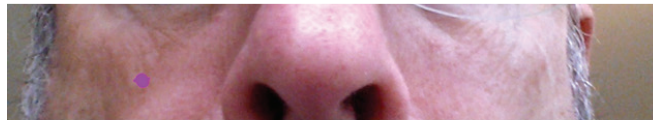
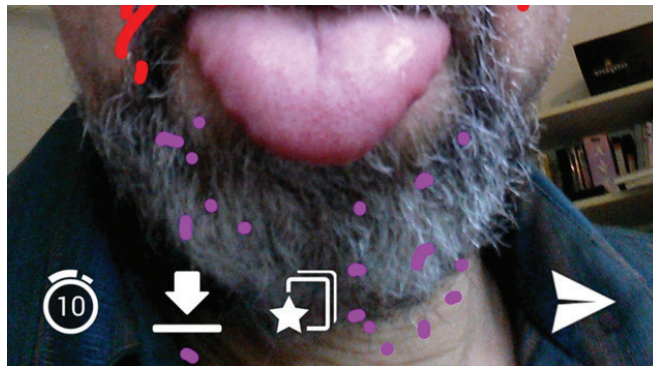




## PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE AGE OF SNAPCHAT



DANIEL MILLER



Royal Anthropological Institute

***Anthropology & Photography No. 1***

ISSN 2397-1754

# Anthropology & Photography

is a new open-access RAI publication series edited by the RAI Photography Committee. Emerging from the international conference of the same name organized by the RAI at the British Museum in 2014, the series will highlight and make available to the widest possible audience the best new work in the field.

## RAI Photography Committee

Elizabeth Edwards (De Montfort University)

Haidy Geismar (University College London)

Anita Herle (University of Cambridge)

Christopher Morton (University of Oxford)

Christopher Pinney (University College London)

Patrick Sutherland (University of the Arts)

Ariadne van de Ven (independent photographer)

**Volume 1** *Photography in the Age of Snapchat*  
Daniel Miller

## Forthcoming Titles

*'Look Away from Me!': On the Material Meanings of Images in a Digital Landscape* by Paolo Favero

*A Shaykh's Portrait: Images and Tribal History among the Negev Bedouin* by Emilie Le Febvre

*From Resistance Towards Invisibility* by Juno Gemes and Catherine de Lorenzo

*Archaeological Photography as Dangerous Supplement* by Colleen Morgan

*Culture, Memory and Community through Photographs: Developing an Inuit-based Research Methodology* by Carol Payne

*Alfred Maudslay's Causality Dilemma: Archaeology, Photography and the influence of Nineteenth-Century Travel Literature* by Duncan Shields

*'Pierre Verger, A Cigarra, and the Construction of Candomblé's African Purity'* by Heather Shirey

*Visual Economies and Digital Materialities of Koorie Kinship and Community* by Sabra Thorner

*Reflecting (Upon) 'Truth' Online in Iranian Popular Digital Photography* by Shireen Walton

ISSN 2397-1754

ISBN 978-0-900632-43-3

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

# PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE AGE OF SNAPCHAT

DANIEL MILLER



Royal Anthropological Institute

*Anthropology & Photography No. 1*

First published 2015

## Introduction

To call this an essay in the anthropology of photography is already to pose a problem, because its subject – the images used in social media – are so removed from everything previously called photography that the semantic continuity may be misleading. How do our previous analytical tools work for Snapchat, a platform whose images self-destruct after a maximum of ten seconds? We go to sleep in a landscape of evidence, retention and memory and wake up in a field structured by something else, such as communication and transience. Being radical here is not an act of theory or of activism but simply the shock of acknowledgment.

But as a critical discipline we also react with sceptical caution. Hasn't photography always been subject to constant change since first invented? What of the continuity of content? Aren't we still taking holiday pictures and making something like family albums? Do we still archive images and use some for purposes of memory and representation? Clearly this paper must first charter a careful path, being fair to the evidence for both change and continuity. But where radical change is acknowledged, then the second task is to focus upon that which is unprecedented and decide what this object now is and how we should approach and analyse it.

An examination of change and continuity sounds historical, but popular social media has been with us for less than a decade. Instead I propose an oxymoron – 'contemporary or ethnographic history'. This paper will examine developments over just seven years and slice these into several distinct historical periods. Yet as it also employs material used throughout that seven years, this is simultaneously an ethnographic engagement with the appropriate synchronicity. So this will be equally ethnographic and historical, with neither as just background to the other.

This is easier to conceive because anthropology has already developed a distinctly un-historical approach to history. Rather than the continuous narrative favoured by historians, anthropologists often use structural analysis – a sequence of periods each treated ethnographically. For example, in Rebecca Empson's recent book *Harnessing Fortune's* (2011) approach to photography amongst the Buriad of Mongolia, each period is analysed ethnographically and as a transformation of a prior moment. In a similar fashion to the concept of remediation (Boltin and Grusin 2000) used in media studies, the structures of the past become the content of new platforms in the present.

For Empson, Buriad photography starts as a remediation of traditional genealogies. These were seized by Soviet state officials in the 1930s. So photographic displays were used to create portrait-chronicles of absent kin in the area of the house once occupied by genealogies. In the next phase, photographs decorate storage boxes that incorporate both absent and present kin. Finally, Empson in a draft paper (pers. comm.) examines photographs in Buriad Facebook pages as the latest iteration of this trajectory. This treatment concurs with Edwards and Hart (2004) in also emphasizing photography as a material practice.

In emulation of Empson, this paper also proposes three stages in the development of social-media photography. Initially, we look for continuity. This sequence may complete trajectories evident in the prior anthropology of photography. Major theorists such as Walter Benjamin (1970) and Pierre Bourdieu (1990) imply a sequence starting from a nascent photography that mirrors the exclusivity and value attributed to the work of art, but acting, as Benjamin argued, to democratize the image. By the 1960s Bourdieu describes a middle-brow photography expressing class and urban differences and ritualizing family

life and the seasonal holiday. In 2015, by contrast, photography belongs to a global mass-population that creates literally billions of images per day. Low-income Chinese, Indians, Nigerians and Brazilians all use mobile phones for photography. In my conclusion I will argue that this ubiquitous presence has made photography more like language, giving it a powerful constitutive role in the self-production of contemporary humanity.

Less clear are the continuities with other core traditions in the anthropology of photography. How does global ubiquity equate with anthropology's primary historical concern with the representation of the 'other', mainly tribal, societies; and the associated ideologies of documentation, exoticism and science (Edwards 1992)? Or our acknowledgment that these same other societies have multiple histories and experiences of photography themselves (Pinney 2003)? What remains of anthropologists' appropriation of photographic theory from Barthes, Benjamin and Sontag, for analysing photography's relation to memory, image, representation and realism? Is there a sequence from Barthes' emphasis on the materiality of photography, to Edwards and Hart's (2004) examination of the aesthetic, temporality, storage and usage of photos as things, towards the largely online presence of contemporary photography? Not surprisingly, there has been a considered anthropological response, recognizing the need to pay far more attention to digital images of various kinds (e.g. Were and Favero 2013; Uimonen 2012), including the local response to the rapidity of their constant development (e.g. Gershon and Bell 2013) and new forms of circulation (Christen 2005; Larson 2008; McKay 2011).

Most important of all is to acknowledge that there are two stages. The concern here is with the movement from digital photography to specifically social-media photography; whereas

most academic discussion refers to an earlier stage, the shift from analogue to digital photography. Some analysts such as Sarvas and Frohlich (2011) emphasize change, while others such as Keightley and Pickering (2014) focus upon continuity. Van Dijck 2007 argues that digital photography retains, but changes, the relationship to collective and social memory first explored by Halbwachs (1992). Other studies such as those by Slater (1995) and Rose (2010, 2014) look to the continuity of photographic genres, including family and domestic photography.

The two stages also imply a dual sequence, one concerned with technology and the other with consumption. The initial shift to the digital is technology led. The crucial subsequent technical change is that the vast majority of photographs discussed in this paper were taken on mobile phones not cameras. So much so that today the camera is, as it were, almost out of the picture. But the other shift is in what we do with photographs; specifically, this paper addresses social-media photography as an issue of context, platform and consumption rather than of technology.

### **The context**

The material to be presented comes from one study within nine comparative and simultaneous ethnographies that comprise the *Global Social Media Impact Study* to be published as eleven volumes starting from February 2016 (Costa *et al.* forthcoming; Miller forthcoming). One volume will comprise a comparison of Facebook photographs and memes in English and Trinidadian field sites (Miller and Sinanan forthcoming). This paper concerns the English site – The Glades (a pseudonym), a dual village, north of London, with a combined population of around 17,500. As part of an eighteen-month ethnography carried out with Ciara Green, I worked with 16–18 year olds within four local secondary schools. This included

interviews with eighty pupils, teachers and administrators in the schools. In addition, we have subsequently (and with their consent) followed their use of social media on platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Both pupils, parents and teachers were also encountered within the wider ethnography of The Glades.

In addition to ethnography and interviews we carried out a questionnaire survey of 2,498 of pupils at these same schools. The results show that already by age thirteen most pupils are on five different platforms. Instagram is the most popular for the youngest group, then briefly BBM after which Facebook and Snapchat grow to near ubiquity, followed by Twitter and then WhatsApp. Facebook has lost its cool for peer-to-peer usage, only 12.7 per cent picked Facebook as their favourite social media, 8.4 per cent as their second favourite and 9.7 per cent as third favourite. But the continued presence on Facebook indicated that this is replaced by family pressure to remain on this platform. Females show a higher preference for Instagram and a much higher preference for Snapchat, on which they claim to send between 10 and 50 snaps a day (males 1 to 10 a day). I also carried out both more systematic and qualitative analysis of 30 Instagram, 50 Twitter and 50 Facebook profiles from the 16–18 age group. The results of the Facebook analysis are found in chapter two of Miller and Sinanan (forthcoming) results from Instagram and Twitter are given in chapter three of Miller (forthcoming).

Following Empson, this ethnographic history uses images that stretch back through the seven years most informants have been on social media. But this will now be sliced into three periods, represented respectively by Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat. Facebook was first developed in 2004 but has mainly been known to younger people in The Glades since 2008/9, up

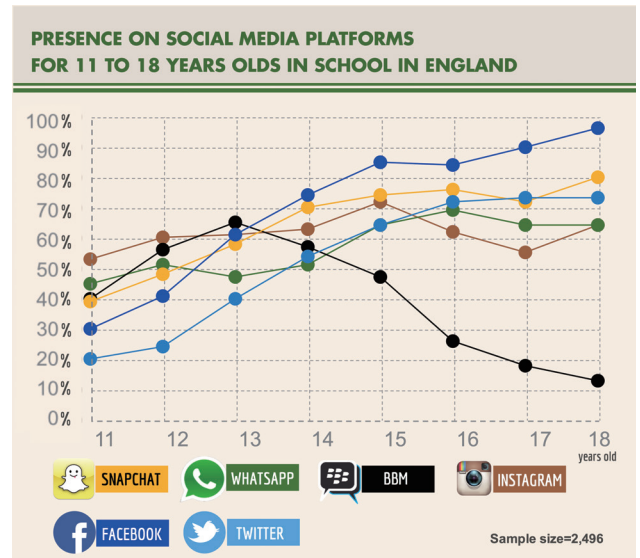


Figure 1 Social-media account ownership amongst UK schoolchildren (per cent).

to seven years ago. Instagram was only launched in 2010 and then purchased by Facebook in 2013 for one billion dollars. Snapchat was launched in 2011 and in 2013 declined an offer of three billion dollars from Facebook. I don't include Twitter, which is more focused upon memes and comic banter than photography.

It is very difficult to locate clear and verifiable figures for the usage of these sites, but Instagram as a company claims that 70 million photographs are posted daily, amounting so far to over 30 billion (instagram.com/press, accessed 2 September 2015), while it is suggested that 300 million photographs are posted on Facebook daily (zephoria.com/top-15-valuable-facebook-statistics, accessed 2 September 2015). But in terms of daily sending of photographs, these are surpassed by Snapchat, with which 700 million photographs are sent every day (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snapchat, accessed 2 September 2015). If we consider that these figures do not include Chinese sites such as QQ and WeChat, which when combined have more users than

Facebook, then it is surely evident that the vast majority of contemporary photographs are now social-media photographs. So the future ethnographic study of photography in anthropology will largely be of social-media photography.

### Photographs on Facebook

Facebook is the most plausible candidate for a historical analysis, as the peak usage by these school pupils was probably around 2011 and has since declined. In retrospect, while Facebook was in some respects a radical departure, there is far more continuity with traditional analogue photography than with subsequent platforms, especially if we consider the ways photographs have traditionally been shared and consumed. A particularly helpful article on photographic consumption before Facebook became popular is Drazin and Frohlich 2007. They focused upon the four locations of photographs in the home: the photo album, the collage, the framed photo and the box. But what was suggested by our fieldwork was that none of these methods for keeping photographs were very effective. Either they were too omnipresent and unchanging, as with photographs on the mantelpiece, or too shut away, in a dusty drawer or box. By comparison, Facebook albums not only facilitated digital photography but provided a far better means of

access, sharing and storage of photographs than had previously existed.

As such, Facebook accords with 'A theory of attainment' (Miller and Sinanan 2014:4–15). This theory repudiates, equally, claims that these new digital technologies create a 'post' or 'trans' human condition (e.g. Whitehead and Wesch 2012), or the loss of authentic and proper humanity or sociality (e.g. Turkle 2011). Typically, new technologies are first used merely to overcome frustrations with the limitations of some prior form, and thereby attain some latent desire. In this case Facebook overcame some of the constraints of and frustrations with prior forms of storage and sharing.

Today, Facebook is rapidly migrating from younger to older users, which is probably where it was always most suited (see Miller 2011). For example, it is more elderly people who are most concerned with means for storing older photographs and for sharing new family photographs, such as those of their grandchildren. Facebook facilitates the prior ideal that 'one day' we will get around to putting our photographs into proper albums, as Facebook albums are relatively simple to use once images are digitized. Almost all the people we studied use these Facebook albums, though for anonymity's sake I here provide an example from the two fieldworkers' Facebook profiles (Figure 2).

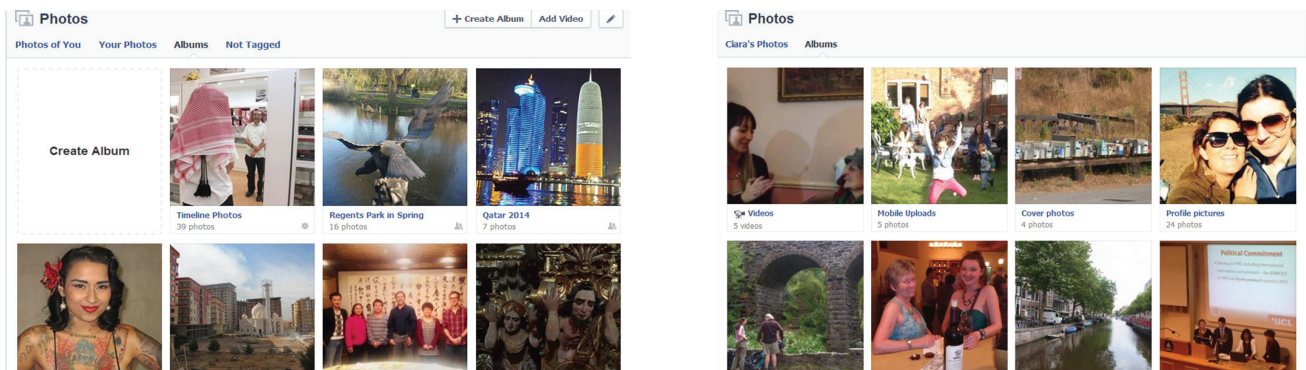


Figure 2 The storage of photographs in Facebook Albums.



A primary consequence of Facebook is simply to make our relationships more visual. For anthropologists this could be understood as making us all a little bit more ‘Melanesian’. Strathern (1988) argues that in Melanesia people are considered less as individuals and more as units constituted by the totality of their social relationships. Furthermore, this is rendered most effectively by making these relationships visible, such that visibility is itself constitutive. Similarly, Facebook portrays us as people constituted by social relations which are now rendered visible by the experience of Facebook itself (see, for example, Mckay 2011).

The idea that Facebook makes us all a bit more ‘Melanesian’ is a useful antidote to glib claims mainly by journalists that Facebook and other social media must be some new form of narcissistic self-expression. Social science has generally tried to avoid the trap of viewing self-expression as necessarily individualistic. Following Goffman, Bourdieu and many others, we recognize that the cultivation of appearances is often a response to

the normative adjudication of others. Facebook represents an interesting twist to this argument. Prior to Facebook, we might see elements of public appearance such as fashion and clothing as individualized self-expression, as we appear to select these for ourselves in the morning before going out. But Facebook stores our photos in three forms. There are, firstly, photographs we post for ourselves on our ‘wall’; and secondly, the albums in which we organize those photographs. But the third are ‘tagged’ photos, posted by other people but indicating our presence in those photos. Ethnographic studies in both The Glades and Trinidad (Miller 2011, forthcoming) reveal that the photographs people first examine when ‘stalking’ our profiles are not our self-posted images, but these tagged photos chosen by others. The reason is shown by these examples, (again for anonymity purposes taken from the researchers rather than informants). They show that we tend to choose more sedate and respectable images for self-posting. While tagged photos are less controlled and more revealing (Figure 3).

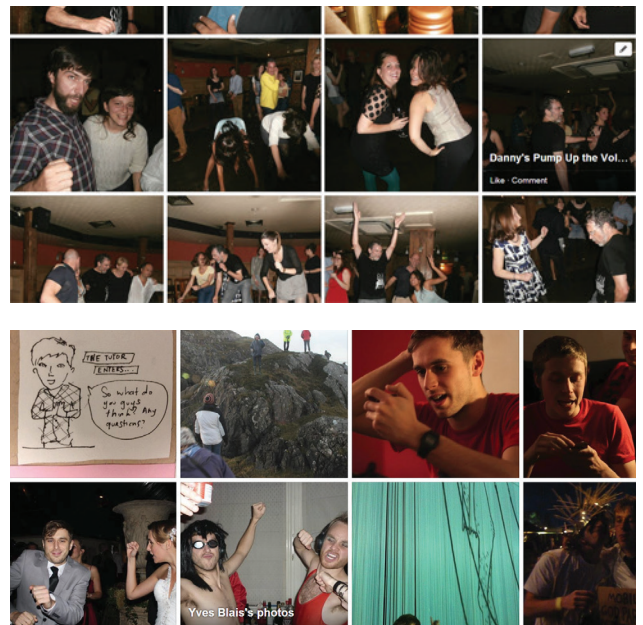


Figure 3 Photos we post for ourselves – left; compared to tagged photos others post of us – right.

For this reason some of the older English informants refuse access by others to tagged photographs, though there were no instances of young people in The Glades imposing this restriction. Tagged photos are clearly a much more fruitful source of speculation and gossip. We can remove such tagged photos, and some people do, but this is considered somewhat 'uncool', and young people tend to only remove those which might be actually injurious to their reputation. It follows that so far from being a simple medium of individual self-expression, Facebook is a site in which we are exposed to the world, not in the 'clothes' that we choose to put on for ourselves, but rather through the visual images that others have dressed us in. In fact, for young people such as those portrayed here, the typical tagged image is one taken from a party or a music festival or some other instance of having fun together, and gives license to such displays.

So Facebook appears to be an attainment of our desire for simple storage and sharing of digital photography, but one that creates a more public and socialized visual definition of the person. There is, however, a third element here. While they may end up in albums, most photographs are first shared on the walls or timelines of individuals. They are consumed as moments in the life – whether shots of holidays, parties or painting ones toenails – that are then supplanted by the next photos to be posted. As such, Facebook represents the first stage in a movement of photography to a more transient form that is integral to social communication rather than the retention of the past, a trajectory that will become increasingly clear in the subsequent platforms. This is the perspective which moves us away from exploring continuities with the past and reveals Facebook as a radical departure towards something quite different.



Figure 4 Responding to the camera phone.

### Photography on Instagram

Of all the social-media platforms, these young people identify photography as most closely associated with Instagram. Instagram is like a stripped-down Facebook. It is almost entirely a site for photographs, though short videos are now also possible. These attract likes and comments in the same style as Facebook. While photographs are retained, there is no provision for organizing them in albums and they are not tagged. Until recently Instagram only accepted images taken on mobile phones, rather than conventional cameras, and is thereby a key moment in the excising of the camera from photography.

Instagram also differed from Facebook as a more serious engagement with photography itself. It comes supplied with filters used to manipulate the image. These represent photographic techniques that not long ago would have been the preserve of professional photographic studios, but which Instagram turned into simple, highly accessible technologies for mass usage. The evidence from these schools is that this matters to users. They regard Instagram as a craft, though one which requires

minimal effort and competence. While derided by elites or professionals, this makes Instagram entirely unthreatening to a teenager.

Often, the craft of Instagram is used to conclude an engagement with some other craft. The moment you finished baking a cake, putting on your accessories or sprucing up your pet, you take the photograph. The school pupils recall how they:

*Upload a photo of some books I found which I got really excited about. I found them, put them in a pile, but I rearranged them so they'd look good for the photo... It is a craft, it's important. You're not going to upload a rubbish blurry photo or something embarrassing... You have a lot of Instagram pictures that are mostly taken if someone goes out for a meal and they're like 'that looks good' so they'll take a picture and they'll put it on Instagram.*

This may imply the crafting of the photographic subject or the recognition of the craft of others, as in Figure 5.

Alternatively, and in accordance with Bourdieu's (1972) discussion of taste, informants reject the evidently good looking, and locate a subject that would not have been aesthetically regarded. In which case making a fine photographic image demonstrates one's

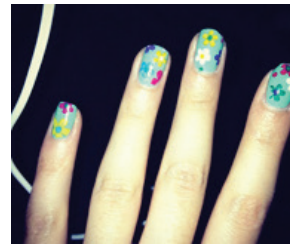


Figure 5 Instagram pictures of what looks good.

own prowess, as with these images of sunburn, frozen raspberries or tins of Vaseline (Figure 6).

Instagram may indicate a more subtle but even more radical shift than the repudiation of the camera. The emphasis in both anthropology and wider studies has been on the photographs retained for memorialization (see van Dijck 2007) and representation whose apparent objective neutrality gave them an especially significant role in ideological and political projects (e.g. Pinney 1998; Strassler 2010). It has seemed natural to start from the practice of photography (e.g. Bourdieu 1990; Edwards 2012a) as handmaiden to the photograph. But can we apply this to



Figure 6 Instagram pictures made to look good.

Instagram? As there are no albums for storage, all interaction is transient and communicative, so the central role of memorialization is gone. Furthermore, by focusing on the image are we missing something else?

Most informants seem to post quite rarely to Instagram, perhaps once every two weeks, but they claim to take photos with this possibility in mind quite frequently. Unlike in Facebook or WhatsApp, they are crafting images.

But perhaps what is really being thereby framed is not so much the photograph as everyday experience. Reversing our normal view, we are not just taking photographs to possess images, but rather to legitimate a different way of seeing the world within the frame of ‘what would make a good photograph for Instagram’. These teenagers are easily bored, but having the task of crafting something special keeps them interested and alive to the world. Indeed, a common genre here is landscape and natural beauty, suggesting an attention to their surroundings quite contrary to a common assumption amongst their parents that social media detracts from an interest in the world around them.

This point emerges also from a comparison between Instagram and Twitter (Miller forthcoming: chapter three). On Twitter individuals (especially males) strive to be recognized for their skill in putting up something particularly funny or clever. This gifts them a

daily task to create a Tweet that will enhance their reputation. While Instagram gives individuals (especially females) the project of making each day a little more meaningful, literally giving it focus. There is a parallel argument in the work of Gillian Rose (2010, 2014), which examines the really huge numbers of family photos that are commonly posted. Although these are legitimated as memorializing the stages of child development, she too suggests that we should pay more attention to what this creates as a practice of photography employed now as a technology for the creation and maintenance of family relationships.

Instagram thereby takes us one more stage than Facebook, from photography as memory to photography as social communication, where photographs are posted to elicit comments and ‘likes’. Within Instagram photography comes closer to conversation. It can, for instance, act as an alternative medium for shy girls who don’t feel confident opening a verbal conversation with a boy. As one informant put it:

*If they want you to talk to them, they’ll go through some of your pictures, a way of showing you are interested without being over the top. Girls hate messaging boys first, they think. Oh I feel too keen, I’ll just wait, so rather than being too keen and saying hello first, they might just ‘like’ your photos.*



Figure 7 Instagram aesthetics.

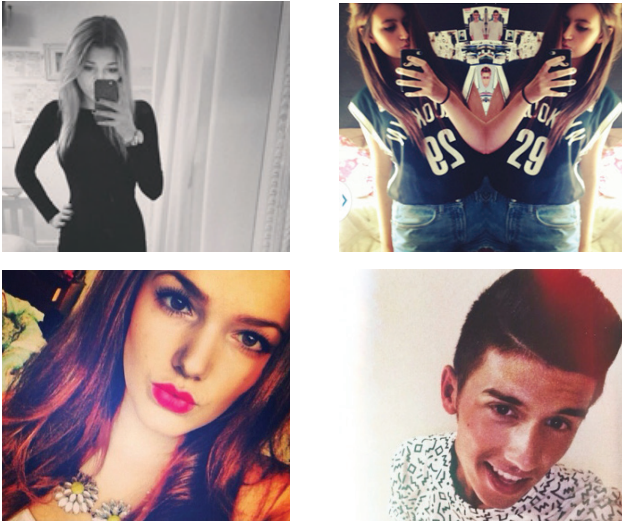


Figure 8 Classic selfies.

In practice, however, the boys are rather more likely to comment on a rather different but particularly common Instagram genre: the selfie.

### Know thy selfie

Instagram is the platform in which one is most likely to encounter the kind of selfie-dominated profile that is being referred to in moralizing journalistic or popular denigration of the young as superficial or narcissistic. These glib dismissals attempt neither any empathetic encounter nor a concern to analyse and differentiate what on closer inspection turns out to be quite a diverse and complex phenomenon. The accusation of narcissism presumably implies an idealized version of the self, directed at the self. The word selfie is very close to that of selfish. Seen ethnographically, however, it is the intense normativity of the selfie – self-taken photo – rather than its individualism, that impresses. The first problem with the presumption of the ‘selfish selfie’ is that it presupposes a focus on the individual. In our survey of postings to Facebook, in only around a fifth of the 16–18 year

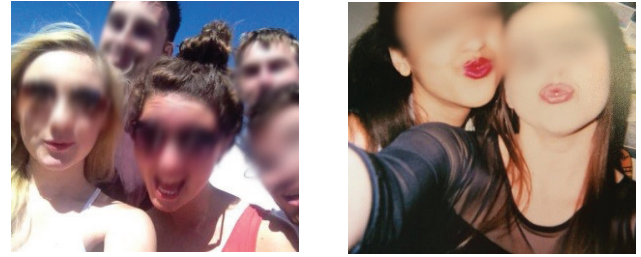


Figure 9 Groupies.

olds’ selfies is the subject alone. They are mainly a means to express friendship. So most selfies are actually ‘groupies’.

There certainly exists a genre which corresponds to the popular imagination of the selfie. There are a few young women (and much more rarely men), generally those deemed ‘fit’, i.e. good looking, who regularly post glamorous and sexy images of themselves on Instagram. Given a certain look, there seems almost a compulsion to post it. This is much clearer in our Italian study, where a national ‘project’ of Italian beauty manifests itself as a burden on women (Nicolescu forthcoming). In *The Glades*, at least, the images are not those of the idealized thin fashion model, but images more likely to evoke a response from males, an hourglass figure of evident breasts and hips. This also contrasts strongly with the selfie in Trinidad (Miller and Sinanan forthcoming: chapters two and three), where the posting of individual female selfies seems less related to being viewed as good-looking or to age. One reason may be the congruence of ideal body shape and the more general ethos of Instagram as a craft, or here, the crafting of the self.

Such bounded genres usually imply a policing of normativity. Anyone who posts this kind of selfie without what is regarded as the appropriate physiognomy may garner responses that are often brutal and cruel. As pupils gather at school in morning to assess postings of the previous

evening or weekend, the remarks reported would be ‘Oh My God, and the boys would be like NOoo’. Even those expected to, and seen as appropriate for, posting attract comments such as ‘bitch’ or ‘slut’, especially if they then post too many. This group is emerging from a stage (generally aged 12 to 16) where many of them may have experienced anorexia, bulimia and, especially, cutting, all of which manifest periodic and devastating issues in self-confidence. So this arena of public presentation is extremely fraught. These same pupils engage in quite acerbic quarrels on Twitter (known as Twitter beef), where almost anything can be taken as a slight, especially by females, and can erupt into a storm of insults and accusations. Perhaps for this reason most selfies, as noted, are actually of groups expressing friendship, having ones arms around each other or making silly faces to the camera. They reflect a constant referencing also to intense female friendships termed BFF (best friends forever) and Besties.

This diversity of selfies is found within the 16–18 age group. Miller and Sinanan (forthcoming) examine a still wider set of variants through including other age groups. For example, during the period of fieldwork there arose the ‘no make-up’ selfie for older women. They almost all posted their first ever selfie under the auspices of a campaign

that was initially directed by cancer charities, and provided a version designed to be a repudiation of the glamour of those of school pupils. To conclude, anthropological and empathetic study can explode the term selfie to reveal the proliferation of a much wider series of sub-genres.

### Photography on Snapchat

Of all these new platforms, it is probably Snapchat that has bludgeoned to death our conventional view of photography. Snapchat consists of images or very short videos, sent to friends, that self-delete after a maximum of ten seconds. The image may have a few words or a bit of doodling attached. A ten-second lifespan cannot possibly be associated with memorialization or the materiality of the image. We have to take the word ‘Snapchat’ literally – the photograph is just a form of chat. Yet not only does this represent 700 million images sent every day, but as this paper demonstrates, Snapchat is the culmination of a movement more generally in photography from memorialization to communication.

Snapchats are mostly devices for merely relaying what is happening at that moment for instantaneous sharing. As with these images reproduced here, it is for when you are feeling your cat looks cute, you are having a good time in London, or you just want to share a laugh.

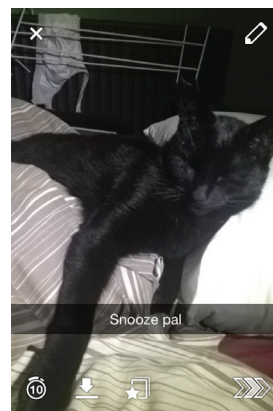


Figure 10 Snapchats.

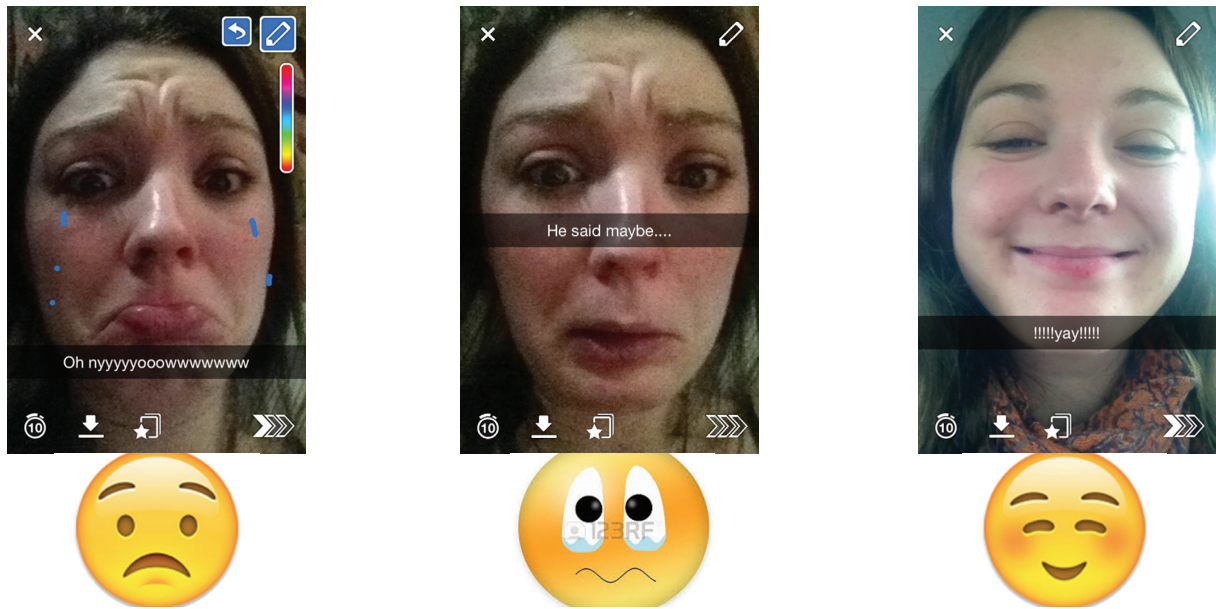


Figure 11 The face as an emoticon/emoji.

Often a Snapchat constitutes a comment about how one is feeling. How this act has migrated from a more textual to visual communication is made evident by comparing it to another earlier device that also seems transitional from the textual to visual. These are the emoticons and emoji that young people often use as form of visual punctuation. The difference is that with Snapchat one can use one's own face to in effect personalize the message and show directly the emotion that the emoticon/emoji only hinted at, as can be seen in the three examples that have been created here for illustrative purposes (Figure 11).

Alongside these 'emoticons/emoji' with their affective brevity, Snapchat has become associated with another genre of the selfie. Selfies shared on WhatsApp and Snapchat usually presume privacy, as they are only seen by recipients. In this context by far the most common selfie is best called an 'uglie', because the whole point is to look as ugly as possible, e.g. photographing the face from below the chin. The idea is to look both

ridiculous and funny. This is probably the single most common form of the selfie, though it has been blithely ignored in most discussions.

Within the ethnography of The Glades (Miller forthcoming) the uglie makes sense because for the English, including in this case the older population, one of the most common forms of posting is based on various versions of self-deprecating humour. As an informant noted:

*I love selfies, we always laugh about them, I just take the ugliest pictures of myself. I take more ugly ones than nice ones. It's easier, it's easier to look ugly than to look nice. Get the triple chin*

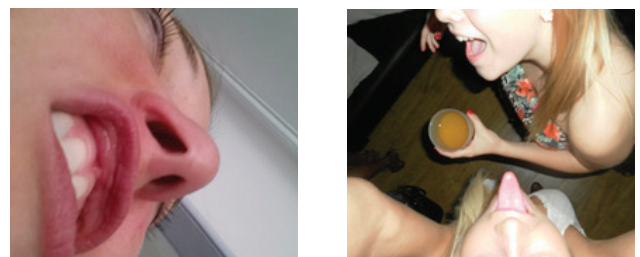


Figure 12 Uglies.

*out, like that, and you go cross eyed. Twitter and Instagram. I always send ugly Snapchats.*

Given how short a time it has been with us, it is remarkable that Snapchat already has its own complex history. Initially, it seems people did use it for transgressive and irresponsible images, simply because they could. Both teenagers and the school staff concur that this included a quota of naked teenage pics exchanged with other teens, which in some cases had serious consequences for the pupils' reputations. Though even at that point this was never common. In any case, quite soon after Snapchat was created people realized you could screen-capture such images, which is what caused these problems of unintended exposure. It only took a few instances of these scandals for most girls to realize what was at stake when pressurized by males to gift them such images, usually in the hope of developing relationships. Since then usage has generally become more circumspect. It remains acceptable to screen capture some really stupid uglie, to share with others on Twitter in order to embarrass the victim; but only if the victim sees the joke and accepts this as banter.

Not only does Snapchat have its own internal history but it provides the culmination of this paper's historical sequence. Indeed, the end point makes most sense when considered in the light of its beginnings. Clearly, one reason young people moved to such a transient medium was that many of them had had a problematic encounter with Facebook. The legacy that Facebook retained from conventional photography was its longevity. Postings of parties and having fun remained on the site when one's parents and even grandparents friended these young people. The moment when 'my mother asked to friend me on Facebook' itself became a viral post within popular culture, signifying this major

transformation in social media. Many of our informants recall the untagging and removal of earlier photographs that resulted. Even amongst the profiles that I followed there was a marked difference between what was present when at school, and what was there after they had left school and probably been advised to clean up their profiles. So the popularity of Snapchat may partly be a response and repudiation of that more conservative feature in Facebook, which effectively came back and bit them. Photography had not at that point achieved the ephemerality of chat, even though it was digital, but with Snapchat this has been attained.

### **Contemporary sociality and culture of photography**

As an ethnographic history, we can complement this vertical historical perspective with a more horizontal synchronic perspective of the social relations of social media. Today, all these platforms co-exist as complementary sites for the posting of photographs. So rather than taking platforms in isolation they combine to constitute polymedia (Madianou and Miller 2012). Taking a lead from structural anthropology, the concept of polymedia first defines these platforms relationally. Secondly, it argues that when the choice of platform is no longer determined by cost and access this effectively re-socializes these media. People now judge each other as responsible for the decision as to which platform they choose to use (Gershon 2010). So whether someone used Facebook, Instagram or Twitter is now viewed more in terms of gender stereotypes or who is considered cool.

If we explore how images are shared by 16 to 18 year olds across the three platforms so far examined, this complementary relationship becomes clear. As just noted, Snapchat creates an immediate issue of trust by inviting, first, transgressive images, and now mainly ugly



self-deprecating images. As a result, you send Snapchats only to people you trust not to share or screen capture, except where this is evidently acceptable as fun. So Snapchat is generally dedicated to a relatively small group of people one would also normally chat to. In our study it was quite rare to find anyone posting to more than twenty others, and often it was to just a half a dozen. Snapchat is basically a form of enhanced bonding between very close friends.

One level up from Snapchat would be WhatsApp groups. Typically, these school pupils have one WhatsApp group of same sex pupils in their class and another which includes both sexes. Beyond this is Twitter, which although open to public consumption has become in practice the main peer-to-peer platform used for banter. Facebook started with young people competing over numbers, but today is normally limited to people one knows online. But this may include hundreds of ‘friends’ such as family, most people in one’s school class, and various examples of ‘weak’ ties (Granovetter 1973), such as people met during casual paid jobs.

Instagram widens the circle to strangers that would not appear on either Snapchat or Facebook. Since Instagram allows others to admire one’s craftwork, people appreciate their posts being seen by strangers, who are assumed to have been attracted by their aesthetic skills (cf. Gell 1998), but they don’t necessarily want to become friends with them in other respects. In this way we can see how social media achieved what we can term ‘scalable sociality’ (Costa *et. al.* forthcoming), which maps these differentiated forms and levels of sociality onto their respective platforms. Similar instances of scalable sociality were found across our fieldsites. For example, a Tamil population in South India may use WhatsApp images to circulate within the family,

but Facebook to present an idealized image of the family to outsiders (Venkatraman forthcoming: chapter three),

## Conclusions

This paper has devised an approach, termed ethnographic history, which facilitates both a vertical narrative of change and a horizontal mapping of social relations, and both derived from the ethnography of The Glades in south-east England. It appears that the crucial change in photography may not have been, as generally presumed, that from analogue to digital technologies, as a transformation in their production (Sarvas and Frohlich 2011). That transformation may have been relatively conservative and remained in alignment with more established approaches to the anthropology of photography. Rather, it has been the storm waters of social-media photography that have cast us adrift from these familiar seas. These focus on changes in sharing and consumption rather than technology. Yet as with many digital technologies (Miller and Horst 2012:24–30), the extraordinary finding is how quickly highly normative genres become established and policed, as with the various forms of the selfie.

With respect to earlier theorizing of the nature and role of photography, social-media photography clearly represents the final stage in the process of democratization: the link with art is no longer exclusive (Benjamin 1970; Sontag 1977) but through the mass crafting of Instagram. The link to class is not of Bourdieu’s (1990) middle-class practice but of Bourdieu’s (1972) differentiation through the aesthetics of taste. Social-media photography is as a mass media an aspect of the ‘everyday’, which renders it closer to communication (Slater 1995), though each new phase creates new forms of conventions around

image creation (Harrison 2004). Instagram directly equates the craft of photography with the ubiquity of everyday crafting, as in putting on make-up or baking cakes. It contributes towards the resolution of one of the core contradictions of an egalitarian society. How, when we are all equal, can we ensure that everyday and everybody includes something a little bit special and distinct? With Snapchat we abjure even the possibility of institutionalization and the legacy of memory or the materiality of the photograph, for a pure transience. Though, just as with a chance remark, that doesn't mean it can't be consequential.

As Edwards (2012a and Edwards 2012b), Pinney (2011) and many other anthropologists have shown, anthropology has travelled a considerable distance in finally embracing photography, and its analyses have become ever more sophisticated, nuanced and insightful, whether embracing issues of affect or post-colonial politics. This paper is not intended to in any way detract from these achievements. But in the last seven years this movement of anthropology towards photography has been met by a counter movement from photography towards anthropology. With over a billion photographs posted every day, photography has expanded to become a ubiquitous presence. Through platforms such as Twitter and WhatsApp it has become an integral part of messaging and general communication. This storm, this deluge of photographs now saturates almost every relationship, every concern and every interest anthropologists may wish to explore, from kinship to shopping. It is hard to imagine any topic of ethnography that would not be enhanced by studying social-media photography, which shifts this from a sub-discipline to as much an integral part of ethnography as conversation.

Indeed, this may go beyond being merely an aspect of ethnography. In the book *Visualising*

*Facebook* Miller and Sinanan (forthcoming) examine the degree to which visual images alone may now constitute a viable alternative or complement to conventional ethnography, in that we can explore the fundamental values of a given society from an ethnography that consists largely of people's visual postings on Facebook. At this point photography is almost analogous to language itself. We may not emphasize words as the topic of our ethnography, but we can't imagine undertaking an ethnography without language. Similarly, we may no longer focus upon the photograph per se, but in the future there may be almost no topics we can undertake the ethnography of without engaging with the communicative consequence and ubiquitous presence of the visual form.

While leaving adrift some anthropological approaches, this relation to ethnography may reinforce others, especially the analysis of visual genres in comparative contexts. Though in each case this new ubiquity requires some shift in perspective. For example, good ethnographies have always tried to situate photography as one practice in relation to others within that population. So Deger (2008) relates photography to Yolngu practices of mourning, Wright (2008) to Solomon Islanders' concept of the spirits, and Harrington-Watt (2015) shows how family photographs bring out the affective dimension of Gujeratis' relationship to their ancestors. But these tend to focus on more particular roles and resonances; while the sheer quantity and expansion represented by social-media photography is likely to shift the focus to the sustaining of the normative as everyday practice rather than marking something as special. In a similar manner, previously anthropologists have sometimes needed to engineer the relationship to observing everyday life through actively taking images, a tradition that goes from Bateson and

Mead (1942) to Pink (2001), but the necessity for this may now be partly obviated by the mundane nature of social-media photography. We may also have shifted slightly from the idea of photography wanting something (as in Mitchell 2005) or doing something (as in the tradition that follows Gell 1998). It may be less demanding or less seductive, but social-media photography is powerful by becoming comfortably trivial, more akin to phatic communication in a pub, or a different bracelet, it gains the diversity of language as potentially a little bit pertinent to pretty much anything going on around it.

This power becomes clear in the tradition exemplified by Strassler (2010) and others, where we find social-media photography has, if anything even more than traditional analogue photography, a clear role in ideology and other forms of representational practice that vary between populations. In this case its potential for normativity arises from its ubiquity. That is, it manifests a principle or value largely by making it mundane. This is very evident in our comparative project. The obligatory crafting of beauty (Nicolescu forthcoming: chapter three) through social-media photography by a southern Italian population is strikingly different from the purpose of social-media photography in a small, ill-favoured town in Chile (Haynes forthcoming: chapter three), where images are used to repudiate such pretensions in pursuit of local ordinariness. One Chinese population may post aspirational fantasies of the future (Wang forthcoming: chapter three), while another (McDonald forthcoming: chapter three) posts in a manner which reinforces Confucius's dictates of filial piety and parental devotion.

So just as we thought anthropology had finally colonized photography, we find that anthropology has in fact been thoroughly counter-colonized by the photograph. But there is no reason

for us to resist this act of visual imperialism. Photography adds considerably to the potential for ethnography itself, broadening the cultural objectifications upon which anthropology is based. And there are therefore good reasons for anthropology to welcome such developments.

## References

- Bateson, G. and Mead, M. 1942. *Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis*. New York: New York Academy of Sciences.
- Benjamin, W. 1970. The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. In Benjamin, W. *Illuminations*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Bolter, J. and Grusin, R. 2000. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Bourdieu, P. 1972. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment Of Taste*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- 1990. *Photography: A Middle-brow Art*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Christen, K. 2005. Gone digital: Aboriginal remix and the cultural commons. *International Journal of Cultural Property* 12:315–45.
- Costa, E., Haynes, N., McDonald, T., Miller, D., Nicolescu, R., Sinanan, J., Spyer, J., Venkatraman, S. and Wang, X. forthcoming. *How the World Changed Social Media*. London: UCL Press.
- Deger, J. 2008. Imprinting on the heart: photography and contemporary Yolngu mournings. *Visual Anthropology* 21:292–309.
- Drazin, A., Frohlich, D. 2007. Good intentions: remembering through framing photographs in English homes. *Ethnos* 72(1):51–76
- Edwards, E. 1992. *Anthropology and Photography: 1860–1929*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Edwards, E. 2012a. *The Camera as Historian: Amateur Photographers and Historical Imagination 1885–1918*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- Edwards, E. 2012b. Objects of affect: photography beyond the image. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41:221–34.
- Edwards, E. and Hart, J. 2004. *Photographs, Objects, Histories*. London: Routledge.
- Empson R. 2011. *Harnessing Fortune: Personhood, Memory and Place in Northeast Mongolia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Empson, R. 2012. Creative Genealogies: Documenting Subjects in Mongolia (paper presented at CRASSH conference Freedom, Creativity and Decision: Towards an Anthropology of the Human Subject).
- Gell, A. 1998. *Art and Agency*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Gershon, I. 2010. *The Breakup 2.0*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Gerson, I. and Bell, J. (eds). 2013. The newness of new media. *Culture, Theory and Critique* 54 (special issue):3.
- Granovetter, M. 1973. The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology* 78:1360–80.
- Halbwachs, M. 1992. *On Collective Memory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Harrington-Watt, K. 2015. The affective, devotional and therapeutic agency of everyday photographs in a Gujarati migrant community, New Zealand. *Visual Anthropology* 28:155–69.
- Harrison, B. 2004 Snap happy: towards a sociology of 'everyday' photograph. In Pole, C.J. (ed.) *Seeing is Believing? Approaches to Visual Research*, Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Haynes, N. forthcoming. *Social Media in Northern Chile*. London: UCL Press.
- Keightley, E. and Pickering, M. 2014. Technologies of memory: practices of remembering in analogue and digital photography. *New Media and Society* 16:576.
- Larsen, J. 2008. Practices and flows of digital photography: an ethnographic framework. *Mobilities* 3(1):141–60.
- McDonald, T. forthcoming. *Social Media in Rural China*. London: UCL Press.
- McKay, S. 2011. On the face of Facebook: historical images and personhood in Filipino social networking. *History and Anthropology* 21:483–501.
- Madianou, M. and Miller, D. 2012. *Migration and New Media*. London: Routledge.
- Miller, D. 2011 *Tales from Facebook*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Miller, D. forthcoming. *Social Media in an English Village*. London: UCL Press.
- Miller, D and Horst, H. 2012. Introduction. In H. Horst and D. Miller (eds) *Digital Anthropology*. London: Berg
- Miller, D. and Sinanan J. 2014. *Webcam*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Miller, D. and Sinanan, J. forthcoming. *Visualising Facebook: A Comparative Perspective*. London: UCL Press.
- Mitchell, W. 2005. *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*. Chicago. Chicago University Press.
- Nicolescu, R. forthcoming. *Social Media in Southern Italy*. London: UCL Press.
- Pink, S. 2001. *Doing Visual Ethnography: Images, Media and Representation in Research*. London: Sage.
- Pinney, C. 1998 *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs*.
- Pinney C. and Peterson N. (eds). 2003. *Photography's Other Histories*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Pinney C. 2011. *Photography and Anthropology*. London: Reaktion.
- Rose, G. 2010. *Doing Family Photography*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Rose, G. 2014. How digital technologies do family snaps. Only better. In Larsen, J. and Sandbye, M. (eds) *Digital Snaps*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Sarvas, R. and Frohlich, D. 2011. *From Snapshots to Social Media: The Changing Picture of Domestic Photography*. London: Springer.
- Slater, D. 1995. Domestic photography and digital culture. In M. Lister (ed.) *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture*. London: Routledge.

- Sontag, S. 1977. *On Photography*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Strathern, M. 1988. *The Gender of the Gift*. Berkley: University of California Press.
- Strassler, K. 2010. *Refracted Visions: Popular Photography and National Modernity in Java*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Turkle, S. 2011. *Alone Together*. New York: Basic Books.
- Uimonen, P. 2012. *Digital Drama: Teaching and Learning Art and Media in Tanzania*. London: Routledge.
- van Dijck, J. 2007. *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press
- Venkatraman, S. forthcoming. *Social Media in South India*. London: UCL Press.
- Wang, X. forthcoming. *Social Media in Industrial China*. London: UCL Press.
- Whitehead, N. and Wesch, M. 2012. *Human No More: Digital Subjectivities, Unhuman Subjects, and the End of Anthropology*. Boulder: University of Colorado Press.
- Were, G. and Favero, P. 2013. Imaging digital lives. *Journal of Material Culture* 18 (special issue):3
- Wright, C. 2008. 'A devil's engine': photography and spirits in the Western Solomon Islands. *Visual Anthropology* 21:364–80.

## **Acknowledgments**

The project was funded by the European Research Council grant ERC-2011-AdG-295486 Socnet. Particular thanks to Ciara Green and the four schools who granted us permission to work with their pupils. Also thanks for comments from the project team and the peer-reviewers. The degree of blurring of images reflects the type of consent received for their reproduction.

# Anthropology & Photography

is a new open-access RAI publication series edited by the RAI Photography Committee. Emerging from the international conference of the same name organized by the RAI at the British Museum in 2014, the series will highlight and make available to the widest possible audience the best new work in the field.

## RAI Photography Committee

*Elizabeth Edwards (De Montfort University)*

*Haidy Geismar (University College London)*

*Anita Herle (University of Cambridge)*

*Christopher Morton (University of Oxford)*

*Christopher Pinney (University College London)*

*Patrick Sutherland (University of the Arts)*

*Ariadne van de Ven (independent photographer)*

**Volume 1** *Photography in the Age of Snapchat*  
Daniel Miller

## Forthcoming Titles

*'Look Away from Me!': On the Material Meanings of Images in a Digital Landscape* by Paolo Favero

*A Shaykh's Portrait: Images and Tribal History among the Negev Bedouin* by Emilie Le Febvre

*From Resistance Towards Invisibility* by Juno Gemes and Catherine de Lorenzo

*Archaeological Photography as Dangerous Supplement* by Colleen Morgan

*Culture, Memory and Community through Photographs: Developing an Inuit-based Research Methodology* by Carol Payne

*Alfred Maudslay's Causality Dilemma: Archaeology, Photography and the influence of Nineteenth-Century Travel Literature* by Duncan Shields

*'Pierre Verger, A Cigarra, and the Construction of Candomblé's African 'Purity'* by Heather Shirey

*Visual Economies and Digital Materialities of Koorie Kinship and Community* by Sabra Thorner

*Reflecting (Upon) 'Truth' Online in Iranian Popular Digital Photography* by Shireen Walton

ISSN 2397-1754

ISBN 978-0-900632-43-3

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.