

Joachim Schmid  
Reload Currywurst

Photo Sharing: You Can Eat Your Sausage and Have It, Too

My home town is not famous for its fancy food. People seem to be happy with fast food. The best-known local specialty is the so-called Currywurst. It is a sausage made of unknown ingredients that is fried and covered with some sort of ketchup made of unknown ingredients. The dish is topped with curry powder and it comes either with a piece of bread or with potatoe chips made of unknown ingredients. People seem to like it. Huge numbers of these sausages are sold and consumed every day.

I have been living in Berlin for more than 30 years. For the most part of this time I have been studying other people's photographs. In all these years I have not encountered more than maybe a dozen photographs of Currywurst. There were a few stock photos that were printed in papers and magazines whenever there was a Currywurst-related article, there was one picture postcard featuring Currywurst, and then I came across one single snapshot of a Currywurst — one out of several hundred thousands of snapshots I looked at. That was it.

Things look different today. When I prepared this talk I checked how many photographs of Currywurst you can find on the internet. There are more than 30,000 photographs online, and these are just the ones that are found by search engines because they are identified by appropriate captions and tags. I would like to mention some more figures, only to avoid a possible misunderstanding. There are not only a lot of photographs of Currywurst on the internet, there are also hundreds of thousands of photographs of other sausages and several million photographs of hamburgers, fish 'n' chips, pizza, sushi, tapas — and many more photographs of everything you may or may not want to see.

The popularity of fast food is as much a by-product of modern life as the popularity of fast photography. Although the latter is clearly younger and there is no causal connection, one might get the idea that people love fast food because in the time they saved by avoiding a proper meal they can take photographs of fast food and post them on the internet. The majority of these photographs are to be found on Flickr, one of the first image hosting websites that is today the most successful of its kind. This site was launched in 2004 and in just four years has become the biggest image pool ever accumulated in the history of humankind. Today, about three billion photographs are stored there. This inconceivable number is increasing continuously — millions of photographs are uploaded to the site every single day.

Virtually everybody is a photographer today, and it is obvious that the exponentially growing quantity of images has turned into the foremost quality of photography itself. The number of photographs that are taken every minute will

continue increasing - and that's maybe one of the very few things we can predict with reasonable certainty. Other than that, any attempt to predict the future of photography or the future of art or the future of technology is — in my humble opinion — about as promising as predicting the trajectory of a clipped toe nail. We can, however, get an idea of the magnitude of changes that we have to expect by envisioning the changes we experienced during the past years.

Looking at the stream of incoming photographs on Flickr confirms our beliefs and prejudices and at the same time is full of surprises — the latter being definitely more interesting. Besides masses of snapshots that may be interesting for a small number of people such as family and friends of the photographers we find basically everything conceivable in the field of photography, including many things we never saw before. For the first time we can observe in real time how new types of images emerge, how motifs become popular, and how recurring patterns get established. There is a remarkable number of quite new memes, the most successful one probably being the “buddy shot” — the self-portrait with friends made with the camera held at arm's length. And among other things, we learn that nowadays an astounding number of people photograph their food before they eat it. This is not only true for festive meals or fancy food that may have been photographed by some people also in the past, it is true for all kinds of food, at home, in restaurants, or at fast food stalls. This is not only the case with exceptional experiences — let's say the first time a European tourist sees a dish of roasted dog in China or a Japanese tourist tries to conceive the physics of a submarine sandwich in France — it is true for everyday experience.

Not long ago this would have been unthinkable, first of all for economic reasons. Not many people would have wasted one frame of film on a slice of pizza, and hardly anybody would have taken a photograph of their meal every day. The person doing it nevertheless would have been considered slightly insane by most of their fellows — and probably they would have been an artist. More interesting, if there was such a person only very few people would have known of him or her. Hardly anybody would have seen the photographs. Today, everybody has the opportunity to look at the photographs of everybody else. A substantial part of the photographic production that was traditionally confined to the realm of privacy is now accessible for a general audience.

We will probably never know for sure why people take these photographs; it is fascinating to observe, however, that they do, and that doing such a thing as taking a photograph of every single meal you eat has become socially acceptable behaviour. The man who takes a picture of his Currywurst nearly every day may be unique but he is not isolated. There's also the man who takes photographs through the windshield of his car — he has about 4,500 of them online. There's the woman who posts photographs of all the things she knitted. There's the man who takes photographs of all women he meets — he presents these neatly organized in categories such as “talked with,” “went out with” and “slept with”. There's the woman who takes photographs of her feet every day. There's the

woman who posts several photographs of every single plush toy she owns. There's the man who photographs his collection of spoons stolen from airplanes — more than 1,200. There's the frequent traveller who photographs all hotel rooms he stayed in. There's the fetishist who photographs all his rubber items. There's the man who photographs all his books, all his music CDs and all his video tapes. There's the woman who photographs every single page of her notebook. And these are just a few of the remarkable photographers I discovered on photo sharing sites.

In my understanding these people are not more peculiar than those who take thousands of pictures while traveling, those who take hundreds of pictures at a birthday party or at a wedding reception, those who photograph every single detail of the home they are living in, or those who photograph their babies every day. Contrary to popular opinion I do not think that 99.something percent of the mostly anonymous photographs stored on photo-sharing websites like Flickr are brainless rubbish. But even if we provisionally accept this popular prejudice, this still means that the remaining less-than-one-percent of photographs that are not rubbish will soon amount to a number that will equal and soon after tremendously exceed the number of so-called “good” and “important” photographs that are stored in the archives of Corbis, Getty and other corporate or institutional collections focussing on the gems of traditional mainstream photography. From here we can arrive at the conclusion that it is time to adjust the popular understanding of photography to the facts of modern times. It is time to accept the idea that photographers are not ingenious creators but extensions of their technique. The masterpiece is nothing but a random necessity, occurring more often if people take more photographs.

Taking photographs and posting them on the net has become a key component of leisure fun and entertainment. Many of these billions of photographs are most likely subject to oblivion, but even if their makers completely forget about them they can still be unintentional and undiscovered masterpieces of photography, and they can play a role in the social network of the community. Let's come back to the Currywurst photographer one more time to examine this. Each of his fast food photographs comes with the name and address of the fast food place, a short commentary, and a rating of the respective dish. Thus a personal obsession turned into a potentially useful social activity for the benefit of a wider audience — it can spare people with similar tastes lots of disappointing experiences. The same is true for basically any field of human activity.

In our traditional understanding, photographs preserve individual and collective memory — that is allegedly their main function. People probably still work on this assumption, but in the age of online image hosting photography has started to play a new, multifaceted role. Photographs can be social networking tools enabling people to exchange experiences regarding nearly any conceivable subject. People can borrow other people's eyes if they want to find out about a remote island, a desirable location for a bachelor party, a traveller's view of a

hotel room, a house they wish to rent or to buy, or a good place to enjoy a sausage. Aside from these simple utilitarian uses we can observe and easily imagine equivalent developments in fields like politics, journalism and art.

Weblogs turn out to be quite useful instruments for political activists, bloggers turn into citizen journalists, and artists explore the internet for their own purposes. All of them store their images on sites like Flickr. Photographs of newsworthy events appear on these sites sooner than on TV. Storing one's photos there is, however, not just switching to a new mode of delivery. The creative use of such services subverts the fundamental assumptions of gathering and presenting information. Content is no longer being transmitted from A to B following the well-established pattern of publishing; instead it is developed continuously in an ongoing mutual feedback process. People re-discover the idea that a network of many small and self-determined voices may be more useful than any corporate or institutional medium that is simply meant to be consumed. Today's technique is much more suitable for such approaches than any previous technique.

One of the best ways to observe the collective production of meaning is the system of indexing and classifying photographs. In a traditional picture library photographs are classified by subject. An archive is made accessible by applying a limited number of keywords following a strictly determined system of classification. Somebody looking for an image will only find it through these keywords — or by mere coincidence. It is significant that no such overarching and predetermined system exists in user-generated online pools. On the contrary, everybody is entitled to invent new categories, everybody applies the keywords they consider appropriate, and people do this not only for their own photographs, they do it for virtually everybody's photographs. Thus the manifold readings and associations evoked by the complexity of a photographic image are preserved in its description in a much more efficient way — and it becomes much more likely that somebody looking for any type of picture will actually find and eventually use it, no matter what it is, a trivial picture taken for utilitarian purposes or a piece of supposed photo art.

Online image hosting started from the idea of providing a new form of album for snapshot photographers; it was discovered as a new form of global gallery by more ambitious amateurs, and even if the operating companies still think that this is what they provide, more and more people use the service in ways that the providers never even thought of. Collaboratively creating knowledge turned a picture pool into a social sculpture. The community features are for many participants now the most important aspect of their participation. This is true both for special interest groups and for people producing content of a wider interest. Average snapshot photographers are to be found next to commercial eBay sellers, semi-professional travel photographers, street art collectors, pornographers, real estate dealers, supporters of football clubs, bird watchers, trainspotters and nearly any other group you may or may not have heard of,

including people who love Currywurst. Many of these sub-communities overlap and mingle.

The vast majority of people who share their photographs with the rest of us via online hosting sites never published anything at all before there was this kind of service, and maybe many of them don't even think of it as publishing. Their photographs are public however, and in this new extension of public space we can observe how new social structures and new forms of information management emerge. This is by the way not only true for photographs but also for video, music, and writing, often produced by the very same people in a dual role. The majority of these people do not know each other personally, but they meet in the virtual world in order to pursue their individual and collective studies. They produce enormous amounts of photographs and in sharing them they increase their knowledge both about their favorite subjects — and about photography itself.

Examining the steady stream of new photographs we notice a significantly higher portion of photographically satisfying pictures than we would have found in any random sample a decade ago. People do not only take many more photographs than they did before, they also look at many more photographs. They get much more feedback, too. We may even start to think about the possibility of general visual literacy in the not too distant future. Today the knowledge about the photograph's deceptive nature is certainly more widespread than it was one generation ago, and that is without the slightest doubt due to the widespread use of digital cameras and the resulting copious presence of photographs.

In a new situation new models of images emerge, and the ones that are fit for the new environment succeed and spread. There's a new mainstream style in amateur photography that has emerged because the pictures look great in thumbnail size. There's a new extremely popular pastime — the self-portrait made with the camera held at arm's length — that is so successful that we start to wonder how long it will take before the course of movement becomes part of our genetic code. Hardly anybody took pictures like these before there were digital cameras. However, it is not the camera itself that triggers the behaviour but the ubiquitous presence of the image model in online communities inspiring its imitation. An android can easily be programmed to replicate the gesture. Looking at the resulting image the android may start to wonder what "self" is supposed to mean.

The image-producing collective called humankind has the opportunity to get a much better picture of itself than ever before. We may have wondered what the photographs of all these Japanese tourists visiting Europe look like. Now we have a chance to look at them. We can also have a look at the pictures the Japanese take when they are not traveling. We can also have a look at our immediate neighbours' photographs, the ones they take when they are traveling, when they are staying at home, when they are having sex, when they are eating

Currywurst — and while we are doing that the neighbours and the Japanese can have a look at our photographs, too. Basically we have arrived at a point where nearly the entire world is being photographed nearly automatically, with regular updates in short intervals. A human life that is continuously accompanied by photographs published in real time from the moment of its conception to the moment of the body's funeral is no longer beyond imagination.

Joachim Schmid  
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