

Vernacular Creativity, Cultural Participation and New Media Literacy: Photography and the Flickr Network

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This paper is based on one of the major case studies for my doctoral study, which is titled *Vernacular Creativity and New Media* and which seeks to explore the relationships between everyday creative practice, new media technologies, and cultural citizenship. When I began planning this study in 2003, the topic of amateur content creation in new media contexts, while timely, seemed marginal to mainstream industry and policy concerns. Even then though, drawing on highly problematic and hyperbolic ‘natural’ evolution discourses, we were hearing about a ‘tidal wave’, or a ‘flood’ of ‘user-generated content’ that appeared to emerge transparently as a direct result of more powerful, accessible technologies enabling the innately creative nature of human beings to flower.

By now, however, I think it is clear there has genuinely been a participatory turn, not only across web business models, but also in some sectors of government, public service broadcasting and civil society.

In some sectors, user-led content creation is seen as a driver of technological take-up by consumer markets; in others, the fragmentation of a common cultural public sphere means that it is an imperative for governments and public service broadcasters to find ways to integrate active community participation as a demonstration of and as a means to civic engagement, however imperfectly that is actually happening.

But if it is true that the figure of the active citizen and the creative consumer are in some sense one and the same thing – that is, that active citizenship and consumer co-creation are no longer separate domains of practice but are caught up in a process of convergence - then new media literacy gains a significance that radically exceeds its traditional remit in the domain of formal education and training. So, proceeding from a fundamental concern with cultural inclusion, what I want to explore here is the way in which the cultural politics of literacy are bound up with the everyday practice of user-led content creation.

[slide: theories of new media literacy]

I acknowledge that literacy is among the most contested, multivalent and possibly over-used concepts in our repertoire. Rather than engaging in any depth with those

issues here, I will very briefly make four broad points that indicate my perspective in relation to the surrounding debates.

1. First, Literacy is a **social construction**

It is not a ‘thing’ that can be possessed by individual subjects, but a locally and historically specific, socially constructed field of negotiation. That said, it is possible to talk about the *competencies* of individual users, as I will in this paper.

2. Following on from that, there is not one thing called literacy, but **multiple literacies**: visual literacies, creative literacies, network literacies, and so on.

3. Third, I won’t really be talking about ‘formal’ literacy, instead focusing on informal, or what I call **vernacular literacy**.¹ This concept is especially relevant at moments of media transition such as the present one because conventions and norms tend to be constructed and stabilised in informal learning contexts long before they are adopted and instrumentalised by the institutions of formal education, as we have seen in the case of blogging, for example.

4. Finally, I take a position on **technology** that, without being technologically deterministic, holds that technologies at least to some extent teach us what they are *for*, and it’s this techno-social construction of literacy that I will focus on most in this paper.

One of the most important dynamics of this is the tension between what I call ‘usability and hackability’ – what I mean by that will hopefully become clear as I go along. In the process of technological stabilisation and mass adoption, I would argue, it is always the case that some balance between usability and hackability is reached and becomes stabilised.

We can see how this played out historically in the case of the domestication of photography, beginning with the so-called ‘Kodak moment’.

[slide: 1st Kodak camera ad]

¹ Just as it is possible to speak of ‘vernacular creativity’ as a field of cultural production that is structurally outside of, but nevertheless references and is referenced by the artworlds and commercial media, it is also possible to talk about ‘vernacular literacy’. There are two levels to this concept which follow from the duality of literacy as both a field of contestation and a site of practice, and which I outlined above in the more general discussion of the cultural politics of new media literacy.

First, it is possible to talk about ‘vernacular literacies’ as part of the practice of everyday content creation. That is, the range of everyday competencies that constitute what people can already ‘do’ creatively, and the local, social contexts in which those practices are embedded. Secondly, these sites of vernacular creativity are also the location for vernacular theories (cf. McLaughlin) of literacy – where transpositions of ‘official’ debates around literacy are worked through at a local level, especially at moments of perceived technological ‘newness’, such as with digital culture.

Eastman's flexible film technologies, introduced in 1888, made easy-to-use cameras available to a huge market - a market which Eastman deliberately set out to create, not only supplying photographic film and cameras, but also establishing a network of developing centres, thereby gaining a near monopoly over almost the entire production process of photographic images. It was at this point that Kodak's slogan, 'You press the button, we do the rest' came to define vernacular photography. The camera itself became a black box, and the art and science of developing and printing became a mystery to the majority of users.

Photography itself was transformed from an expert, inaccessible system to an accessible but externally controlled one: photography as a technology was usable, but not hackable.

[slide: Other Kodak ads]

At the same time, through its advertising and 'how-to' manuals, it is no exaggeration to say that Kodak largely came to dominate the very *definition* of vernacular photography, and therefore vernacular photographic literacy for the United States and beyond. Kodak taught us not only that anyone *could* and *should* take photographs, but also where and when and how to take photographs, in relation to shifting ideological constructions of modernity, leisure, domesticity and of course, the family.

[slide: Flickr homepage]

If amateur photography in the twentieth century was defined by Kodak's slogan, 'You push the button, we do the rest', then the slogan of Web 2.0 models of amateur creativity such as Flickr's might be, 'Here are the buttons, *you* do the rest.' Where the Kodak system disciplined photography, Flickr is characterized by soft controls and deep structures that allow an enormous amount of freedom, and the social and aesthetic conventions of practice are softly shaped, rather than overtly 'taught' by the architecture.

At the same time, the affordances of Flickr need to be discovered and mastered by individual users. So, at the front end, and to some extent the back end as well, Flickr is *hackable*, but to what extent and for whom is it *usable*? I would argue that in terms of network literacies, the collective practices of Flickr users work to construct norms that are absolutely not obvious to novice users, precisely *because* they are not 'taught' top-down. Rather, they are learned through everyday practice and become intuitive.

[slide: Pizzodesevo example]

Pizzodesevo', now resettled in Italy but who had been resident in Australia in the 1950s and 1960s, began posting scans of slides taken in 1959-1960 to the Brisbanites group². One Brisbane-based member of the Brisbane group began going out specifically to capture images of the same locations as in the old slides, and uploading them to his own Flickr photostreams. 'Pizzodesevo' then combined some of these new images side by side with the old ones in a series of diptyches that reveal the often

² See <http://www.flickr.com/photos/globetrotter1937/195304137>

dramatic changes to the Brisbane cityscape, which in turn led to more discussion about the ways in which the city has changed, blended with nostalgia for a past that many of the discussants had never encountered themselves.

This is a deliberately unspectacular and routine example of some of the ways in which a rich engagement with the affordances of Flickr has unintended consequences that I would argue constitute the practice of everyday cultural citizenship. But what is necessary in order to make this happen?

- At a bare minimum, how to scan photographs or operate a camera to take new ones – in this, most of us are already very well schooled by the consumer electronics market.
- Awareness of the existence of Flickr and at least some of its possible uses.
- How to sign up and upload images
- Tagging
- Finding appropriate groups
- Commenting and responding to comments
- The assumption of the value of ‘speaking’ to the imagined community of interest, to an imagined world ‘out there’.
- An understanding of the network as a conversation – the image as social object.
- Understanding of CC licensing and the ethics of merging two photographs, one of which is not your own.
- On behalf of the contemporary Brisbane user – the idea of collaboration and playfulness behind going out to take that image.

[slide: emerging norms]

Norms of new media literacy indistinguishable from emerging norms of everyday creative and social practice:

- Continuous, active participation in content creation
- Networked individualism, as a normative mode of social organisation & the network as conversation, as a normative mode of creative practice
- Iterative, accretive media use
- Pro-active discovery, tweaking and control – in other words, hacking.

Who are the users most likely to master the competencies associated with these norms, and so to contribute to the collaborative *construction* of new media literacy in the context of Flickr, and by extension, other emerging sites of cultural participation?

The following table is a demographic summary of the seven Brisbane-based Flickr users with whom I chose to undertake extended field interviews for this project, following on from two and a half years of ‘online’ participant observation and attendance at offline ‘meetups’.

[slide: table]

Table 1

<i>Name</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Occupation</i>
Cyron	M	30	Suburban	Tertiary (incomplete)	Online customer support
David	M	32	Semi-rural	Tertiary (incomplete)	IT network security
Louise	F	44	Suburban	Tertiary (Bachelors Degree)	Nursing, medical research
Melanie	F	47	Outer suburban	Secondary (incomplete)	Web design (self-employed)
Mr Magoo ICU	M	26	Suburban	Secondary (incomplete)	Computer systems engineer
Shanrosen	F	55	Suburban	Tertiary (Bachelors Degree)	Part-time student
Yinyang	M	39	Suburban	Tertiary (incomplete)	IT contractor

The interviewees had not all been particularly interested or skilled in photography when they joined Flickr, but with the exception of Louise who learned to use a computer when she returned to formal study after having children, all had been extremely active computer and internet users for most of their lives.

[slide: Dave’s family computer room]

Of course, what I am leaving out here is the whole range of aesthetic and photographic literacies in play. As an aside, an engagement with those literacies is actually entirely optional for active participation in Flickr, but I have found in my research that they often become increasingly compelling factors in *ongoing* integration of Flickr with their everyday lives – that is, people become increasingly interested in ‘better photography’ as they become more deeply engaged with the various layers of possible participation.

The participants I interviewed for this project talked a lot about how they learned or were learning photography, describing flickr as both a showcase and a learning space for photography, but spoke very little about how they learned to participate effectively in online social networks, saying things like “as I went along, I started getting more into groups”, or talking about “stumbling” on or being introduced to various websites and online communities back in the 1990s, or simply shrugging the question off. So, the competencies of network literacy that are necessary for deep participation in networks like Flickr over time become part of the *habitus* of the most prolific and persistent early adopters and expert users: a group of people not necessarily high in

traditional cultural or educational capital but schooled to the point of naturalisation in the technical and cultural competencies that allow them to participate in each 'next big thing' that comes along in internet culture.

And so, in conclusion, if we are interested in the extension of new media literacy in the interests of cultural participation, where does this leave us? It is not immediately clear how the 'user-led content revolution' on the web serves the interests and concerns of those who have compelling stories to tell but whose cultural and technological competencies are a mismatch with these emerging norms of new media literacy.