Chapter 10

Images, Self-Images, and Idealized Identities in the Digital Networked World: Reconfigurations of Family Photography in a Web-Based Mode

Luc Pauwels
Universiteit Antwerpen, Belgium

ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the impact of digital technology on the way in which families present themselves in an online mode. Rooting family photography in its analogue and digital past, where it mainly served a ‘socialization’ and ‘integration’ function confined to next of kin and propagating mainly domestic values to a fairly secluded audience, the author discusses how the expressive means have increased dramatically as the practice moved into the public or semi-public realm, catering for an anonymous mass of Web surfers. At any rate, family self-representations on the Web present a fascinating area of research into cultural change and reproduction, and into the complex role of technology in those processes at the ‘grassroots’ level. However, this of course implies a new challenge to researchers who need to be able to decode/interpret the various multimodal aspects of these hybrid constructions as to their social and cultural meaning. This chapter discusses both the social and scientific impact of the change in functions and make a contribution to the development of a tool to adequately decode the Internet as a socio-cultural space.

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1. FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHY: FROM THE ANALOGUE TO THE DIGITAL WORLD

1.1. A Practice Ruled by Social Norms

Contrary to the much discussed transition from analogue to digital recording equipment, the subsequent and much more silent move of family photography to the Web has involved some major shifts in the social functions of these formerly ‘private’ forms of communications, and in the ways group and individual identities are constructed and disseminated. In particular the opportunities to create a desired and easy to alter ‘identity’ of the group and to a lesser extent of its individual members are greeted with much enthusiasm. These carefully constructed identities may or may not differ significantly from the off-line identities of groups (their values, aspirations, achievements, relations, characteristics) and thus may be mainly a matter of image or impression management (Goffmann, 1959).

Pictures taken in the private sphere of the family are often regarded as very trivial. But their triteness and stereotypical character should not distract us from their very important social functionality. The characteristic look of family pictures – almost identical situations, players and style – serves the deeply grounded social functions of photography in the domestic sphere. Family photography therefore very rapidly developed into a true ‘social institution’ (Bourdieu, 1978: 38-54). To a large extent this explains why private images are made in a particular way, why certain moments and subjects are particularly favored and why some other aspects of life are rarely highlighted, or are even absolutely taboo.

Birthdays, marriages, holiday trips are those instances where the camera is kept at hand, whereas less valued or symbolic moments of family life go by unrecorded. A clearer indication of the profound normative nature of private photography can hardly be found. Showing and exchanging pictures still constitute a social ritual, however much it may be masked by its casual nature (Bourdieu, 1978, Boerdam & Oosterbaan Martinius, 1978, Musello, 1979). Many years ago the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1978, p. 38-54) theorized that family photography fulfills an “integrating” function, fostering and maintaining a bond between family members. Photographic activity in the private sphere, according to Bourdieu, may serve as an index for the degree to which families are “integrated”. The fact that pictures are being made suggests a certain kind of togetherness and these photographic practices in turn help to promote this feeling. Additionally, private images offer almost “magical surrogates” to those longing to remain connected with the temporary or permanently unreachable (e.g. physically remote persons, deceased individuals and past experiences) (Bourdieu, 1965, 1978: 38-54). More than a decade later Musello uses the term ‘communion’-function’ to confirm that strengthening the family ties is still the main function of domestic photography (1979: 109).

Whereas the traditional “rites of passage” such as baptism, communion, marriage and birthdays still enjoy considerable popularity, less ritualistic or unpretentious moments at home or on holiday, including even somewhat embarrassing moments, have become eligible to be photographed and tend to form the bulk of family pictures. But still it is noteworthy that the less happy, but more representative moments of family life, remain absent in most collections. The depiction of bad luck, hardship, failures and disappointments remain in the realm of the unmentionable.

Even with the enhanced range of photographic styles (ranging from the formal studio pose to the candid shot) and the expansion of moments that are appropriate to be kept for posterity, it seems that the attempt to construct and present ideal images of the family continues to predominate (Boerdam & Oosterbaan Martinius, 1978; Musello, 1979). Hirsch formulated this normative persistence as follows: