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DOCAM 2014 Founders Lecture: Photocutionary Acts, Selfies and Public Knowledge

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Public knowledge is, then, the view of the world that is the best we can construct at a given time, judged by our own best procedures for criticism and evaluation of the public record.

Scholars and scientists are by no means the only ones who make contributions …all who publish the results of their inquiries, observations, data collections or reminiscences may also make additions to the public stock of knowledge.

Patrick Wilson, <u>Public Knowledge, Private Ignorance</u>

Over the past hour as I have been revising my Founders Lecture for the proceedings, I have visited a webpage at the University of California Press to search for phrases in their digital version of Patrick Wilson's <u>Two Kinds of Power</u>; I have photographed a cold monarch butterfly; I have received several tweets about the European Space Agency's successful attempt to land a probe on a comet; I have uploaded three of the butterfly pictures to Facebook; I have watched a video of men in Syria digging with bare hands to free a toddler from bombing rubble; I have received comments on the butterfly pictures from a woman who walked me to kindergarten over 60 years ago, a college friend, a colleague in France, and a friend in New Hampshire. Earlier in the day my older son had re-tweeted a comment from a Mars Rover engineer that is appropriate here, too: Retweeted Mike Seibert (@mikeseibert): I now have to leave our #CometLanding party to go drive a rover on Mars. If that isn't proof we live in the future, I don't know what is.

Astonishing video shows moment Syrian toddler pulled alive from rubble after Aleppo bombing

Rescuers dug with their bare hands after hearing cries

It is this now/future world of public knowledge I sketch in this essay. Selfies are used as the probe because they exist, by definition, in this world. Selfies would be of considerable interest to us as documents even if only on the basis of the literary warrant for the inclusion of "selfie" in the Oxford English Dictionary and the extraordinary number of such documents being produced. They are even more deeply interesting because of the sea change in the notions of document and authorship of which they are an index. Selfies help us frame the constellation of changes in concepts of authorship, concepts of public and private knowledge, concepts of vetting public knowledge, concepts of situational utility, and concepts of what constitutes publication.

The blog of the Oxford Dictionaries declared "'Selfie': the interplanetary Word of the Year" when they received a tweet with this photograph, a selfie "performed"

by the Curiosity Mars rover. (http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/2013/11/interplanetary-woty/)

The Oxford Dictionaries had declared "selfie" Word of the Year for 2013 because its word research had shown a 17,000% increase in the word's use in a one year period. For the Oxford Dictionaries a selfie is: *a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website.* At the same time Yahoo estimates the year 2014 will see the production of roughly 880 billion photographs, with 15% of those likely to be selfies.

In 1859 Oliver Wendell Homes wrote of the newly invented photographic process as a "mirror with a memory," the first achievement of this sort in human history; less than two centuries later such a mirror's memory can be sent by a vehicle on Mars and imbedded into a website or a conference paper on Earth.

Recording one's being near the Statue of Liberty with a cell phone, spending lots of time with a large format camera making a single image in Yosemite, one is simply recording photon data. That selfies are simple to make does not, ipso facto, demean the act. Linguist Geoff Nunberg notes:

> For a recent fad, selfies have unleashed a torrent of portentous yammer and invective. The word imputes an aura of narcissism to whatever it's attached to, whether it's apt or not. Use "selfie" to describe that banal Johannesburg snapshot, and all of a sudden Obama becomes the "selfie president." A <u>columnist</u> at the *New York Post* writes that the event "symbolizes the global calamity of Western decline." That gives "selfie" a cultural resonance you're not going to find with any of the other word-of-the-year finalists, not even "twerk."
> http://www.npr.org/2013/12/19/255294091/narcissistic-or-not-selfie-is-nunbergs-word-of-the-year

Walter Benjamin
Yesterday

Walter Benjamins passport.

Like · Comment · Share
45 Shares
358 people like this.

Selfies act as an index of the nature of authorship and publication in the digital environment. The quantitative change in the ease of authorship and publication infrastructure yields qualitative changes in who is an author, what counts as authorship, who is a publisher, and, perforce,

what does vetting mean in such an environment. Original production of documents is easy. Appropriation of earlier works is simple. Modification of earlier works is simple. We have gone beyond Benjamin's notions of reproduction; easy access to images that once held gravitas from their mere difficulty of production and access has evolved into easy acquisition, modification, re-publication, even multiple re-authorships. Now anyone can have a mechanically reproduced copy of some image, anyone can modify another's work, anyone can make their own work. We have expanded the notion of author in line with the Latin notion of someone who causes something to flourish.

The second portion of the definition of "selfie" used by the Oxford Dictionaries: *typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website.* It is here that the selfie begins to present us with a new constellation of notions of authorship, vetting, and public knowledge. Uploading to a social media website is publication. Even when photography moved to film from wet-plate imaging that required sophisticated knowledge of chemistry, a horse-drawn cart to move the camera, and long exposures, publication was no simple matter.
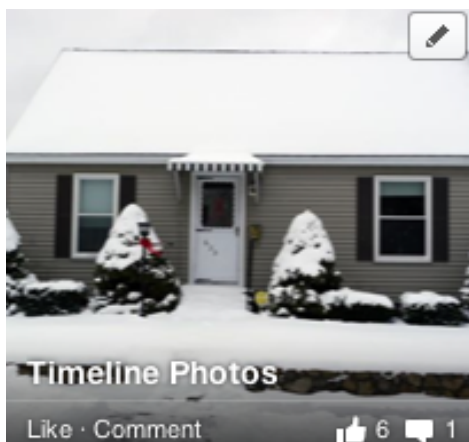
Selfies make evident the dissolution of the technological wall between producers and users, between private documents and public documents. The situational document is within easy reach. While visiting the home in which I had been born I made some photos of the snow around the house; I posted a few on Facebook; a childhood friend whom I had not seen in decades saw the photos and asked if I could walk up the street and photograph her old house; I did. The digital environment provided the circumstances for my friend to even think of having a certain sort of document; that environment made it simple for me to make public both the images of my house and the photos of her house. Subsequently, other old friends posted comments about the good times in the snow 50 years earlier and how cozy our house had been with its wood-burning stove in the kitchen. We might see this as a situational document. The low expenditure of resources enabled an initial publication, a request for making and publication of a second document, and a near real time conversation generated by those documents, and the production of a third document – the transcript of the conversation still sits on Facebook.

It should be noted here that such publication is not limited to simple smart phone photos. Institutions ranging from colleges to the White House upload videos to services such as YouTube and Vimeo on topics of abiding interest as well as those of transitory usefulness. Mill Girl is a four-minute documentary about young girls working in textile mills. The video components were shot with a digital SLR camera, while historical images from the Library of Congress collection are woven into the production. The expenditure of resources was very low by comparison with the production of a similar film made on film stock. This video will be embedded within a larger project, from which users can download clips for use in their own works, and to which users can upload their own videos on the topics of the project.

One might now ask "So what?" We are well enmeshed in the constellation of possibilities of digital authorship and publication. There are myriad selfies of little or no value to most of us, but it has long been the case that there have been too many documents for any one person to master, too much trash through which to sift for the gems. This means there is work to be done in making sense of how documents are brought to the point of use/need, and it means that there are more possibilities for navigation of the question document space. Perhaps we are seeing the emergence of new means privileging utility over subjectness, over documentness. Let us look backwards for a bit and then look forward to how we might begin to seek what Wilson termed "relative clarity and a bit of precarious understanding (p. 2)."

In the 4th Century CE a mother wrote a personal note to her son serving in the Roman army stationed at the fort in Vindolanda saying she had sent underwear and sandals.

At the same time an officer's wife sent a personal note to her sister at another fort asking her to come over for a birthday party. Both notes would have been of only the most trifling interest to anyone else at the time; now they are intensely studied, put on display, and used in high school Latin course blogs. Within the digital environment, intensely personal, situational, and transitory documents have, by their age and place of origin become meaningful in unintended ways, becoming secondary documents of themselves. The boundary between the private document and public document is erased.

Another form of re-authoring can be seen in the photograph of American Western icon Billy the Kid. The photo shows Billy with his pistol on his left side, so folks assumed he was left-handed. Although this interpretation of the image is based on the fact that ferrotype images showed their subjects reversed, the left-handed image became more authentic than Billy's reality.

For screenwriter Gore Vidal and director Arthur Penn Billy the Kid is <u>The Left Handed Gun</u>. Megan Abbott writes of a similar phenomenon in her *New York Times* article about a mug shot that has inspired thousands of web posts, most of which ignore the current "reality" that the young man is no longer incarcerated and is working to support a young family:

He's our smooth criminal, our deadly gangbanger, our lost young man begging for reform —
whatever we want him to be. And far more than any police photographer, we've caught him. We've captured him. He's ours.

Our Love Affair With the Mug Shot
Megan Abbott New York Times JULY 19, 2014

Photocutionary Acts

In discussing the bibliographic universe Wilson notes:

> "[t]here is no …no sharp boundary between the universe of writings and sayings, and the universe of pictorial and musical works …[because a] 'language' without a dictionary or set of conventional assignments to symbols, and without a syntax or way of combining symbols to allow statements or assertions, is not recognizably similar to the languages spoken by humans (p. 14)."

As images are used more and more by more people within the comparative ease of the digital publication environment, we need to seek some clarity, some way of including the image universe and the other universes of means by which we present and examine the world. To this end I suggest the concept of photocutionary acts.

According to an article from *AFP*, Yahoo estimates that 880 billion photographs will be taken next year, and a survey taken by Samsung in Britain found that 17% of men and 10% of women take selfies. http://bgr.com/2013/12/24/how-many-selfies-were-taken-in-2013/ . Imaging of one sort or another is a significant aspect of document making in the digital public knowledge environment, so it is some use to consider the use of photographs.

There is an enormous number of people in the world making billions of photographs each year. Let us model this activity as "photocutionary behaviors," in the spirit of J.L. Austin, who modeled speech acts as "illocutionary acts." We might summarize his work by saying: "to say something is to do something." We will move the "doing" into the photographic realm. This doing of a photocutionary behavior holds whether one is making a quick snap shot with a point & shoot camera, using a camera built into a cell phone, or making a sophisticated studio image with equipment costing more than a small automobile. It holds whether one is making a simple recording or a highly modulated image. What is done at the time of the making of the photograph is irrelevant for our model, as is what is done after the photograph is taken. Of course, "doing" does not necessarily stop after the image is made. Even in the case of the immediately deleted snapshot, the deletion is the doing of something, though if may well be the limiting case of what is done.

We might model photocutionary acts in the following way. A person considers making a photograph. It might be a snapshot of a child, an elaborate advertising photo, a documentary photo of teens using drugs, or a carefully crafted cityscape. Austin says of illocutionary acts that they are generally accomplished in order to "persuade, suggest, demand, or promise;" Pratt suggests documents are constructed in order to accomplish a similar set of goals: "motivate, articulate, educate, or felicitate." (The information of the image / Allan D. Pratt. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1982) Given the promise of the photograph, in the words of Oliver Wendell Holmes, to "retain [the subject's] impress, and a fresh sunbeam lays this on the living nerve as if it were radiated from the breathing shape" it would seem not unreasonable to make the overt addition to these lists "remember." This person or, in the case of some complex imaging projects, the person's agents, must engage some instrumentality. Ordinarily this would be a camera in the ordinary sense. In some circumstances there will be lights, several lenses, and

post-production hardware.

The product of the photographic process is an image in some physical form. For much of the history of photography the immediate product was visible to the eye as a negative or reversal positive with subsequent operations producing tangible and manageable prints. Nowadays the images are likely to be physical only in the sense of arrangements of bits in some digital storage medium. These may be made manifest as prints, occasional viewings on the cell phone screen, closely scrutinized images on a computer monitor, large scale prints, or bits analyzed digitally with no human eyes in the process.

We might refer to the print or digital file as the "message" or, perhaps for clarity, the "photo message." Message is used here in the sense of the substrate modulated to encode some information. In the Shannon and Weaver sense, we distinguish between the message and any meaning it might have for the photographer or for any other viewer. The message may be in a format that is interpretable by others or not; it may be in its original state or not; it may be made with production methods hospitable to subsequent uses or not. Subsequent users may include the original photographer or not.

Any subsequent use or interpretation of the photo message may or may not have a direct relation to the original meaning the photographer hoped to have embodied in the message. The persons or objects in front of the lens may or may not be known to the subsequent user. That user may or may not be concerned that the "original" meaning of the message has not survived. The subsequent user may or may not use the image according to the message maker's original "intent." The secondary photocutionary behavior may often be directly related to the initial photocutionary behavior – remembering. Ten years after a child's birthday, the pictures evoke memories; pictures of a mother when she was a child may fascinate her adult children; news photos viewed many years later remind us of the flood of thoughts at the time.

We have an initial photocutionary behavior in the construction of the photo message; we have a physically present message; we have a range of possible secondary photcutionary behaviors using the physically present message. The secondary behaviors may be conducted by the original maker of the photo message, by another familiar with the original behavior, or by someone with no knowledge or particular interest in the original photocutionary behavior.

An Early Selfie Photocutionary Act

During World War II, Seabees in the 69th battalion were photographed just before boarding their ship for Normandy. The photograph is a public document – made by a US Navy photographer. The initial photocutionary act was one of official documentation. Donald O'Connor, my father, "selfied" the public document by handwriting "me" and drawing an arrow to the image of himself. His secondary photocutionary act demonstrated that even in the 1940s the boundary between public and private documents a little porous.

This is very different

The selfie is not just a self-portrait; it is an image of oneself by oneself and published by oneself. One can hold the camera, lab, studio, and publishing mechanism in one's hand. The selfie shows us mechanisms and consequences of authoring in the digital document environment – authoring of documents, authoring of questions, authoring of constellations, excerpts, and entanglements.
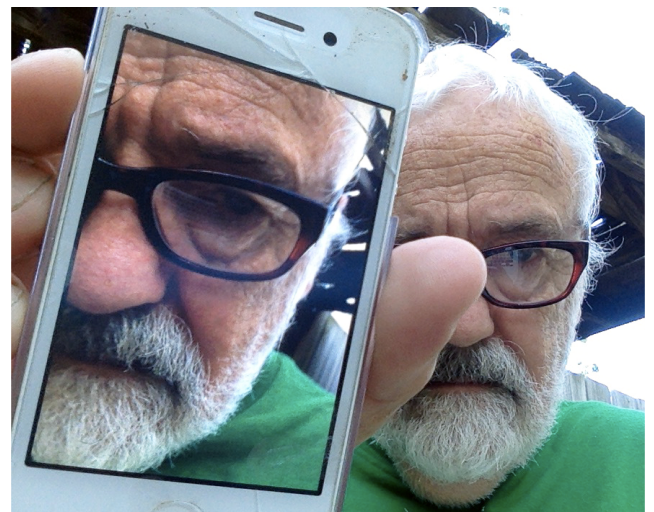
Recently this image arrived in my email, an arrangement of three portraits of men holding animals. To the intended recipients, this image brought a smile over a clever visual joke. Whether this should have any overt or immediate meaning for any other viewers is irrelevant to the sender. What is of interest to us in the context of selfie photocutionary acts is the trivially small amount of time required to make a collage of such a sort and have it sent around the world to its intended recipients.

Nunberg's comment above on selfies mentions the image of President Obama sitting with some other folks (while there is little, if any evidence of this, it was not without consequence that the image was made at the time of Nelson Mandela's funeral.) Many folks performed secondary photocutionary acts on the image of Obama performing a selfie. Niels Lund has pointed out that the "Obama selfie" is actually a selfie by Helle Thorning-Schmidt, Prime Minister of Denmark. Secondary photocutionary

acts appeared in print and web sources. While the amount of effort required to superimpose a portion of the Obama-Thorning-Schmidt photo onto other, well-known photographs of major historical events is greater than the effort to arrange three portraits into a single file, it is not significantly so in any meaningful terms.
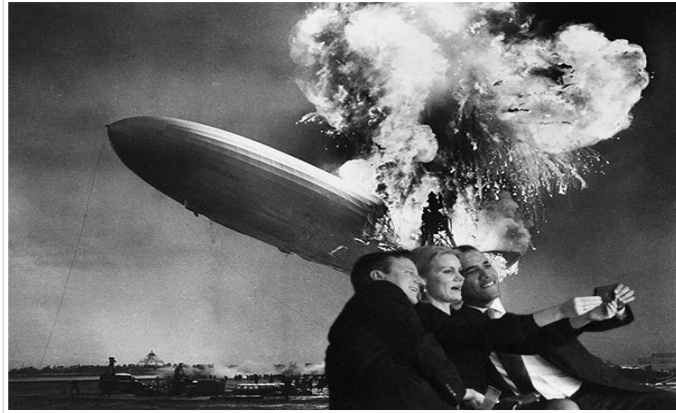
In 1946 my father, Donald, asked his mother to take a picture of him with his wife, Marge, in front of the public library. The digitized version of that image (the secondary photocutionary act) is on the left above. That image has been a favorite of family and friends for six decades. In 2010 Don & Marge were photographed leaving their favorite local restaurant, where they had eaten nearly every day. After they had both died I made the image of the empty booth at the restaurant both for my own memories and to share with the staff at the restaurant. The time required to put the three images together and to put them onto my Facebook site was less than 15 minutes, within a day many people had commented on Facebook or telephoned.

This personal piece is here largely because I am intimately familiar with the images, their various instantiations, and the time and processes required to construct the piece and to make it available. While it is not an image of me, it is arguably a selfie in the sense that the image components are closely tied to my own life. Of perhaps more concern is that the image set was made without going into a darkroom, without a razor blade and glue, without hours of work; the image was published without going to the local newspaper or to a print shop (where publication would have meant having some large number of prints of the image to hand out or mail to people;) and comments were shared within hours.

In 1948 my mother made the black and white image of my father and me. Nearly 60 years later I returned to the same stairs and set the self-timer (an asynchronous selfie) to make the image of myself. It seemed both comforting and cute to combine the images – some five minutes of work for the mechanical aspects of the project. Now it has served to stimulate several Facebook users to make their own composite image memory tags.

Iranian Women Remove Hijabs in Facebook Selfie Series

By Elise Solé, Shine Staff | Healthy Living – 11 hours ago

Email   f Share ‹ 111   Tweet ‹ 23   g+1 ‹ 4   Pin it   Print

Facebook/Stealthy Freedoms of Iranian Women

Hundreds of Iranian women are ripping off their hijabs and posting selfies online to the Facebook page "Stealthy Freedoms of Iranian Women," a photo project that's reaped more than 130,000 likes and sparked conversation about how safe it is for women to forgo their headscarfs.

London-based Iranian journalist Masih Alinejad told the U.K.'s he Guardian that since she created the page on May 3, she's been inundated by submissions. "I've hardly slept in the past three days because of the number of pictures and messages I've received," she said.

Let us consider just a very few other digital photocutionary acts involving selfies. Here a cultural/political statement published worldwide. The technology of making and the technology of showing enabled a new form of self-disclosure, a new form of action, and a new form of audience.
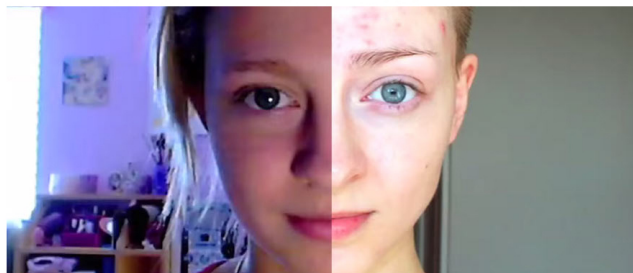

Here, a joke. It is a source of some humor to viewers of Star Wars movies that the Stormtroopers seem to unleash a great deal of ammunition, yet they seldom actually hit any intended targets. So a photograph (a shot) of just the tops of some Stormtrooper helmets and not their faces yields a missed shot. Perhaps some would not think of this as high art or humor, but the investment of time and resources is not high either. Not that there is any necessary correlation between effort and art.
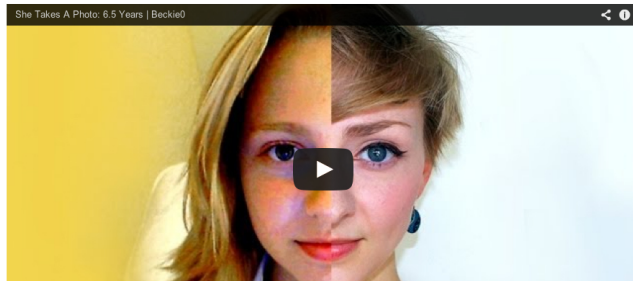

Here a photocutionary act, a selfie, of extraordinary discipline, utility, amd authorial rigor. A young woman suffering depression that manifested itself as a need to pull out her own hair made an image of herself in the same position over several years. The video she constructed from those selfies is, in and of itself, engaging, and it was part of the impulse to pursue a media career.

Country and Western singer Brad Paisley was scheduled to perform in Kansas and saw that he was being picketed by members of the Westboro Baptist Church. He decided to confront the picketers: "Instead of aggressively telling the group what he thinks of their message, Paisley gets out of his car and organizes a selfie."

In the image of a selfie act below we are presented with a form of co-authorship. Angelina Jolie is handed a cellphone by a fan and then makes a selfie with the fan. One can see the actress looking at the small screen on the camera held overhead and at an angle intended to include both her face and the camera owner's face.

The original caption on the Jolie image read: "The selfie is the new autograph; it is the fan's proof of celebrity contact." If this proves to be a general case, will new rituals arise? Attempting to shove a cell phone to a celebrity would seem to involve more risk then putting a piece of paper in place to be signed. Does the time to compose the selfie mean that some form of selfie station will appear? Will security personnel require training to quickly examine threat levels posed by devices?

bradpaisley   View on Instagram

1201 likes   51 comments

Brad Paisley played Bonner Springs, Kan. (near Kansas City). on Sunday night, which means he got a special greeting from the Westboro Baptist Church. Like Vince Gill and others have done before, he confronted the group. But he put a very Paisley-like spin on his interaction.

Instead of aggressively telling the group what he thinks of their message, Paisley gets out of his car and organizes a selfie. Watch as they smile for the 'Alcohol' singer. The woman holding the "God Hates Drunks" sign seems especially happy to be a part of his fun. He captioned his photo (below) with "Westboro Baptist Selfie!! Or west-Burro(ass) selfie. Hopefully they can hear the show out here. We'll play loud."

Until recently, proof of contact would have been the image of the celebrity taken on one's camera or, perhaps, having someone else use one's camera to make a group portrait with the celebrity; now the optical and mechanical characteristics of the cell phone both enable co-authorship and constrain the look of the resulting image.

Here the former vice president for research at Twitter makes a selfie with the President of Armenia, Serzh Sargsyan. The essentially immediate availability of well-focused color images with little or no necessity for the intrusions of additional lights, large cameras at a distance, and waiting for proofs or prints enables conversational image making.

Palestinians who had been tear-gassed communicated with digital images and texts with folks in Ferguson, Missouri about the manufacturers of the canisters and how to deal with the gas.

Here I offer some questions and assertions that might offer touchstones in our explorations of the constellations of authoring and using. While it is in some ways a self-portrait the selfie engages you, communicates with you, seduces you in new ways. It becomes the field of present reality and largely dissolves the boundary between subject and object. The selfie provides a tool with which one deals with real stuff of life. The selfie straddles, stretches, even dissolves the boundary between the subjective and the collective, the private and the public. Such a document can seed a family of documents, not just a continuum, but a sphere of

selfies. The image is permanently created, not just re-created, and is even permanently creating; exponentially more so than analog pictures stored in a shoebox could ever do.

An institutional intermediary is no longer necessary for publication. I can immediately play with Obama's selfie, and you can immediately comment on and (re)create the original and my (re)creation. A tremendous capacity of creativity is unleashed.

Let us sum up all of our considerations by noting that the Mars Curiosity selfie description uses the term "performed," indicating more authorial intervention than "taking." Ethan O'Connor asserted at DOCAM 2009 that: "All of photography can be summarized as photons in, photons out." Let us then propose that the collapsing of the mechanisms of gathering, processing, and viewing photon data, may yield new forms of interaction with that data. The selfie may then be seen as intriguing not simply because the subject is the self, but also because the self does the authoring and the publication of the document.

Michael Collins only human not in front of the lens. LEM, Moon, Earth during Apollo 11 Mission, July 1969. Image courtesy NASA.

Dinner during DOCAM 2014