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Intimate banalities: The emotional currency of shared camera phone images during the Queensland flood disaster

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From the mid-2000s, particularly since the launch of popular online hosting services for digital photographs, photosharing has emerged as an important social practice in crisis and disaster situations. There is now a body of work on this phenomenon. Much of this work focuses on the uses of digital photography and online photosharing not only for documenting but also for coordinating recovery and response efforts in crisis events. It highlights the fact that, through the enhanced publishing and networking affordances of platforms like Flickr, “mere” personal photography was legitimated as a source of visual information and evidence for the authorities, and a source of news footage for the mainstream media.

Outside of such extraordinary circumstances, camera phones have always been a tool for, and of, banality — indeed this has often been their primary purpose. In their ubiquity, intimacy and taken-for-grantness, these cameras — embedded as hardware features and software apps into the mobile devices we carry in our pockets or handbags through our days and nights — provide insight into the experience of everyday life. While the banality or ordinariness of much camera phone photography can be seen as extending the genres and practices associated with earlier paradigms of personal or domestic photography (as with the Kodak), they also significantly depart from these
earlier paradigms. The banality of the camera phone should not be understood only in terms of the visual content of the images it produces, but also in its very use it has becomes an embedded part of the ordinary, the routine, habitual and often-tacit practices as we move through, sense and perceive environments; and like all banal things, they are involved in processes of power negotiation and naturalization. Precisely because of their banality and near-ubiquity, camera phones are on hand to capture not only the unremarkable or quotidian aspects of life, but also the spectacular, the shocking and the disruptive — a fact that is particularly apparent in times of crisis.

As Burgess notes elsewhere, user created content (UCC) such as camera phone images resonate with publcs because of their ‘vernacular’ familiarity. In effect, such images work as a shared currency. Adopted by users and re-appropriated by mainstream media, the do-it-yourself (DIY) creativity and intimacy evoked by camera phone images has become a pivotal part of the broader contemporary visual cultures from Facebook to Instagram and far beyond. First generation studies like Burgess, Hjorth, Ito & Okabe, Lee, and Mørk Petersen identified some of the aesthetics — banality, intimacy, vernacular creativity and ambient co-presence — and developed models for understanding the contexts (and thus content) of everyday image sharing, particularly using mobile devices. The networked visuality of this first generation explored the ways in which the three Ss — sharing, storing and saving — impacted on camera phone practices.

In second-generation studies of mobile media — with the added layer of geographic presence through location-based services (LBS like Google Maps, geotagging) — mapping these contexts takes on new dimensions. The role of place, as a
contested and ambiguous concept, takes on greater complexity with mobile media. As Richardson and Wilken note, with mobile media place is rendered into a series of entangled modes of presence (co, tele and net) and “placing.”12 In this situation camera phones no longer merely participate in networked publics, but as Sarah Pink argues, become part of “emplaced visualities” — that is, networked images that are entangled within the temporal and spatial movements of everyday life.13

These emplaced visualities, and the role of co-presence placings between intimates that might not be physically there, are magnified in the case of disasters. Through almost instantaneous uploading, images of events elsewhere can be shared. The DIY and vernacular aesthetics of camera phone images also evoke a particular type of affective effect. So how do we make sense of these emergent emplaced visualities at points of crisis? How do we map the motivations, affects and emotional currencies of images shared during a crisis? Why are some images shared and circulated on mass while others are just shared amongst one or two people?

Taking the 2011 flood disaster in Queensland, Australia, as a case study, this chapter explores approaches to understanding the kinds of images that are captured and shared via mobile social media in such situations — and the emotional currencies and social textures that attend them. From the images that were posted in tweets containing the #qldfloods hashtag we discuss a diverse selection representative of disaster-related image-sharing and reflect upon the accompanying comments and visual aesthetics. In our discussion, we particularly focus on categorizing and interpreting the kinds of images that are most “resonant” — where resonance is indicated by virtue of being retweeted most frequently.
Sprinkler effect: Intimate distance and common banalities

Early mobile media practices were thought to be associated with sharing between existing offline intimates that reflected what Ichiyo Habuchi called “telecocooning”. With the advent and growth in smartphones affording social, locative and mobile media convergence, mobile media now articulates with multiple registers of contact\textsuperscript{14}. This can be seen as a sprinkler effect whereby the mobile phone becomes the vehicle for fleeting moments across a variety of platforms (including social media platforms, accessed via the mobile web).

Twitter’s dominant affordances specifically encourage immediate photosharing via smartphone. The mass popularization of Twitter coincided with the mass popularization in similar Western markets of internet-enabled smartphones like the Apple iPhone. At the time of writing the iPhone had integrated the native Twitter app with its camera functionality, enabling the almost seamless capture, uploading and social sharing of images taken with the phone. In combination with Twitter’s compressed textual economies, the role of images takes on new dimensions that reflect the cliché of a picture being worth a thousand words (a characteristic that is even more notable in the case of the even more image-oriented camera phone platform Instagram). Here images assume emotional resonance and currency.\textsuperscript{15} This is of great importance in times of crisis and disaster in which grief and shock may make formulating words to describe the feeling impossible, or the spectacular scale of the disaster seems to call for iconic imagery rather than straightforward description. This is particularly so for the distant
social media observers who may in fact account for much of the labor of sharing and redistributing camera phone images.

The rise of camera phone apps for smartphones not only allows users the ability to create ambient and unique images with a variety of filters but also affords them an almost seamless ability to take and share immediately. For Chris Chesher, the iPhone camera represents a new “universe of reference.” The rise of smartphones like the iPhone — with their attendant software applications like Instagram, Google Goggles, and Hipstamatic — have created new ways in which to think about camera phone practices as between image and information.\textsuperscript{16} As Chesher notes, the iPhone ‘universe of reference’ disrupts the genealogy of mass amateur photography that was formed through the rise of the Kodak camera. Part of this shift is the role movement plays in the relationship between co-presence and place. Here place, as a series of “stories-so-far,”\textsuperscript{17} becomes part of new visualities in motion Pink calls “emplaced.”\textsuperscript{18} As Pink and Hjorth argue in their study of location based camera phone practices, this new applications provide new contexts. Instead of being a “snapshot” whereby time and space is frozen, these new temporal-spatial visual configurations are part of a moving set of cartographies orchestrated by the rise of locative services as part of everyday mobile media.\textsuperscript{19}

Palmer argues that, for photography, the smartphone (represented by the iPhone) was particularly distinctive across three areas.\textsuperscript{20} Firstly, it created an experience between touch and the image what Palmer calls an “embodied visual intimacy.”\textsuperscript{21} While “touch has long been an important, but neglected, dimension in the history of photography … the iPhone, held in the palm of the hand, reintroduces a visual intimacy to screen culture
that is missing from the larger monitor screen.” Secondly, the proliferation of photo apps for the iPhone has meant that there is a plethora of ways for taking, editing and sharing photos. No longer do camera phone images have to look like the poorer cousin to the professional camera. Thirdly, is the role of GPS capability with the iPhone automatically “tagging photographs with their location, allowing images to be browsed and arranged geographically.”

It might be said that the convergence of Twitter and camera phones creates a piano-accordion of intimate media. They both revolve around an affective moment. While Twitter is compressed, the affordances of visuality allows for greater potentialities either through representative and non-representative. They both perform co-presence placings — one visual, the other textual. And yet, despite their complimentary relationship, there are no studies conducted in Twitter camera phone practices. So, to return to our initial questions — can we map the emotional currencies of Twitter camera phone practices? Why are some images more shared than others?

**Social media and mobile photosharing in the Queensland Floods**

The Australian state of Queensland experienced an extended period of much higher than average rainfall in 2010, and an acute period of major flooding between December 2010 and January 2011. The flooding significantly affected a very large geographic area of the state, and included major flooding in Queensland’s capital city, Brisbane. The Queensland Floods acutely highlighted the growing importance of social and mobile media in disseminating, coordinating and originating disaster-related communication, alongside and in connection to other elements of the media ecology. Twitter in particular came to play a prominent role — and with it, so did mobile media and smartphones. The
event also foreshadowed the high levels of use of social and mobile media services like Twitter and Instagram in the disasters that have followed — in the 2011 Christchurch earthquakes in New Zealand and in Hurricane Sandy in the East Coast of the United States and the Caribbean.

Our case study of photosharing during the 2011 Queensland Floods is based on a larger study, which undertook a comprehensive analysis of 40,000 thousand tweets sent during the most acute two weeks of the disaster. This previous work on the use of social media in the Queensland Floods focused on information sharing, and in particular on the communicative relations among authorities, media organizations and the community. In this study, the web-based version of the Twitter archiving service Twapperkeeper was used to collect all available tweets that included the #qldfloods hashtag; this data set was then processed and a range of analytics were applied to identify patterns of tweeting activity over time, to identify and profile key actors, to identify key themes, and to generate a typology of external resources (URLs) that were being shared by Twitter users during the floods. Of most relevance for the present chapter is the finding that images and videos were by far the largest category of external media resource shared (ahead of official emergency information and news reports by a significant margin).

The sharing of links to image- and video-hosting websites noticeably peaked on 12th January — the day that the floods were peaking in Queensland’s capital city Brisbane and its neighboring city Ipswich; and coinciding with a large overall peak in Twitter activity and global media coverage. From this we can speculate that images were particularly resonant for observers elsewhere in Australia and overseas, whereas
situational text-based information was of interest to a minority — perhaps mainly local and/or directly affected residents — a pattern discussed elsewhere.\textsuperscript{25} Within the image URLs twitpic and yfrog are dominant — they were at the time the default photosharing services built-in to most mobile Twitter clients (Twitter has since formally acquired and embedded its own photosharing service into the official platform); while Flickr, which was more cumbersome to upload to from a mobile device, comes much further down the list, and Facebook is only minimally represented. Taken together, we can take these indications as evidence that many of the most-shared photos were originally captured and/or uploaded to Twitter via smartphones.\textsuperscript{26}

\textbf{Resonant image genres}

To explore the affective resonance of image \textit{sharing} (as opposed to image publishing), it is useful to take the top 100 images circulated via Twitter during the 2011 Queensland floods — as measured by number of retweets of tweets containing the \#qldfloods hashtag and a link to the image, and hence indicating their cultural resonance rather than only their reach.\textsuperscript{27} By focusing upon retweeting, we are reflecting upon images that warranted not just a viewing, but that motivated others to re-circulate. In this way, we have picked images that resonate with an affective, “shareable” quality; we now proceed to discuss the aesthetic, formal and affective patterns that emerge from this data.

\textbf{Insert Table 45.1}

\textit{Table 45.1: 100 Most-shared images in tweets containing \#qldfloods}\textsuperscript{28}
We worked our way through this corpus of 100 most-shared images in order to identify emerging themes, genres and aesthetics. In these images, one can see the resonance of both conventional mainstream media and vernacular photographic genres and practices. Many of the most shareable images were those with distinctively DIY aesthetics; taken on cheap camera phones and often blurry, which we might deduce signify authenticity and therefore veracity, encouraging people to share them. In keeping with the aforementioned previous research by Burgess on the UCC creativity and networked visuality on Flickr, there was also a strong element of “vernacular” aesthetics and sensibilities, especially in the spirit of what Australian’s call the “larrikin”. The larrikin represents a particular type of Australian humor whereby Australians deploy humor as a coping mechanism — a particular laconic, no worries attitude that is often stereotyped in media both nationally and internationally. Despite the devastation of the floods, the appearance of the larrikin was part of the cliché of Australia’s survival technique. Figure 1 evokes the typical and clichéd Australian larrikin — some plucky Rugby League fan, we are led to believe, has prepared an iconic statue for his imminent dunking, supplying him with a snorkel and floral flotiation devices.

Insert Figure 45.1

*Figure 45.1: Image 3 is typical of the Larrikin spirit (@mackiemarsellos)*

However, some of the most retweeted images are more closely related to traditional photojournalism or landscape photography than they are to the tradition of the snapshot. For example, the image quality of both Image 1 and 2 (see Figure 46.2 as an example) is high and the framing is closely aligned with classic landscape documentary.
Other images appropriate a conventional documentary style but with DIY aesthetics (i.e. blurring of the hand-held camera, low resolution of camera phone and general movement while taking the picture) that indicated a sense of movement and panic, and invoke a much more visceral, embodied sense of the immediate experience of the crisis than the spectacle of televised disaster footage could. Blurry images of a supermarket in chaos as shoppers panic to get supplies captured the anxiety and confusion. A set of empty bread shelves (see Figure 46.3) represented a haunted calm after the panic-shopping storm had passed, the shoppers racing traffic chaos and rising waters to get home. In what would become a trope across a range of media representations of the disaster, the unavailability of traditional staples like bread and milk (only slightly ironically) represent the mundane reality of the flood as an emergency of the everyday.

As we proceed down the “long tail” of the list of popular images, away from those highly retweeted top ten, we see more subtle themes, especially vernacular ones, begin to emerge. In Image 11 (Figure 46.4) we see a mash-up operating as a humorous political commentary: a viewer has spotted the rather unfortunate typo “tits” in the official subtitles provided for hearing-impaired viewers. Image 15, an image of a toilet building allegedly floating out to sea near Fraser Island is the first image that is outside of Brisbane. It is both humorous and tragic in a typical “Aussie larrikin” laconic style.
Figure 45.4: This image by @willrolloABC is an example of using mobile media to critique the failings of mass media.

Thematically, while the documentary and mockumentary styles dominate, images of animals in addition to landscape evoke particular feelings and affects. Through images of animals lost, injured or rescued, strong emotional responses (and hence the need to forward the image) become prevalent. In keeping with Zuckerman’s comments about cute cats as part of digital activism, the deployment of animals speaks to the emotional and personal fabric of Web 2.0. Poignant, humorous and cute images of animals (many of very uncertain provenance) feature persistently in this dataset in a way that they do not in mainstream news reports; where animals are sometimes the silent collateral damage. Here we seem some evidence of what Ethan Zuckerman has called the cute cat phenomenon:\(^{30}\) as Zuckerman notes, in Web 1.0 physicians shared information. Now, Web 2.0 is all about sharing images of cute cats.

But behind this sharing is an affective currency that motivates people to get involved and participate, an important part of digital activism. Many images deployed animals to both see the funny and tragic side of events.\(^{31}\) Images of rescued kangaroos and an image of a lost dog poster highlight one of the biggest tragedies of natural disasters, the animal deaths, at the same time as they draw on sentimental nationalism. Animals are just as easily deployed in visual pranks and improbable gags, though — Figure 46.5 is an example of this aspect of Zuckerman’s cute cat theory, surfing chicken style (Figure 46.5).
Figure 45.5: This image shared by @winestein32 epitomizes the Aussie Larrikin ‘vernacular’ style. Animals play a key role in Web 2.0 affectivity (see Zuckerman).

Again the “Aussie larrikin” spirit is evoked in Image which depicts a game of cricket being played on Coronation Drive, normally one of the busiest roads in the city, and accompanying the tweet “Locals on Coronation Drive taking advantage of empty streets.” Images like this, as well as the sandbags piled up on the footpath outside the Louis Vuitton retail store are indicative of the use of highly particular, iconic images of Brisbane city (and global capitalism) to represent the magnitude of a whole state’s crisis (Figure 46.6).

Figure 45.6: Many of the most-shared images were those that depicted Brisbane, rather than the country, under flood. Here, the symbol of global capitalism, Louis Vuitton, prepares to be submerged (By @michaelmeloni)

Image 17 is an image of a flooded furniture showroom in Toowoomba — highlighting the visual incongruity of the highly improbable flash flood event: quite simply, images such as this represent water where water clearly shouldn’t be. Similarly, the next ten images continue the Southbank-as-iconic-of-Queensland tradition with images of the library, Pat Rafter arena, Garden Point fairy stop all flooded. It was images of the Brisbane CBD flooded that dominated despite the reality that in geographic terms, a wider swathe of rural and peri-urban areas were affected significantly by the flood. In some discussions, this over-representation of the “centre” highlighted existing tensions...
about urban and rural divides in the Australian imagery; on the other hand it
demonstrates that the “news values” of Twitter are not so far removed from those of the
mainstream press. But the salience of the CBD is perhaps more telling about the
demographics of the users retweeting these images than the users taking and uploading
them. That is, given the large numbers of national and international spectators who tend
to be involved at the peak of disaster-related social media activity, it is unsurprising that
it is the images that are already most deeply embedded in the Australian touristic
imaginary that hold the greatest affective power and are able to convey the extent and
significance of the flood event.

**Insert Figure 45.7**

**Figure 45.7:** For some, the image of globalization, McDonald’s, underwater is cause for celebration
(＠ThommyBee), for others, grief. But with its global currency, it helps to represent a familiar
symbol gone awry.

**Conclusion: Reflections on emplaced visuality**

With the increased presence of camera phone in representing and depicting events both
officially and unofficially, there is a growing need to develop methods that can
understand how the sharing of camera phone images — as part of broader distribution
systems — reflects the changing role of visuality and its affective nature. This is
magnified in moments of crisis whereby the always-on hand camera phone provides
both a co-present lens and also a way in which to mediate the horror of events as they
unfold.
In this networked visuality, we can see both traditional genres of photography (i.e. landscape documentary) and also emergent forms of vernacular creativity (larrikin and mash-up mockumentaries). In this shift we see that camera phones are no longer just about an economy of networked visuality. Rather, we see how through the deployment of microblogging, the relationship between movement, place and information is changing through entangled emplacements.

Thus in this chapter we have endeavored to initiate some preliminary discussion on the role of emplaced visualities and affectivity, via a case study of the 2011 Queensland Floods. What we have shown is the kinds of genres that emerge in these crisis and emergency situations, as well as the resonating themes. Throughout the top 100 Twitter images distinct patterns emerge: the perpetual resonance of the larrikin, most omnipresent through mockumentary images, to represent the unique sense of Australian humor; the use of animals to evoke emotion and affect. The on-going use of Brisbane CBD as iconic of the Queensland state, a source of little surprise but much irritation or even distress from the perspective of the great swathes of regional and rural Queensland that were in many ways hardest hit by the floods.

For us, the images provide rich materials to reflect upon a sense of place as both imagined and experienced and how this translates to viewing communities. Our contention is that by attending to the most retweeted — actively passed on, rather than just viewed — it is possible to gain good insights into what makes a picture newsworthy enough to activate audiences to re-post it. Future studies into this area might explore the photographers’ motivations for taking and sharing the images and how and whether, by sharing, their relationship to the image and the event changed.
NOTES


7 Burgess, “Remediating Vernacular Creativity”

8 Larissa Hjorth, “Snapshots of Almost Contact.”


15 Ito and Okabe, “Intimate Visual Co-Presence.”

16 Cheshire, “Between Image and Information.”

19 Pink and Hjorth, “Emplaced Cartographies,” 145-156.
21 Palmer, “iPhone Photography”, 88.
22 Palmer, “iPhone Photography”, 88.
23 Palmer, “iPhone Photography”, 88.
24 Axel Bruns, Jean Burgess, Kate Crawford, and Frances Shaw. #qldfloods and @QPSMedia: Crisis Communication on Twitter in the 2011 South East Queensland Floods. Brisbane: ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation, 2012.
26 For detailed charts and lists of most-tweeted images as well as the most popular image-sharing hosts, see http://mappingonlinepublics.net/2011/03/06/image-sharing-in-the-qldfloods/
27 We should note that due to copyright reasons not all images that we refer to in this chapter were able to get permission to reproduce. In order to give readers a sense of the aesthetics and genres we have chosen approved images that closely align with the specific images we are discussing.
28 This list contains some incomplete links (marked in italics), which is due to a technical issue resolving shortened URLs into their full versions.
31 Popular examples of such “animal pics” include http://twitpic.com/3p21ze, 32,038 views, 18 comments, tweeted 65 times; http://yfrog.com/gybifpmj, tweeted 56 times, viewed 3250, 1 comment; http://twitpic.com/3p8px, tweeted 51 times, viewed 13,417 times, 15 comments; http://twitpic.com/3rf099, tweeted 26 times, viewed 4,412, 4 comments.