The Societal Significance of Smartphone Cameras

Alanna Carmichael

Master of Educational Technology, University of British Columbia

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Dr. Ernesto Peña and Dr. Teresa Dobson

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In the last decade, cell phone cameras have evolved well past the point of being a "nice to have" feature on our mobile devices. Cell phone cameras, or, more specifically, smartphone cameras, have changed both how and why we take photographs. These easily accessible cameras have permeated how we share and consume media, and they shape our communication, social identities, and self-representation. Perhaps most importantly, smartphone cameras afford us the ability to connect with others in contextually rich ways, mediating the remoteness of our physical location and adding a visual dimension to our communication (Villi, 2015). This not only carries over to the world of social media, but also affects education and corresponds with First Peoples Principles of Learning through direct connections with storytelling. The impact of smartphone cameras on society will likely evolve and develop over time as our world becomes increasingly digital, visual, and interconnected.

Smartphone cameras have drastically changed the mechanics of taking a photograph by streamlining and simplifying the process. Gone are the days of snapping a picture and waiting days for the film to develop to see how the photograph turned out, or taking photos sparingly to avoid wasting film. Smartphone cameras even eliminate the need to bring a separate device along on our excursions and adventures, as we have one built into the mobile machine that never leaves our sides. It has never been easier to take a photograph, and this is highlighted by the fact that around one trillion photos were taken in 2015 (Heyman, 2015). According to research done by InfoTrends, this is triple the number of photos taken in 2010 (Heyman, 2015). Not only were more photos taken, but more photos were shot on a phone camera, with 75% of photos being captured on a cell phone camera, compared to just 40% in 2010 (Heyman, 2015). These numbers have continued to climb, albeit it at a slower rate. Researchers at Keypoint Intelligence indicate that 1.4 trillion photos were taken in 2019, with 90% of these photos taken on mobile phones

(Carrington, 2019). The development and ever-improving quality of smartphone cameras has changed our relationship with taking pictures by drastically increasing accessibility and making everyone feel like a photographer.

Even more important than the physical changes, however, are the changes to the meaning behind taking a photo and the significance of photos themselves. With the sheer number of photos being taken each year, some people feel that "photos aren't as valuable as they once were" (Peters & Allan, 2018, p. 361). While we still take photos to capture precious memories, taking a photograph is now often fuelled by the motivation to share the moment with others. This drive and compulsion to share photos illustrates perhaps the single most prominent goal of taking a photograph today: connecting with others. This desire for connection applies to more than just our close friends and family; it extends to acquaintances and sometimes even strangers, as we see with those who have hundreds, thousands, or even millions of followers online. One participant in a study by Peters and Allan (2018) suggests that photo-sharing is "an easy way to stay in contact without the long catch up talks" (p. 267), further demonstrating the relationship between sharing photos and staying connected.

As Peters and Allan (2018) state, camera phones have led to a transition away from "'this is what I saw then' to 'this is what I see now'" (p. 359). Villi (2015) confirms this, suggesting that smartphone cameras allow people to "form a connection in the present, as opposed to a connection between past and present" (p. 3). In fact, most participants in Peters and Allan's (2018) study state that they have little interaction with their photos after taking them and sharing them. This further supports the notion that smartphone camera use is very much an "'in the now' practice" (Peters & Allan, 2018, p. 365). Rather than taking photos to preserve the moment, we take photos to share the moment. This fosters what Villi (2015) refers to as a "mediated

presence" (p. 5), where those physically distant from an event can still experience the moment through their phone screen as if they were there. This allows people to form an "'always on' connection" (Peters & Allan, 2018, p. 365) where physical separation is not a barrier.

Nowhere is the notion of mediated presence more prominent than on social media. We tell stories online through the photos and videos we take and share, and roped into these stories are our individual and social identities (Edmonds, 2014). We have seen the rise of storytelling through photos in recent years with the increasing popularity of Snapchat stories, Instagram stories, and, most recently, Facebook stories. The widespread adoption of social media "stories" shows a shift from the polished, perfect photos people post on their social media feeds to the more authentic, less filtered glimpses into peoples' lives offered by social media stories. Instagram even describes itself as being the home for visual storytelling, highlighting the relationship between sharing photos and telling stories (Instagram, 2020).

Although connection is at the heart of storytelling, visual storytelling goes beyond the goal of connecting with others; it is also directly related to self-representation, identity, and impression management. According to participants in a study done by Sukmayadi and Yahya (2019), emotions, humour, and perceived authenticity are key elements of digital storytelling through Instagram stories. Instagram users carefully construct stories about their lives, selectively choosing which moments to share and which to keep to themselves in order to shape how others see them. For example, one participant in the Sukmayadi and Yahya (2019) study states that he opts to share content that will make his followers "perceive [him] as an active person" (p. 220). A study done by Lee (2009) has even found that camera phones "change the way individuals [are] visually attuned to the world and ephemera around them" (as cited in Peters & Allan, 2018, p. 359). This suggests that we tune into "photo-worthy" instances

differently than ever before, seeking out scenarios that drive our digital identities forward. This connection between photo-taking, photo-sharing and self-representation has been spurred by advancements of cell phone cameras over time, and the pervasion of social media would likely not have transpired without these developments.

The relationship between smartphone cameras and storytelling does not start and end with social media, however. Visual storytelling using smartphone cameras also has important implications for education and connecting to Indigenous ways of knowing and being. As Edmonds (2014) states, "for Aboriginal people, storytelling is central to culture and learning (Yunkaporta, 2007)" (p. 94). Schools can better connect with First Peoples Principles of Learning by integrating digital storytelling into the curriculum and individual classroom practices (First Nations Education Steering Committee, 2018). The proliferation of smartphone camera usage allows students to act as "producers" in the classroom, a key shift that empowers students to take ownership of their learning (Stenliden, Bodén, & Nissen, 2019). These benefits may be especially pronounced for Indigenous students, as images and storytelling hold special cultural significance in Indigenous communities (Edmonds, 2014).

With the changes in communication brought about by rampant cell phone camera usage, it is important and necessary for both digital literacy and media literacy to adapt to encompass the affordances of cell phone cameras. To a large extent, digital literacy and media literacy have been shaped by our ability to capture and share photos in the blink of an eye. The ubiquity of smartphones and thus, smartphone cameras, has sparked crucial conversations about privacy, cyberbullying, and digital footprints. These issues and concerns are evolving alongside recent developments in technology, suggesting that digital literacy is an ongoing learning process. For example, smartphone cameras have changed the face of cyberbullying due to the ease in which

embarrassing moments can be captured and shared online. Photos and videos may even be taken and manipulated without the permission or knowledge of the victim, making this not only an issue with cyberbullying, but also with privacy. These privacy issues have become more pronounced in schools as smartphones become increasingly prevalent among students. Youth must also consider their digital footprint now more than ever before, as it is all too easy to press "share" without thinking about where images, videos, or comments may end up. Students must learn to think critically about their online presence and what they post online, and this should be a core component of digital literacy curricula.

The advent and adoption of smartphone cameras as the new "normal" for our world reaffirms the notion that "we live in, rather than with, media" (Peters & Allan, 2018, p. 364). The transition from photographs representing a past-to-present connection to a present-to-present connection has massive cultural implications (Villi, 2015). Taking and sharing photos now plays a key role in how we communicate and connect with others, and how we take in the world around us. The changes brought about by smartphone cameras shape how we think about digital literacy, and require us to rethink our understanding of issues like cyberbullying, privacy, and digital footprints. It is important to remember that smartphone cameras are not a stagnant technological development. As smartphone camera technology develops, so too will the implications for society. We have already seen drastic changes to our lives at the hands of smartphone cameras, and these changes are likely far from over. How we take and share photos may look significantly different in the next 10, 20, or 50 years, but regardless of the specifics, this visual medium will continue to shape how we think about human connection, digital literacy, and the life-changing affordances of communication technology.

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