

# 'Picturing the Social': Questions of method, ethics and transparency in the analysis of social media photography.

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2015/06/10/picturing-the-social-method-ethics-social-media/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2015/06/10/picturing-the-social-method-ethics-social-media/)

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**Anne Burns** *has been researching current norms of social media sharing, particularly in relation to photo sharing practices, and reflects here on the implications this research might have for social media research in years to come. Whilst there are many opportunities for researchers, more reflection is needed on the potential for harm that can be caused by the unauthorized reproduction of data.*



Over 1.8 billion photographs are [uploaded and shared each day](#). This amount of potential data can be overwhelming for researchers – how does one start? Where are the boundaries to be placed? How much data is enough? And what kinds of method should be used? These concerns can cause two types of problems. Firstly, the quantity of images produced each day prompts an understandable focus on managing and analyzing volume. Secondly, a large-scale approach can tend towards producing generalizations, in terms of key themes and demographics. An example of this approach is [Selfiecity](#), a project led by Lev Manovich in which more than 600 000 images were downloaded from Instagram, and reduced to 3200 key selfies. Using images that were taken in five major cities around the world, this investigation of global self-portrait style sorted the data according to factors such as gender, head cant and expression. As [Losh \(2015\)](#) notes, this approach to images tends to atomise data and strip it of its contextual meaning. Furthermore, Losh also questions the project's use of casual labour on Amazon's Mechanical Turk, in order to tag and sort selfies. Selfiecity therefore serves as an example of some of the possible limitations of large-scale forms of image analysis.



**Eye drawn onto a dirty bus shelter, Sheffield. Photo: Anne Burns**

In contrast, the ‘Picturing the Social’ project – part of the [Visual Social Media Lab](#), based at the University of Sheffield – consists of several studies that employ a combination of methods for studying social media photography. For example, one of these studies, ‘Imaging Sheffield’, uses an ethnographic approach in order to consider how sharing and looking at photographs online contribute to a sense of place and belonging. Other ‘Picturing the Social’ studies take a broader view than this micro approach, such as Mike Thelwall’s analysis of images on Twitter, which uses a random sample of 400 images to analyse factors such as the type and content of images shared on the platform. Both of these approaches to social media photography will yield valuable insights into the expectations and affordances of online sharing, so it is therefore not a question of qualitative versus quantitative, but rather a matter of offsetting potential limitations by using a range of methods.

To demonstrate the particular relevance of small-scale, ethnographic approaches to ‘Big Data’, I would use the example of my PhD research, which examined the disciplinary effects of certain types of social media discourse. In particular, I considered how the negative messages circulated online regarding women’s use of photography – such as selfies – act to reinforce gender stereotypes and social inequalities. Having seen that the evaluation of others’ photographic practices is far from neutral, I was keen to avoid inadvertently reproducing problematic stereotypes when undertaking this new research project. As such, the ethnographic approach used in ‘Imaging Sheffield’ is very appropriate, as it demands that I situate myself alongside my participants, rather than determine what their behaviours ‘mean’ from a distance. Importantly, ethnography considers the opinions of its subjects, as summarized by Boellstorff et al.: “We conduct research not just to mine data from informants, but to learn about their theoretical and pragmatic insights” ([Boellstorff et. al, 2012: 16](#)). The large-scale approach taken by Selfiecity could not access these kinds of user perspectives, and therefore misses out on arguably some of the most interesting and useful data

relating to contemporary social media practice.



**Sheffield Forgemasters. Photo: Anne Burns.**

In order to obtain these kinds of insight, 'Imaging Sheffield' considers the practices of three categories of user, all of whom share images of Sheffield online, namely: groups, individuals and organisations. 'Groups' include Facebook groups dedicated to sharing images of Sheffield, as well as Sheffield-based camera clubs who have a large presence online. The 'Individual' category comprises those who post images of Sheffield to sites such as Flickr, or who curate Sheffield-themed boards on Pinterest. Lastly, 'Organisations' include the University of Sheffield and its Instagram account, and the local studies archive Picture Sheffield. This category is important for exploring some of the ways in which sharing is used as part of a wider strategy, either in terms of company branding, or as part of the council's provision of local information services.

The aim of this study is to explore how sharing practices differ within and between these three categories, and to establish what the current norms of sharing include and how they develop. How, for instance, does a subject decide whether to post in a group or as an individual on Flickr? What different affordances, and types of sociality, are offered by each context? And what other activities – such as discussions and meet-ups – take place in relation to photographic sharing? A key component of this study will be participant observation, in which I will take part in the practices I am studying, by taking and sharing photographs of Sheffield.

Whilst working on the Imaging Sheffield study, I have found it useful to work through the process of *how* to conduct research by writing a weekly blog post – [@annelburns](#) on Medium – addressing topics such as ethics and the use of ethnographic methods in visual research. Principally, I wanted to make the processing of designing a study, and



generally working things out, to be transparent, and to show some of my reasoning behind certain approaches. This is one of the study's strengths, as it challenges the conventional model for research, as emerging fully-formed, with findings being presented at the project's conclusion, and with decision-making either opaque or obscured entirely. In contrast, I wish to show my thinking at every stage of the process, and argue for the validity of each step taken.



**Children's drawings, Sheffield. Photo: Anne Burns.**

In [one post](#), I discuss how my PhD topic influenced my ethical approach to social media research. One aspect of my work looked at the non-consensual sharing of intimate images, sometimes called 'revenge porn' or involuntary pornography. Victims were frequently chastised for taking sexualized images, as that was perceived to be the specific act that made their private lives public, rather than their aggressors' actions. Additionally, the feminist principle of 'choice' was commonly deployed to assign blame, in that women were accused of making bad choices, or having effectively chosen their own abuse. Such an explicit instance of the politics of data management is undoubtedly extreme, but I began to see uncomfortable parallels with the research practices of other academics. Too often, I see the argument that once material is perceived to be public, then it is fair game for research use. But as the [AoIR report \(2012\)](#) concerning research ethics warns us, private is not a straightforward concept, and neither is the potential for harm that can be caused by the unauthorized reproduction of data.

These questions of method, ethics and transparency are of central importance to the emerging field of social media research, and as such form some of the key points of interest for the 'Picturing the Social' project. Hopefully, this study will also provide a useful guide for other social media researchers who are working through similar issues.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.*

## **About the Author**

**Anne Burns** is a Research Associate at the University of Sheffield's Visual Social Media lab, and is conducting an ethnography for the *Picturing the Social* project, that will explore the practices and forms of social media photography. Anne writes a weekly research blog, through which she will be sharing some of the findings from the ethnography. This can be [found here](#). Anne has recently obtained her PhD from the Loughborough University School of Art. Her PhD focused on a connection between the discussion of women's photographic practices and social discipline. Principally, Anne analysed how the devaluing of certain types of photograph (such as selfies) or behaviour (such as the pouting 'duckface') within popular discourse is used to classify and marginalize women. Her PhD blog, which discusses photography, social media and feminism, can be [found here](#).

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