

Carte de Visite as the Pre-analog Version of Facebook

An examination of the similarities between the 19th century carte de visite and contemporary digital social media such as Facebook. The juxtaposition of these two media by characteristics and cultural implications serves as a case study for observed shared social behavior. The author proposes a connection between mid-nineteenth century social phenomena and the social experiences of the present era.

Recent proliferation of social media such as Facebook, MySpace and others, is evidence that society is readily adopting new digital modes of communicating and interacting socially. Similarly, mass-adoption of the carte de visite in the 1850's and 60's represented a mode of social interaction based on oral culture. Whether the medium emerged before electricity or after the internet, each serves as proof of the human desire for intimate connectivity and community. Indeed, current society may be facing, even yearning, to engage social issues that correspond to those of the Victorian past. This paper aligns the carte de visite to Facebook in an attempt to reveal the nature of social connectivity today and to draw predictions concerning social connectivity in the future.

Pre-Analog

The term analog is often contrasted with the term digital and is used to describe a certain character of things. When we say analog today, we tend to accept the idea that it encompasses everything that is not digital or not binary. Norman Klein, media historian and novelist states that the term analog is being used too broadly at present. He draws a more specific distinction within non-digital objects based on the historical use of the word which implies "something having analogy to something else." [dictionary.com] Klein argues that analog more accurately refers to the way that electrical technology is analogous to the character of the physical world. For example, radio waves are analogous to water waves. This description has existed since the invention of the electric dynamo, before digital technology prevailed. Therefore, anything that does not use an electrical current is classified as *pre-analog*, electrical things that resemble the physical are classified as *analog*, and electrical objects that are binary in nature are *digital*.

A trend has emerged among designers and the public, characterized by a desire to break from the virtual world and return to the physical. Research groups and design organizations focus on interactions imbedded and embodied in the physical experience. The Slow Media movement has also emerged: a social rebellion against digital communication in which people divorce themselves of email, cell phone, and text message and return to hand written and face-to-face communication. This turn back to the physical, or more accurately the pre-analog, is much like the 20th century response to the *hyper-stimulation* of the modern world (Simmel) and to early 19th century Gothic Revival architecture.

These antiquarian movements pose an interesting context for investigating the carte de visite and its likeness to digital social media. As the pre-analog is placed against the current culmination of digital social interaction, insights emerge that show a greater bond between the present and the 19th century past.

The Origin of the Carte de Visite

During the early 19th century interest in the photograph was thriving. Methods for portraiture and photographic process were a topic for research and investigation. In 1854, Andre Adolphe-Eugene Disdéri patented a photographic process that replaced the daguerreotype and became the dominant form of portraiture of the era. Disdéri's carte de visite utilized a special camera that could take eight poses on one paper negative which would then be cut into eight separate photos roughly the size of a standard visiting card (Newhall). The process produced quantity over quality, which proved to be a successful trait for the carte de visite and led to its use as an adornment to the calling card. By the end of the 1850's the 4 1/2 x 2 1/2" carte de visite became the medium of "urban society [by] which people of rank, whose names might or might not be recognized, visited other people of rank, who demanded to know the identity of the caller before admitting him into their homes."(McCauley)

The carte de visite was the dominant social medium of the era. Its popularity thrived in Paris where it is told that "Napoleon III halted a column of troops he was leading...in front of Disdéri's studio while he has his portrait taken." (McCauley) From here it continued to proliferate throughout the western world. Speaking on the carte de visite, 19th century author Oliver Wendell Holmes said, "Card portraits, as everybody knows, have become the social currency, the 'green-backs' of civilization." The carte de visite is significant in that it is a tangible representation of a social system based in oral-culture; a pre-analog remnant of life before the modern obsessive addition of speed to communication.

The Origin of Facebook

A common practice among Ivy League schools is the distribution of "paper 'face books' with student photographs and limited personal information about incoming freshmen."(Westlake) In February of 2004, Harvard University computer science major, Mark Zuckerberg developed the concept of a paper face book into a digital version called Facebook. Facebook began as a tool for students to meet other students, primarily only associated with colleges and universities. However, in 2006 it was opened to the public and has since been quickly adopted as a dominant medium for social connectivity.

A similar connection between the carte de visite and the bourgeois can be seen between Facebook and Generation Y. Both media emerged first with limited access, attainable only by wealth and class or by age and academic association. As each medium became progressively available to the public each became widely accepted as a system for social interaction affording the ability to befriend and communicate with individuals who would not previously be accessible.

Characteristics of the Medium

Image + Profile

There are ironic similarities in the character of these two media, the first of which is the coupling of image and profile. With the carte de visite the portrait on the front side was coupled with titles and family histories printed on the back. This coupling provided a unique social affordance beyond the standard calling card of the era—the ability to legitimize one's identity and social standing. "With the addition of a small photograph, the card's expressive potential was hugely

increased. The face and bearing of the caller...could reveal much more about his character than the signature or catalogue of titles and decorations.”(McCauley)

Facebook provides a similar affordance, however with this medium image extends beyond the avatar or professional portrait. With Facebook image is created by a “multimodal approach...of amateur self-portraiture heralded by the spread of technologies such as digital cameras and webcams, and software which streamline the uploading and imbedding of imagery.”(Whitlock) On Facebook, as well as other digital social media, identity is created by collections of images and is coupled with multiple profiles both user-generated and data-generated.

The importance of the image plus profile connection is as important with Facebook as it was with the carte de visite; “Self-portraiture in this new media is central to a primary function of social networking software. To find people one knows online, visual identification is key to confirming one is ‘friends’ with the intended individual.”(Whitlock)

Synchronous and Asynchronous

There is also a similarity in the affordances each medium provides for communication. The carte de visite could communicate in two ways. First, it could be used by the caller to gain immediate access to the visited thereby arranging a synchronous face-to-face encounter. Second, the carte was used a asynchronous request for communication or sign of social acknowledgement, frequently left with a porter to deliver to the recipient rather than to arrange a direct interview (L'Illustration).

Facebook provides like affordances with basic applications. Including an individual into one's network allows one to then engage them directly using live chat, or communicate asynchronously using a variety of tools such as leaving messages and wall posting (Westlake).

Increased Social Mobility

In the oral culture of the 19th century, physical self representation was paramount in communicating one's status and identity. The carte de visite was innovative because it offered the ability to represent one's self in more than one location and without the presence of the actual person. This could be seen as the first manifestation of virtual self through media—possibly the beginning of Baudrillard's simulation.

Facebook provides the same experience—a virtual self that can be engaged anywhere internet access is available but Facebook and other social media take social interaction to new realms. It breaks down classes and transcends boundaries, democratizing social interaction more than any other time in history.

Differences

While there are obvious similarities between the carte de visite and Facebook it is important to note some interesting differences, the foremost being an issue of gesture. With the carte de visit the emphasized gesture was in the act of giving. With Facebook the emphasized gesture is much more focused on the act of adding or “friending” an individual. This is a key distinction, one that takes Facebook to a realm that Foucault would relate to the panopticon.

Additionally, the act of leaving a carte de visit brought with it complex social ramifications. This seems to differ greatly from the act of friending someone on Facebook, where virtual connections are seemingly made and broken without significant social impact.

Cultural Implications

Collecting

Social media such as the carte de visite and Facebook have a transformative affect on culture. A culture of collecting surfaced with the carte de visite. Literature and imagery of the era describe “bourgeois and aristocratic sitting rooms...littered with ornate [cartes] left by guests.”(McCauley) Collecting cartes of celebrities or important friends signified loftiness and affiliation with high society. “To accommodate [collections of] card photographs of relatives, friends and celebrities, elaborately bound albums were sold...the family album became a fixture in the Victorian home.”(Newhall)

The act of friending and the quantity of friends one has in their Facebook network has similar social meaning to these Victorian carte collections. Presently, it's common to hear casual conversation about who a person has added or removed from their Facebook network. Facebook and the management of one's profile is a social talking point, much like a carte photo album placed conspicuously in a sitting room.

Associated Content

Along with the culture and proliferation of these social media came a flux of associated content. H. J. Rodgers' *The Peoples' Guide to Photography*, 1872 shares the history of the carte de visite as well as acceptable cultural practices for producing and using an acceptable carte photograph. For example, chapter sixteen is titled, “To young men—How to look well in pictures.” Texts such as this are ironically similar to contemporary books written on Facebook culture, for example, Brogan and Smith's book, *Trust Agents*, 2009, a guide to “using the web to build influence, improve reputation, and earn trust.”

Implications for the Future

Telephone is the terminator

By the mid 1860's the carte de visite had lost its newness and carte portraits were less prevalent. (McCauley) The social traditions originating with this oral culture continued until the proliferation of a new social medium in the late 1870's, the telephone. This was the birth of a new era symbolized by the dynamo and characterized by a fascination with speed's ability to conquer distance. The telephone posed a terminating contrast to the carte de visite and the social interactions associated with it. It afforded a synchronous mode of communication without introduction, without ritual and void of face-to-face interactions inherent to co-location.

Ironically, the telephone has also had an affect on digital social media. The mobile phone has presented new associations between location, space and social media. As this emphasis on mobility proliferates we will continue to see a breaking away from the desktop-bound traditions of the digital era. I propose that media entities such as Facebook and MySpace will begin to dissolve into simple affordances provided by an ecology of mobile devices—a change not unlike what happened when oral traditions dissolved into electric communication devices.

Connected to the past

The relationship of the carte de visite and Facebook is strongly indicative of the social issues we face at present. “The consumption of other people’s identities in popular culture has become central to how Americans are getting, distributing, and consuming information.” (Rak) People’s identities are the “green-backs” of our civilization, the cartes de visite of the digital world.

The fragility of the virtual as manifest by the global financial recession of 2009 and historical alignment between the carte de visite and digital social media prove the existence of a collective yearning for the pre-analog. We are more socially connected than ever before and still somehow unsatisfied with the experience it offers. Current indications point out a common desire for community and palpable social relationships. Desires that also were sought for in the 19th century spawned from opposition to modernization. I believe this provides the force behind researching the possibilities for the pre-analog to converge with the digital. This revived desire to find meaning in physical experience as well as the virtual will lead to social media that is digital, tangible, mobile and spacial; and these media will produce social experiences essential to life in the future but plainly connected to the past.

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