So You Like Taking Photos Huh: A Study About Resistance Against Digital Data Colonialism Through Meaningful Inefficiencies

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Abstract

Taking photographs to capture moments is not a novel activity. Taking pictures is an activity we are so accustomed to that it often escapes conscious thought; it has become habitual and ingrained in the human experience. The digital age of photography brings a sense of comfort in photography that has made documenting memories easier, but it also brings a new form of surveillance and data harvesting. Digital photo cataloguing applications like Google Photos and Apple Photos quantify every image they store and capture metadata and location data. These applications process and assign the images to 'auto-generated' albums without user authorization. This study aims to understand what data is being captured and to what extent by digital photo cataloguing applications. Withdrawing from digital photographic mediums, this study uses analog film mediums to capture daily life. Throughout this experience, I conducted an auto-ethnographic study on photography practices. Findings introduced and proved the primary concern of data surveillance in digital photo cataloguing applications. While the process of resistance proved to be inefficient on some ends, it provided great insight into how analog media is a strong medium of resistance against digital data colonialism.

Keywords

Data colonialism, meaningful inefficiency, photography, resistance, auto-ethnography, data harvesting

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Documenting Memories in the Digital Age and the Perils of Digital Data, Data Harvesting

In the essence of the form, the process of taking a photograph is intentional and deliberate, it captures a fleeting moment and "creates [a] body or mortifies it" (Barthes, 2010, p. 11). Mediating this documentation experience through digital media is enriched with interactivity and efficiency. The digital camera redefined the boundaries of capturing moments; it is not just an intentional activity, it is not the "death" of an intimate moment anymore (Barthes, 2010, p. 15). The mediation is not just a camera now; the ability to take pictures on the phone introduces convenience that takes away from the 'essence' of photography that Barthes (2010) describes. Digital mediation of photography introduces commodification and collection of data, whether the image is taken on a mobile phone or a digital camera. On a digital camera, each image is embedded with metadata, which is structural data concerning the exposure settings of an image, as well as archival data. A mobile phone camera introduces a third element of geographical data; each image is 'geo-tagged' with an approximated location of where the image was taken; this, in turn, allows for cataloguing software (Apple Photos, Google Photos, and so on) to configure the data for "capture" (Kitchin and Dodge, 2011, as cited in Couldry and Meijas, 2019, p. 339). The "capture" of data comes to the surface in processing and cataloguing images into auto-generated albums [Figures 2 - 3].

Couldry and Meijas (2019) define "personal data" as "data of actual or potential relevance to persons, whether collected from them or from other persons or things" (p. 339). The personal data in these images is treated as a "natural resource" (p. 339) for harvesting by cataloguing apps to create slideshows, giving recommendations concerning the mapped locations and so on. This harvesting moves online to social media by sharing the same images online to create an online presence that indulges in disciplinary regimes of the social media platforms. Social media platforms heavily influence the activity of digitally documenting one's daily life, and there is a "threat of invisibility" if you do not engage in the platform's rules (Bucher, 2012, p. 1171). For a personal account, this threat of invisibility is not having one's community know what they have been doing. As a long-term Instagram user, my account is a social catalogue of all my day-to-day activities.

My study focuses on Instagram as a digital documentation platform using digital cameras and resists posting daily activities onto my feed to resist voluntary data surrender. While heavily analog, my study is ironically still in the realm of digital media by engaging with technology for scanning and sharing, where the project engages in Gordon and Walter's (2016) notion of "meaningful inefficiencies." The data was documented using film photography to engage in the

materiality of the art form, and the archiving process was done by memory to invoke memory, structuring the project around memory and materiality as resistance against digital data colonialism.

The Process of Shooting Film

Barthes (2010), in Camera Lucida, establishes three key practices for photography: The *Operator*, the *Spectator*, and the *Spectrum* of the photograph. The operator is the photographer, the Spectator is the person glancing at the image, and the Spectrum is the person or thing photographed (p. 9). While to Barthes (2010), the Operator's practice was foreign. For myself, that was the only practice I ever engaged in. Contrary to the impatience Barthes found in the practice of an operator, I embody that slow process in my practice. The operator's practice provided the foundation for studying the tangible order: I had to take pictures of a fleeting moment from my own perspective to tell a story. On the other hand, the spectator would engage only in the process after the images had been processed; this is the practice I found myself invoking while archiving my images.

The study involved resisting documenting my day-to-day activity on digital devices and social media platforms and doing it using analog methods like photographic film. The process of documenting this experience for research was two-fold, with videos to visualize the activity and the creation of a zine to engage in the recollection of thought. For about 25 days, I documented all of my activities on photographic film using two cameras that had to be on my person at all times. I shot eight rolls of film, totalling up to 168 images, with no metadata, geographical mapping, or digital archival data. I did not keep a digital journal to capture any archival data as the activity went on to keep the project as analog as possible, given that I would not usually do the same if I were to take photos of daily, mundane things. Instead, the archival data was created in the form of recollection, which was mediated through a reflective artifact, a zine.

As described earlier, taking photos is not something I do deliberately, but introducing material limitations to the process enforced active engagement on my end. Moving to use only my film cameras involved introducing numerous limitations, including but not limited to the price, number of images, choice of lens, choice of film stock, choice of film type, and so forth. Figure 1 showcases the cameras used for this project. Both cameras were equipped with fixed lenses, also known as 'prime' lenses; both cameras were also completely manual and analog. Limiting myself by lens choice enforced the first crucial limitation: framing capacity. Prime lenses, by nature, force a photographer to be more conscious when approaching a scene; given that condition, I chose a wide focal length as I had to consider that my subjects would be at face distance to me.

Figure 1

Image of analog film cameras used for the study.

My film stock choices were dictated by the lighting conditions I would be working under, the core limitation I observed moving away from digital photography was the ability to adapt to changing lighting, making taking pictures a convenient activity. Figure 2 exhibits the different kinds of film I shot, including 35mm and 120 film formats. 35mm film rolls had 36 exposures each regardless of what camera I used, whereas the 120 film format exposures are more flexible and dictated by what camera the film is being used in. The camera chosen for this activity was a 6x6 format, resulting in only 12 square exposures per roll and making the process more intentional. I chose a black-and-white film stock because of the format's ability to be more adaptable to consistently changing light and dropping my concerns about lighting affecting the colours of my final images, given that colour film does not fare well at higher sensitivity. Black and white film has more latitude regarding how far it can be pushed. 'Pushing' film is the process of exposing film for a higher ISO than it is meant to be shot at. ISO or film speed is the standardized light sensitivity of film, it is also the third pillar of photograph exposures. For my activity, the chosen film stock was HP5, which is at box speed supposed to be shot at 400 ISO, but I proceeded to shoot it at 800 for the most part and push it even beyond to 1600, which resulted in really contrasty and grainy images.

When I knew beforehand I would be in daylight while taking pictures, I chose to shoot low-speed colour film. My choices throughout the activity were dictated by the lighting and intensity of the activity I would do; lighting dictated my lens and film choices, whereas the intensity dictated if I would use only a 12-exposure roll [120] or a 36-exposure roll [35mm]. I shot colour only in the 120 format and had to rush to finish the rolls, given how little time I had in daylight. I chose Cinestill 50D, a daylight-balanced film stock with warmer tones and low sensitivity, producing low-grain and high-resolution images for the colour film stock.

The process of shooting film is documented here; the video briefly showcases the process of shooting, developing, and scanning film. Developing film on my end gave me control over how my images look in the result, from how grainy I wanted my images to be and how contrasty or flat my images come out. Since I pushed all my film, given the changing lighting conditions, I increased all my development processes to compensate for the underexposed film. Scanning film myself provides the same flexibility, scanning on my camera to digitize negatives provides control and more resolution.

For about a month after taking these images, I withdrew from posting them to my Instagram feed and held only an offline archive of them. Still, there was 'anxiety' about not being seen on my Instagram account. I consistently engage with my Instagram account, which gives me a sense of control as I participate in my community by sharing what I do regularly. Since I had not posted for a month, I felt 'invisible' (Bucher, 2012), which resulted in my return to Instagram. Even though I did post back to Instagram, it engaged in Gordon and Walter's (2016) notion of meaningful inefficiency. While voluntarily engaging in Instagram, I did not work within the system as intended, rather ironically.

Taking Pictures as an Act of Surveillance.

My study was informed by my experience with photo cataloguing applications like Apple Photos, which continuously captured more data than I needed or wanted for photos I took on my phone. I observed how much data Apple Photos captured from each image I took. On the surface, it seemed to be just archival data. However, upon further investigation, I observed how every image was catalogued. Faces, content, and textual information were scanned in each image to be used for archiving into catalouges..

Figure 2

Metadata information captured by a mobile phone camera.

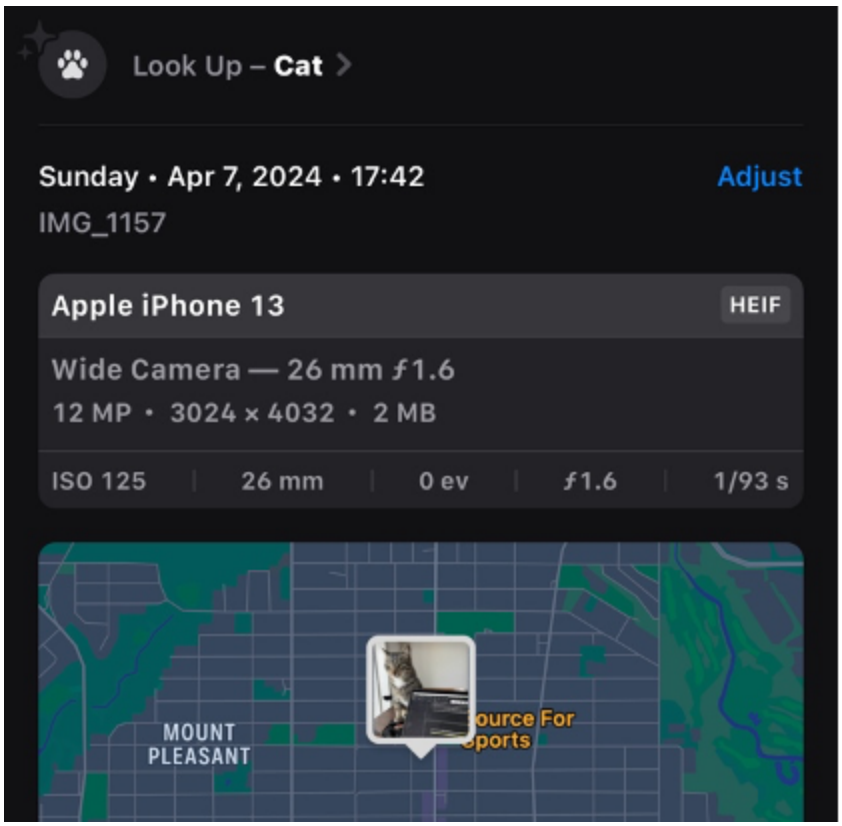


Figure 2 demonstrates the metadata captured in an image of a cat, and it exhibits the amount of data each image was marked with. This included geo-tagging and image scanning to recommend a reverse image set. The interactivity of digital image capture found in these cataloguing applications operates in a sense to control the users, as Andrejevic (2019) argues that the end goal of surveillance is to have "total information capture" through "more and better data" (p. 11). He uses Deluze (1992) to construct a framework of "automated surveillance," with the key characteristics being "environmentality, operationalism, and framelessness" (Andrejevic, 2019, p. 10). The latter two are observed in cataloguing applications, and even offline, the images are subject to surveillance.

Figure 3

Memory album created by Apple Photos for concerts.

Figure 4

Memory album created by Apple Photos for location setting.

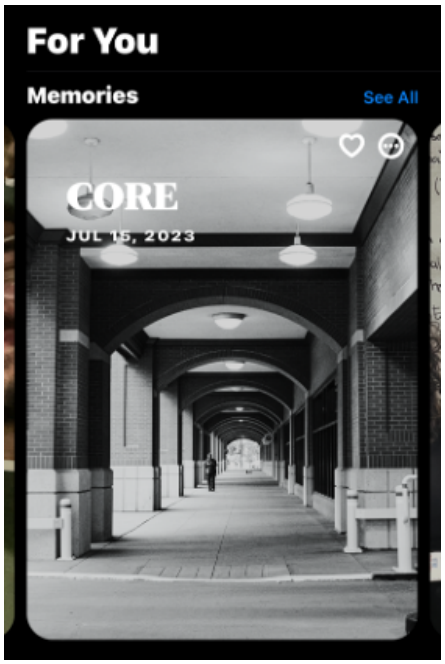
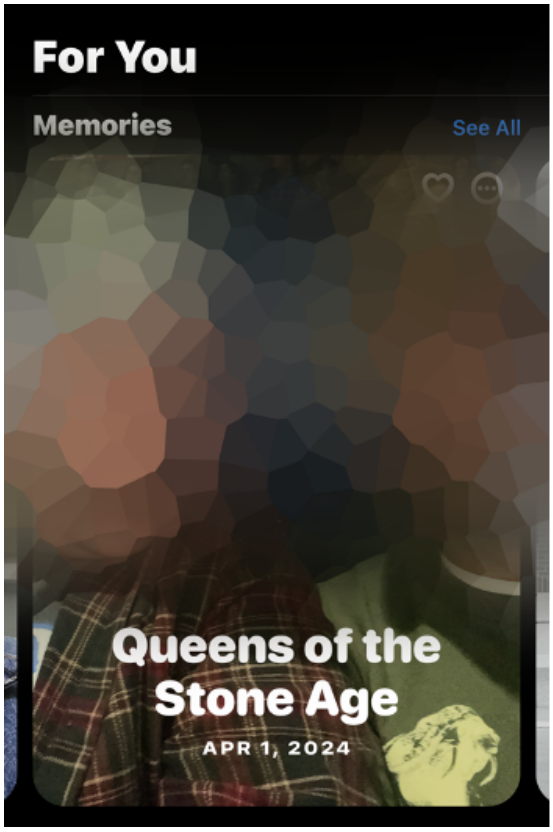


Figure 5

Memory album created by Apple Photos for a specific event.



Figures 3 – 5 exhibit 'memories,' which are slideshows created from images in my catalogue. None of these images were backed up to my iCloud drive; every image on my phone is offline stored to not have all my pictures up for digital data commodification. It became clear that every image in my offline catalogue was subject to surveillance. Figure 5 includes a slideshow archive of a concert; neither these images nor videos were uploaded to my iCloud. This made it to a catalogued carousel that scanned through the images to title it "Queens of the Stone Age," surprisingly, none of these images included any information that could be traced back to Queens of the Stone Age unless the videos were analyzed and traced back to the music in the capture. This exhibited the frameless nature of surveillance. Andrejevic (2019) described it as having no "clear delimitation on what is to be collected, sorted, and processed" (p. 12) and through this observation, it becomes evident that the data capture has permeated into mundane daily activities.

The surveillance through the cataloguing applications also exhibits Couldry and Meijas's (2019) discussion of the naturalization of personal data capture (p. 339). For capture, raw image data from everyday mundane activities is "configured" (p. 339). Raw data is considered useless unless image data can be commodified and assigned a unit for the market. This surveillance makes it onto social media practices through documenting daily life on a platform like Instagram. The platform captures everyday social acts and translates them into profitable data by establishing social rationality around reducing the labour to be "just sharing" (Couldry and Meijas, 2019, p. 340). This frameless data capture through cataloguing applications and platforms tracks a "permanent feature of life" (p. 344). It moves by creating a sense that this data is irrelevant, and the capture does not mean much to make the voluntary surrender much easier.

Resisting Cataloguing Applications and Digital Photography

Digital cataloguing applications and platforms like Instagram form a framework of efficient civic systems by appropriating existing technology (Gordon and Walter, 2016) and enhancing the experience of taking and archiving pictures. Taking pictures is so streamlined and 'efficient' that it becomes second nature to facilitate governance over the captured content, as observed in the 'memories' catalogued in Figures 3-5. Instagram is built on sharing one's life to 'save the moment' in an archive. The 'efficiency' in the system is to play actively by the platform's rules to stay active and

visible in your community. Those who act as good users get rewarded in this civic engagement system with the private sector.

Such enforced civic systems demand 'civic inefficiencies' to counteract the dominant design values and integrate "meaningful inefficiencies" (Gordon and Walters, 2016) into human life. These inefficiencies call for tools, systems, events, etc., that disrupt efficient civic systems. Gordon and Walter (2016) describe meaningful inefficiencies as recognizing and accommodating play in which the user is propelled toward action, not just labour. Furthermore, Walter describes how players voluntarily enter a system ostensibly to pursue some goal (pp. 251- 252).

Preceding my study, I involuntary surrendered my data to efficient systems, given the ease of interactivity and usability in digital mediums. My study was structured around meaningful inefficiency, creating tension between new and existing efficient systems. Shooting film became an activity of inefficiency in the streamlined system of digital image documentation. The process is slow and unnecessary, but it acted as an attempt to step back from the efficiency of modern digital system to get an oppositional gaze at it. This process employs 'play' (Gordon & Walter, 2016) as since the means of the activity were more meaningful than the end and the activity was done for the sake of doing it. Shooting film by itself is not 'meaningful' as it could just be taken as a hobby, but once a stance of active resistance is taken, it becomes a critical activity. In the study, The purpose of shooting film is to engage in a civic system of documenting daily life, but in a completely analog manner, resist data capture and governance over it for the most part. Shooting photographic film still engages in the digital media system as scanning film negatives into process involves a digital camera.

While I playfully shot my photos in an analog manner, I had to come full circle to digital media to be able to view those images, as my other option would have been complete analog printing. Analog darkroom printing is an impractical and tedious process owing to the time needed, prices, and availability of equipment.. Figures 6 – 9 are samples of the images I got during my film shooting project. While replicants of digital photos and visual memoirs of a moment, they lacked archival information.

Figure 6

Picture of a dog taken on black and white film.

Figure 7

Figure 8

Picture of a street on technicolour motion picture film.

Figure 9

Self-portrait on technicolour motion picture film.

The digitizing process introduces the exact metadata I attempted to resist, but this time, it is all meaningless because it is common metadata in my scanning gear. This EXIF data also exhibits the play of film as there is some metadata, but it is meaningless to anyone attempting to govern these images as they do not exist outside the archival data I created for them outside the EXIF. Furthermore, all metadata is erased once I convert the negatives to positives, as exhibited in Figure 10. This contrasts with the amount of EXIF data in an image from a digital camera capture, displayed in Figure 11

Figure 10

EXIF data of a film negative converted into a positive.

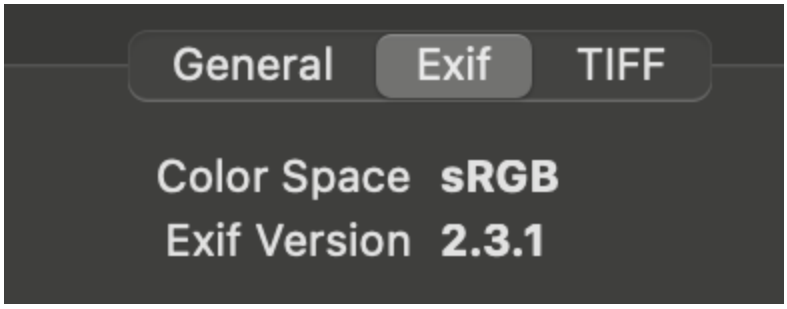


Figure 11

EXIF data of an image captured on a digital camera.

Creating a tangible archive for the images was the second play of meaningful inefficiencies employed in my study. Given that there was no archival data for my photos, I decided to create my own from memory and my experiences shooting these images. I created a zine, *Materiality & Memory*, which provides enough metadata for my film photos. At its core, making a zine as such is an act of

resistance and inefficiency as it still engages in the civic systems of image cataloguing, just in a very playful manner. While this zine was supposed to be a tangible archival document, due to the inefficiency of printing as a format, I had to publish it digitally, which exhibits the inefficiency of this attempt.

My plays on inefficiency became 'meaningful' only as they provided a new view of efficient systems. Sitting in the slow system of film allowed me to see how much data was being voluntarily surrendered to the cataloguing applications. The activity provided me with a scope of understanding of how digital cataloguing shapes me and how I could, in turn, shape it (Gordon and Walters, 2016, p. 250).

Sharing on Instagram and the Fear of Invisibility

Bucher (2012) describes a regime of visibility in Facebook's algorithm as the 'real-time feed' users believed they were seeing. The algorithm highlights what Facebook wants users to see based on how relevant and recent the post was made (pp. 1168-1169). Bucher (2012) argues that contrary to the panopticon, where the threat of permanent visibility disciplines behaviour, for platforms, there is a "threat of invisibility," which implies the fear of disappearing from the newsfeed at any given time (p. 1171). This fear shapes my social media use the most. In the case of Instagram and my study, the platform's rules shape how I document my daily life on the platform, even if the platform is created to document memories. Throughout my study, while I resisted documenting my activities on my Instagram account, I felt a sense of anxiety over not being seen by my community, as no one knew where I was, what I was up to or what I had done.

After a long gap between deliberately posting nothing, this fear of being 'unseen' found me sharing my images on my Instagram account. As I noticed in my gap between postings, the images I posted for work reasons would not see the same level of engagement I usually observed on my account. This displayed not only Bucher's (2012) notion but also the example of Deleuzian control in how the platform enforces a regime of control on its users. On Instagram, the rules of engagement are dictated by the algorithm that makes the user dependent on — posting consistently, using the right tools (hashtags and/or captions), and post format (reels/video-based posts, or image-based posts). As Deleuze (1992) notes, "Man is no longer man enclosed, but man in debt" (p.

6); the 'debt' becomes the visibility and the eventual reward from the platform for abiding by the rules of engagement.

Noticing the lack of engagement and my anxiety, I posted my images to my feed again. The fear of invisibility slowly disappeared, and I observed the engagement return to my account. This establishes Instagram as a disciplinary regime using visibility as a reward for participating in the platform. It also applies the logic of control to reinforce the logic of participation in its users. While I did engage with Instagram's rules again, I approached it with the play of meaningful inefficiency as I did not use all the right tools of engagement and made sure I was not documenting all of my personal details with the posts. My captions were humorous and poked fun at the documentary nature of this visibility regime I observed on Instagram.

Limitations and Conclusion

Through this study, I showcased how much data captured through a task is as meaningless as taking mundane photos is naturalized. The study provides insight into how analog forms act as a method of resistance against data colonialism. The experience, as intricate as it became, was limited by the inefficiency of the film form. Throughout the study, I had to engage with digital media, from documenting the experience to digitizing my negatives and presenting my zine. The equipment limited the study; my work could have been documented entirely offline using cinema film or compact discs to avoid any form of digital surveillance I was attempting to avoid. My zine was supposed to be a print artifact, but given the inability to print and time constraints with resources, I could not and had to resort to online publishing methods. This raises the question: Is it ever enough? As detailed as my attempt at resisting digital photography for personal use got, it is not feasible for anyone. Fiscally, film prices were a big factor. While my scanning setup was something I invested in before the study, that cost cannot be ignored if someone attempts to shoot, develop, and scan film independently; they would need all the equipment I have acquired over time. While I digitized my images because that is the more convenient and feasible option, my pure analog method would have been to print these images in a dark room, which is, once again, not feasible fiscally as I do not own a darkroom. Considering all this, the study becomes a feeble attempt at resisting but still opens room for discussion about how digital civic systems can be disrupted.

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