Low: Maybe write on the back of the photo time and date	High: Tags, comments, descriptions
Photographs selection	Technical selection when developing	Rigorous selection of pictures

The audience of a traditional album is very small compared to a digital one. From here the attachment to a classic album, as this is only shown to family and close friends. Furthermore, without explanations, an analogue album is a closed one, opaque. That is why it must be looked in the presence of a storyteller who can provide all the necessary details to understand the photo's context. On Facebook albums the role of this storyteller has been taken by tags and comments. Without them it is quite difficult to understand the album of our virtual friend. Still, interviewed enjoy looking at pictures of strangers as well, to see what the world has been up to.

Another issue to mention is that the digital photo camera transformed the act of making a picture into an experience. All the features and possibilities of editing a picture bring a fun, entertaining component. Something the scope of pressing the shutter is not to make a snapshot of the moment, but to see how I look like, to make an „artistic” photo or just to try out the editing options.

V. Final Considerations

The initial hypothesis is validated partially, as albums that are uploaded on Facebook are selected and organized having in mind the self-image they create through the places where the photos are made, persons with whom you appear in the picture, comments and tags etc. Having a Facebook account implies managing your image, by removing unwanted tags, constantly updating your profile and interacting with your friends. My belief is that through this social network we not only meet new people or stay in touch with our friends but also confirm our self-image. By the feed-back we receive from our friends we wither strengthen our self-image or on the contrary, it is necessary to adjust it in order to become credible.

On the other hand, the traditional album has not disappeared; it is well kept in drawers, waiting to be stumbled upon. The social and cultural practices described by Pierre Bourdieu (1996) are not forgotten.

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