The remediation of the personal photograph and the politics of self-representation in digital storytelling

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Abstract
Over the past couple of decades, the cultural field formerly known as ‘domestic’, and later ‘personal’ photography has been remediated and transformed as part of the social web, with its convergence of personal expression, interpersonal communication and online social networks (most recently via platforms such as Flickr, Facebook and Twitter). Meanwhile, the digital storytelling movement (involving the workshop-based production of short autobiographical videos) from its beginnings in the mid-1990s relied heavily on the narrative power of the personal photograph, often sourced from family albums and later from online archives. This article addresses the new issues arising for the politics of self-representation and personal photography in the era of social media, focusing particularly on the consequences of online image-sharing. It discusses in detail the practices of selection, curation, manipulation and editing of personal photographic images among a group of activist-oriented queer digital storytellers who have in common a stated desire to share their personal stories in pursuit of social change and whose stories often aim to address both intimate and antagonistic publics.

Keywords
Digital storytelling, internet studies, photography, privacy, queer identity

Personal photography as material culture
Notions of cultural transmission, memory, remembering and forgetting are actively transmitted through perceived material worlds … Temporalities thus shape people, but within these temporalities people also shape the future. Material culture materializes identities, but it is also a medium for understanding the processes by means of which those identities are transmitted. (Tilley, 2011: 348)

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Changes in media technologies (from the printing press to the cinema and the rise of mass broadcast media in the 20th century) have engendered changes in how we capture, remember and communicate personal images of everyday and family life. In parallel, large-scale, even revolutionary, transformations in the knowledge, media and cultural industries highlight both continuities and discontinuities with earlier forms and practices (Couldry, 2012) – in these moments of transition, the meanings and constitutive practices of reading, or writing, or photography, are remediated (Bolter and Grusin, 1999), in turn transforming their cultural functions as technologies of memory.

The history of photography as a field of material cultural practice is replete with such moments. It has maintained a central role in society and culture for more than a century – indeed Liu (2003: 519) observes that ‘the photograph has been an important medium by which modernity indoctrinates its subjects, and it never ceases to teach us how to play our roles as citizens of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.’ This history has been inextricably intertwined with cultural, technological and economic change, within which the meanings and material practices associated with photography have changed without decentring it as a dominant cultural form. Van House (2011) argues that its persistence ‘suggests a popular and effective sociotechnical system, an assemblage of technologies, objects, understandings whose multiple meanings are important in a variety of human activity’. Most significantly for our purposes here, the biography of personal photography – and its later articulations within web culture and the digital storytelling movement – is particularly revealing of how moments of technological transition produce changes in the practices and politics of self-representation.

Personal photography begins, arguably, with the introduction of the Kodak hand camera in 1888, making the practice of photography accessible to the mass market (Jenkins, 1975: 12–14) by delivering a photographic system that ‘would place all of the complexities of photography in the hands of the manufacturer and a simple camera in the hands of nearly everyone six years or older’ (p. 14). Instead of relying on professional photographers to capture stilted family portraits once a year or on special occasions, everyday and family life could now be documented by amateurs (for a similar narrative around home movies, see Zimmerman, 1995). It was at this point that Kodak’s slogan, ‘You press the button, we do the rest’, came to ‘define the territory for domestic photography’ (McQuire, 1998: 55). As an industry, photography was transformed from a decentralized, handicraft-based mode to a centralized, mechanized one (Jenkins, 1975); but at the same time, as a cultural practice, photography was transformed from a rarefied, often elitist pursuit to a mass-popular, fully domesticated and everyday activity.

As part of its marketing efforts, Kodak taught much of the world not only that anyone could and should take photographs, but also where and when and how to take them, in relation to shifting ideological constructions of modernity, leisure, domesticity and gender (West, 2000). The market for cameras was expanded through Kodak’s advertising and editorial activities, with women targeted on the basis of the Kodak’s ease of use, especially as an aid to family memory (Walton, 2002: 36) and mobile photography (Nead, 2004: 73). Both the industry discourses and everyday practices of such forms of personal photography insistently invited us to construct and expect a normative family gaze – a fundamental characteristic of which is that the (idealized) family is ‘both the subject and object of the photographic event’ (Haldrup and Larsen, 2003: 42).
The practice of personal photography did not end when each set of prints was picked up from the lab, however, but extended to sharing, recombination and integration into the flows and spaces of everyday life. Van House (2011) notes four social uses for photography, extending well beyond ‘personal and group memory’ to include ‘relationship creating and maintenance, self-representation and self-expression’. In an extended discussion of the vernacular photograph as material object, Geoffrey Batchen (2001) explores the narrative potential of the vernacular photo album as well as the many other domestic practices that emphasized the thingness of photographic objects, through framing, mounting on glass, the creation of jewellery that incorporated photographs, and so on; emphasizing, in particular, the common practice of gridding photographs in multi-photo frames on domestic walls, providing them with ‘the unmistakeable structure of narrative, with the declared capacity to tell a story’ (p. 66).

In the early 21st century, the emergence of digital photography was understood mainly in terms of the ways it was transforming the aesthetics of snapshot photography (with the scarcity of film no longer an issue, photographers could take a maximalist, ‘shoot first and edit later’ approach); but of far more significance were the changes to the uses of the personal photograph that accompanied the worldwide web. Most important was the ‘Web 2.0’ (O’Reilly, 2005) paradigm of the mid-2000s, with its development of platforms and services specifically designed for the networked sharing of user-created content. The rise of platforms like Flickr and Facebook (and, later, Instagram) further segmented the cultural system of photography, as Eastman had done more than a century earlier. Casual photographers no longer needed to set up their own personal websites – although personal photos were very important to the earlier genre of the ‘personal home-page’, as Miller (2000) discusses – in order to share their photographs.

Much more important than digital photography’s influence on the practice of taking photographs, then, are the ways in which the web has changed how and what it means to share photographs. The widespread use of content-sharing platforms marks a distinctive shift from photo albums as the dominant means of archiving our lives, to ‘trans-individual’ (Coudry, 2012: 52) archiving practices via online platforms like Flickr, Facebook and Instagram. Social networking sites (SNS) like Facebook in particular have seen intimate, self-expressive modes of photography (a blurry night out, an intimate self-portrait) enacted in semi-public fora (Livingstone, 2008) alongside more traditionally ‘public’ forms of photographic practice, like documentary and landscape photography. Indeed, sites like Instagram and Tumblr, which rely primarily on image-sharing as the stuff of social interaction, are evidence for Van Dijck’s (2008: 62) observation half a decade ago that we were witnessing a shift among the younger generation towards ‘using photography as an instrument for peer bonding and interaction’. These articulations among everyday life, personal photography and online social networks have produced new forms and practices of public life, which have been characterized as producing the potential for ‘cultural citizenship’, initially in the context of the Flickr photo-sharing network (Burgess, 2009).

Since then, through the popular uptake, global reach and social legitimation of social media platforms like Twitter, these new hybrid practices of personal image-sharing and networked publics have become much more central to the mainstream media ecology. Via user-created content networks and social network sites, the everyday lives of...
individuals are being remediated into new contexts of social visibility and connection – through Facebook and Twitter status updates, videos uploaded to YouTube and photos contributed to Flickr; and, increasingly, through the ways that smartphones afford instant sharing of mobile snapshots with one’s social networks via SMS, Instagram, Facebook or Twitter (Chesher, 2012; Hjorth, 2007). Papacharissi (2010: 137) argues that such use of online media supersedes the traditional Habermasian notion of the public sphere and constitutes a digitally mediated private sphere:

… the personalized content provided by online media fits well within this citizen’s private sphere of contemplation, evaluation and action, in which the self remains the point of reference. This citizen is alone, but not isolated. On the contrary, within the private sphere, the individual cultivates civic habits that enable him or her to connect with others on the basis of shared social, political, and cultural priorities.

Alongside the potential for socially networked photo-sharing to play a role in the formation of cultural citizenship come more troubling implications of the convergence between the personal and the public. Most notable are the many privacy concerns around Facebook images, as well as the loss of control over the distribution pathways for personal content that are a consequence of digitization and digital publishing, especially over time, and especially in relation to the rise of proprietary third-party content-sharing platforms. Hogan (2010: 381) observes that when online identity artefacts such as personal photographs are published to content-sharing services or personal websites, social media platforms are like ‘curators’ of a personal ‘exhibition’ composed of these artefacts; they may originally be shared with a specific (often familiar or intimate) audience in mind, but in actuality they may be reused and reinterpreted by other, unknown audiences. Van Dijck (2008: 59) usefully summarizes these concerns and the ways they operate in tension with the positive ‘affordances’ of online photosharing:

While the internet allows for quick and easy sharing of private snapshots, that same tool also renders them vulnerable to unauthorized distribution. Ironically, the picture taken by the roommate as a token of instant and ephemeral communication may have an extended life on the internet, turning up in unexpected contexts many years from now … the increased manipulability of photographic images may suit the individual’s need for continuous self-remodelling, but that same flexibility may also lessen our grip on our images’ future repurposing and reframing, forcing us to acknowledge the way pictorial memory might be changed by ease of distribution.

In this context, Van House (2011) notes a variety of ways in which the previously described social functions of personal photography are changing in the post-Web 2.0 era; with everyday photographers reporting shifts in their own practices, including an increased awareness of matters of audience and distribution, as digitized personal images circulate among networked publics.

**The personal image in digital storytelling**

Arising in the 1990s as an alternative media and community arts movement largely disconnected from the emergence of web culture (Hartley and McWilliam, 2009; Lundby,
2008), digital storytelling offers a parallel history, but one that has now converged with the history of personal photography. The digital storytelling movement has been an important intervention in community media arts, taking advantage of the affordances of digital media technologies but based on the sharing of personal images and identity narratives among small groups of participants – frequently drawn from social groups at risk of cultural exclusion.

Digital stories are short (3–5 min) autobiographical multimedia narratives in video form, combining personal photographs and/or artworks, narration voiced by participants themselves, and sometimes music. They are traditionally created in a workshop context taking place over three to four days that includes a story circle, technical instruction and celebratory screening for fellow storytellers and invited guests. The ‘digital’ in ‘digital storytelling’ refers to the digital tools used by storytellers for production (computers, digital cameras, edit software, etc.) and in some cases the digital media used for distribution (ranging from DVD to the internet) – technologies that were only just becoming available to non-professionals when the practice emerged in the 1990s.

Digital storytelling as a practice and tradition was originally and remains embedded in the everyday narrative practices surrounding the materiality of the personal image, combined with the personal voice (Burgess, 2006). It relied on materials to hand, often pulled out of physical photo albums or shoeboxes brought along to the workshop and later digitized; these days, they might be brought along on memory sticks, smartphones or retrieved from archives in the cloud, but the creative and social practices that underpin the digital storytelling workshop have changed very little in that time. Indeed, as Van House (2011) notes, ‘photographs as objects of memory have traditionally depended heavily on their materiality and durability, both of which are being attenuated by the digital’; in contemporary digital storytelling, the digital image gains affective weight through its use as part of a deeply personal narrative, and in particular through the intense physical co-presence and intimacy of the digital storytelling workshop as a site of social interaction.

As the internet has become almost ubiquitous in Western contexts and, most importantly, as it has become deeply imbricated with everyday social life, the parallel histories of ‘offline’ digital storytelling and the ‘online’ life of personal images are now converging. Digital storytelling is itself going online, by taking advantage of online distribution platforms; further, through social media, digital storytelling participants are familiar with the challenges of online identity and privacy management. The material practices that surround personal images in digital storytelling – their selection, editing, transformation and distribution – are mediated by the realities of socially networked identity (for example, the participants are as habituated to Facebook-era privacy concerns as anyone else); further, the stories’ distribution pathways may be unpredictable. Hogan (2010: 381) highlights a distinction between the family photo albums, mantlepieces and lounge-room walls of the past and online-curated exhibitions of self:

Unique historical artefacts have typically been curated by experts. These people select which artworks to display, where to place them, and what narrative to tell about this selection. With a shift from presence (and aura) to data and reproduction, it is now possible for information signifying someone to be endlessly copied and reconfigured. Everyone can have his or her own
While Hogan examines non-human curation performed by computers and social network platforms, the digital storytelling participants featured in the remainder of this article regain a degree of agency and ownership over their online self-representations by personally selecting, curating and deploying personal images in complex, yet finite, multimedia form. Unlike single photographs that may unintentionally circulate out of context, their images are embedded and contextualized in a linear narrative form as a large digital file. These files are typically too large to email and are relatively difficult to break or separate into constituent parts. While it is relatively easy to take screen-shots, it is more difficult (and would require technical skills and motivated effort) to re-mash narration, music and digital effects. As such, for storytellers who wish to achieve their creative and political goals while negotiating the challenges of publicness and privacy, digital stories lock personal photographs into a unique expression of digital self-representation in a networked age.

For some storytellers, particularly those who have travelled a personal journey through numerous representations of self (for example, transgender storytellers), making a permanent and finite digital story and distributing it online, where it is both persistent and searchable (boyd, 2008) can be problematic. However, the considered textual approaches storytellers take to production afford a greater degree of agency over their self-representations than those produced by traditional mass media or third-party documentary makers. Similarly, their conscious modes of distribution afford greater ownership over where their stories may be shared than traditional distribution undertaken by a social-service agency or computer-mediated webspaces in which storytellers have no control over privacy settings. In the context of these case studies, we argue that the deliberate framing of life-stories and curated exhibitions of self constitute a form of digitally enabled citizenship (Papacharissi, 2010).

First, we describe the case studies from which we have derived our data, then we detail the central concepts of ‘everyday activism’ and ‘networked identity work’. We discuss the three phases of digital storytelling and some of the risks associated with networked self-representation before offering some examples of visual approaches to managing privacy and publicness. These include five tropes of digital storytelling – family photographs, manipulated images, stock images, artistic abstractions and re-enactments.

**Queer everyday activist digital storytellers**

Our descriptions of image-related practices in digital storytelling draw upon three case studies undertaken by Vivienne between 2009 and 2012 in Adelaide, South Australia. Two separate digital storytelling initiatives were run under the auspices of SHine South Australia (sexual health and education network) and ACSA (AIDS Council of South Australia) in face-to-face and online workshops. In both cases, the workshops had a mix of community development, self-empowerment and community education objectives.
What’s Your Story? (Shine SA) was targeted at GLBTQIS (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Transsexual, Queer, Intersex, Same Sex Attracted) storytellers and friends and the 18 stories produced were assembled on a DVD and packaged with a facilitator’s guide for use in social service, training and education contexts. The What’s Your Story? compilation was intentionally diverse and included disabled, transgender, Christian, Muslim, Indigenous, parent and child perspectives. Positive Stories (ACSA) was designed for HIV-positive storytellers and targeted audiences who were perceived to be slipping through the cracks of more traditional HIV education campaigns.

While conventional digital storytelling workshops generally take place in a hothouse environment of three to four consecutive days and with limited distribution of the digital story products, these initiatives were designed more explicitly around the needs of participants (over extended time frames) and with widespread distribution in mind. The third case study, Rainbow Family Tree, initially served as a workshop interface and then evolved into an independent online digital storytelling community and exhibition platform for digital stories, many of which were produced in the initiative’s workshops. Members of the site participate by watching digital stories and posting comments or sharing stories and experiences of ‘everyday activism’. Some also use ‘like’ buttons to share the stories with their Facebook, Twitter or email networks. Vivienne was directly involved in each of the three case studies as an observant–participant–researcher, workshop facilitator, website curator and digital storyteller.

The impact of mediation upon digital story texts (in both face-to-face and online workshops) and distributed identity (contextualized by multiple platforms including Rainbow Family Tree, Facebook and DVD compilations) is explored further elsewhere (Vivienne, 2011). These divergent sites of identity production position both the processes and products of digital storytelling in socially constructed yet material frames, in a similar yet different fashion to traditional family photo albums and domestic photo frames and displays. While digital platforms are in some ways less tangible, they nevertheless constitute an archive that is representative of social negotiations around gender, sexuality and fluid identity. Further, the ways that storytellers curate these spaces are pertinent to a wider public of social media users. For example, widespread and frequent moral panics regarding the online safety of young people offer evidence of amplified social concern regarding the archiving of enduring and searchable material identity artefacts.

In this article, we use the umbrella nominalization ‘queer’ for its alignment with Queer theory and its inclusion of the identities represented in the aforementioned GLBTQIS acronym. Although the parameters of these identity categories are indefinite and contested, in workshops and in the Rainbow Family Tree community there is a common feeling of being unified as a ‘counter-public’ (Warner, 2005) interested in challenging social assumptions and prejudice founded on sexual and gender stereotypes.

While Rainbow Family Tree members and storytellers often do not describe or think of themselves as activists, in everyday life they frequently share aspects of themselves that challenge the status quo. Like Foucault’s parrhesia – characterized as ‘a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself)’ (Foucault, 2001: 19) – digital storytellers draw upon personal truth to speak to power and in doing so grapple with social risks. Like Goffman’s (1963) ‘spoiled
identities’, queer storytellers are still marginalized or discriminated against in many social contexts. For example, imagine the daily selective self-disclosure of a trans child; a gay HIV-positive rural dwelling nurse; a lesbian Uniting Church Minister; a gay Islamic Asian-Australian, etc. We characterize these people as ‘everyday activists’ and their tools of trade are material artefacts of their daily lives, in this case domestic photographs and personal images, shared in digital stories with unknown and imagined publics.

**Networked self-representation and risk**

Every element of a digital story represents a directorial choice manifest in material form, from which story to tell, what images to use, how they are framed, how quickly or slowly they will be edited together, transitions and visual effects and whether to include music and sound effects. What is left out, glossed over or left unsaid is often just as significant as what is included and takes into consideration the ‘lowest common denominator’ – that is, the lowest threshold of sensitivity or negative response – among imagined audiences (Hogan, 2010). The negotiations storytellers make around being private or public (see Weintraub and Kumar, 1997, for a thorough exploration of diverse understandings of privacy and publicness) take place throughout the digital storytelling process, categorized here as pre-production, production and distribution.

The pre-production phase of digital storytelling is inclusive of the institutional design and framing of the initiative and recruitment of participants who identify in some way with publicly stated workshop criteria or the political goals of the collective. Participants must also believe they have a story worth sharing in public and, in many cases, this in itself is a personal revelation that reflects acquisition of agency. During the production phase, participants undertake micro-negotiations with friends and family members who are also part of the story, including whether or not they are happy to be identifiable. They dig through personal archives of photographs and artwork and in some cases scroll through online image archives in the public domain. Participants find and refine an individual narrative voice in an active and engaged process that includes articulation of which publics they are a part of (aligned with) and apart from (excluded by). Storytellers consider both a tangible network of friends and family members and imagined publics and audiences (see Livingstone, 2005, for excellent distinctions between ‘publics’ and ‘audiences’). We characterize this labour as networked identity work (Vivienne and Burgess, 2012) and it frequently takes material form in edits/manipulations that selectively reveal/conceal aspects of identity. Meanwhile, the distribution phase of digital storytelling includes consideration of where and how to share stories, including exploration of the terms and conditions of various online platforms, like Rainbow Family Tree, Vimeo, Facebook and YouTube. Figure 1 illustrates the three phases of digital storytelling alongside three discrete textual approaches and three modes of sharing that illuminate storyteller understandings of privacy and publicness (described in greater detail in Vivienne and Burgess, 2012).

Rather than delineate face-to-face and online identity performances, we consider digital storytelling as an example of distributed self-representation shared with publics that are always already networked, mediated by social and digital connections. We contend that the networked identity work undertaken by digital storytellers has a formative
influence on evolving expressions of identity, enacted by and embedded in their shared domestic photographs and anecdotes.

In the following, we explore five specific ways in which storytellers employ self-representational images: family photographs, manipulated images, stock images, artistic abstractions and re-enactments.

**Family photographs**

Storytellers who elect to make themselves and family members visible in public online spaces do so despite social injunctions to maintain safety by preserving privacy or at least limiting access to identifying information. In the following section, we discuss some general concerns around sharing personal photographs in public fora, followed by some examples in which digital storytellers have employed visible representations of ‘family’ in order to lobby for law reform.

Jacqui is a member of *Rainbow Family Tree* and an activist blogger. She writes regularly for mainstream newspapers and frequently uses descriptions and photographs of her personal family circumstances as a means of generating empathy for same-sex marriage and alternative family structures. Jacqui and her partner have had numerous discussions about whether doing so puts their kids at risk:

… it’s the big-bogey-man thing … in the back of your mind, if you take it to the extreme, it’s that some nutter out there is going to take offence and track you down and come and kill your kids … you’ve got way more chance of your kids getting hit by a car on the way to school … but it’s ‘a minuscule chance of a catastrophic thing’. (Jacqui, interview, 2011)

Jacqui describes this as a prevailing and unsubstantiated fear, shared by queer and heterosexual parents alike, that correlates publicly visible photos of children (especially online) with an increased risk of ‘stranger danger’ or an equally vague fear of paedophiles. Despite her fears, Jacqui believes she has the necessary support of family and friends to manage risks, including what is arguably an increased exposure to bullying, amplified by public exposure. She feels that the rewards outweigh the risks and (echoing Foucault’s parrhesiastes) that it is her ethical duty to speak out on behalf of others:
… you know, we could just let this go and that’s not good for our kids either … there’s that famous quote … ‘in order for evil to thrive it just needs good people to be silent.’ I’ve always felt a strong responsibility to attempt to effect change if we can, partly because we are very protected … privileged … we are white, middle-class, affluent, educated … all those things. We’re not vulnerable. Not to say on a daily basis I don’t feel discriminated against … but there’s a lot of people out there whose lives are a million times worse than mine … I’m in a safe position to put myself out there … (Jacqui, interview, 2011)

The freedom to speak out or be visible suggests a correlation between identifiable self-representation and social capital (Bourdieu, 1991). Making a digital story involves a journey that is both conscious and unconscious, in many cases a trip from marginalization to advocacy and cultural engagement. In the following, we describe two digital stories that use family photographs to construct their own material articulations of family both for personal affirmation and political activism.

Molly made Where Did We Come From? She is a lesbian mother of toddler twins and wanted to represent her unconventional family structure and pathway to conception. The story shows family album-type photos of a pregnant Molly being embraced by her female partner and photos of the twins being cuddled by both their mums soon after birth. The story is addressed specifically to the children and with accompanying nursery rhyme soundtrack (‘Twinkle twinkle little star’), Molly hoped the story would serve as a discussion starter for future childcare workers and teachers. She also screened and sent the story to various Members of Parliament in Queensland who were considering a bill to recognize non-biological same-sex parents and her story starts and finishes with the name of the campaign – Love makes a family: Vote to recognise our families in ’09. Molly goes on to list things that ‘make a mummy’ and also offers a collection of stock photos of children’s toys assembled in various alternative family units – one mummy; a mummy and a daddy and a step-mum; two daddies; a grandma, etc. These images were sourced from an online archive and were used because they were both evocative and convenient. As a busy mum, Molly struggled to find time to make the story and chose to use stock images because they were beautifully framed and lit, and it was quicker than trying to stage similar tableaux. Other storytellers, as detailed later, use stock images as substitutes for personal ones, in some cases to maintain greater privacy. Molly finishes with: ‘Families can look different on the outside. On the inside, all families are made of love.’

Like Molly, Bronwen made her story, Rowan’s Family Tree, for both personal and political reasons. She had already made Welcome to the World, Pip! as an affirmation of hopes and dreams for her soon-to-be-born child. When it was announced that there would be a Senate Committee considering public submissions for the same-sex parenting inquiry in South Australia, Bronwen and her wife, Melina, were invited to contribute. The story starts with a drawing of a tree on a white board with origami birds appearing around a central nest as every additional member of an extended family network is named. Later, as the narration opens out to explore how society defines their family, the child-friendly cadences of the narration acquire a noticeable edge. Bronwen tells how, according to social services, she is ‘step-mother’ to Melina’s adult children, who she has known for only a few years. Yet Melina, as a co-parent involved in the daily care of their son, has no biological relationship to him and therefore no legal one. Bronwen includes a family photograph of herself (tall, Anglo) smiling, arm in arm with her adopted sister
(short, Indian) and notes that ‘nobody ever questions our right to call ourselves “sisters”.’ The story ends with an explanation of what Bronwen and Melina think constitutes a family – ‘relationships and love’ – followed by a montage of happy snaps of Rowan with a diverse array of family members, both biological and non-biological. A recorder sets the mood with a children’s nursery rhyme and beautiful birdcalls bookend the piece, representing the voices of the paper-crane family in unity.

These digital stories are visual constructions of ‘family’ that embrace material visibility, consigning more conventional heteronormative nuclear examples to invisible backstory. In both cases, the children have acquired a story of belonging; in fact, Molly’s kids became so familiar with the words that, at one stage, they were requesting nightly retellings. Teachers and childcare workers are offered a representation (e.g. two mummies, IVF, etc.) of domestic intimacy, conveyed through words and images, that they can use to relate to the families, thereby demonstrating acceptance. Politicians and policy makers are offered insight into the daily-lived reality of same-sex family life rather than a theoretical possibility. Both storytellers believe their story made a small, yet significant contribution to the law reform that was eventually won in both Queensland and South Australia. Further, as material artefacts of family life that endure in the online contexts of Rainbow Family Tree and are circulated on the SHine SA What’s Your Story? DVD they also believe their stories play a role in slowly shifting social understandings of family.

**Manipulated images**

Some storytellers manipulate family photographs in order to protect the privacy of family members. Similarly, people who feel that their identity is socially maligned are also very careful about their public presentation and distribution of self. In the following, we offer two examples of how storytellers manipulate personal photos in order to attain what we call ‘pseudonymity’.

In *Blue for Boys? Pink for Girls?*, Molly and Brendan (pseudonyms chosen by the storytellers) describe their journey as parents: from the birth of their baby boy to the gradual growth and assertion of her female identity. The story starts with the sound of a heart beating and a stock image of blue and pink pencils hovering over a noughts and crosses (also known as tic-tac-toe) grid. Some of the squares are already filled in with gender symbols, rendered in the appropriate colour, blue for boys and pink for girls. Molly and Brendan were aware that their daughter, upon arriving at adulthood as a legally affirmed woman, might not wish to acknowledge her transsexual origins. They had also heard of family court judges (who are responsible for approving the hormone interventions that may be required as the child approaches adolescence) criticizing parents who failed to adequately consider the child’s best interest by publicly acknowledging their child’s ‘predicament’. They were told of an American legal case in which a mother was sued by a divorced former spouse for exposing the child to the risk of publicly being identified as transsexual. Despite being aware of the risks, Molly and Brendan felt, to some degree, it was their responsibility as everyday activists to make some kind of contribution; to help catalyse social change that might eventually benefit their daughter.
Our reason for telling this story was to raise awareness of the predicament of transsexualism (often referred to as ‘transgender’) in children, whilst honouring our brave and unique little girl. However, we were also concerned about how she would feel about the story as a teenager and adult … At risk of exposing our daughter’s identity and taking away her right to privacy, we decided to conceal pictures and any possible connection to her. This became a technical and creative challenge in our storytelling process that in a way hampered us from truly celebrating our daughter, free from shame and secrecy… (storyteller statement, Molly and Brendan, 2009)

The storytellers, as a family and in conversation with a wider community (including their lawyer), worked through a series of creative textual strategies with which to conceal the child’s identity. They initially used baby photos, or over-the-shoulder or wide shots, but eventually decided to blur all images of the child. Not being expert in photo editing software, this required the support of a workshop facilitator and a technically complex and extenuated exchanging of images. A family friend re-recorded their carefully worded script in order to avoid the mother’s voice being identified. Despite this, tremors in the friend’s voiceover make it clear that she has affinity with the family and that the child’s exploration was not an easy ride: ‘We heard you pray, asking the angels to turn you into a girl … but we kept on telling you that you were a boy. We were wrong … we just didn’t understand…’ Throughout the process of creating their story, Molly swapped insights and ideas with other digital storytellers on the Rainbow Family Tree website, an experience that enabled her and her partner to feel supported and empowered as parents. This engagement also represents their agency and ownership over their role as storytellers. Additionally, the material processes of manipulating audio and visual aspects afford increased digital literacy that further enables digital citizenship.

In My Secret Story, Frank shares the Catholic origins of his deeply internalized homophobia. His description of a drunken encounter with his ex resonates with many audience members; only the consequences for Frank were exceptionally dramatic – he became HIV-positive. Frank describes the process of making a digital story:

Digital storytelling has been very challenging for me, especially because I chose to tell one of the stories that, if I could turn back time, I would change. The story of how I became HIV-positive and the headspace I was in at the time. I live in the countryside and while open about being gay, I keep my HIV status to myself. I was torn between using personal photos or representative images, being out and proud of where I am now, but not wanting to risk being labelled by a disease and ultimately a mistake. So when I somewhat de-identified the film, I initially felt weak yet relieved. (storyteller statement, Frank, 2011)

The revelations that Frank makes, being both sexually explicit and critiquing personal and dark mental states, would be construed by most as ‘private’. Conversely, he uses creative and pragmatic strategies to maintain privacy so that he can share his story publicly. Photographs are creatively obscured with a black box titled ‘Me’ and combinations of zooms and filters are used to abstract home video footage and to represent ‘disturbed’ mental states. Frank did not have the time or desire to learn to edit himself, so he worked closely with an editor/facilitator, performing the role of director. There are no revealing ‘thank-yous’ in the credits and even the personal copyright attribution was omitted.
Frank describes feeling a little shamed by choosing to conceal his identity but was pragmatic in pointing out that his future economic well-being was dependent on concealing his HIV status from his employers and local community. In any case, it can be argued that, by de-identifying his story, he was able to give a detailed account of the extremely private emotional landscape that he believes contributed to his sero-conversion. This description of anxiety, ambivalence and mental unrest is directly pertinent to current public health agendas and addresses with great poignancy an issue that may otherwise only be articulated as a bullet point in an HIV/AIDS policy document. Further, the material co-creative production process afforded a slight distance from his story (while nevertheless maintaining creative ownership) that allowed Frank to look back on the story as ‘nicely wrapped in a box … organized, explored and honest … in a way [it] has liberated that part of my brain’ (Frank, email correspondence, 2012).

In these examples, storytellers manipulate their domestic images in order to achieve pseudonymity that affords expression of profoundly personal, even private, insights in public. Greater ownership over self-representation, in some cases explored through material collaborations, counters social ostracism and shame.

Stock images

Many storytellers, including those already described, supplement their family photos with stock images that they source through various online archives like Google Images and stock.xchng. All storytellers in these case studies were asked to seek permission both from people represented in photos and owners of the photos themselves. While, in most cases, this means using only copyright-free images or acknowledging them appropriately, it was quite difficult to determine the chain of title for some photos because they were already in wide online circulation without attribution. The choice to use stock images is often a pragmatic decision resulting from limited time or in some cases lack of confidence in their own creative capacities. However, stock images can also be used as substitutes for personal photos in order to achieve pseudonymity.

Mahdi made a story called *Islam and Me* entirely with stock images. The narration points out that ‘gay men are still being persecuted or even killed, shunned by family and friends, in many Muslim countries’ and Mahdi uses a dramatic image of a hangman’s noose framing a stark desert environment. As a gay Muslim immigrant with family still in Malaysia, it was easy to assume that Mahdi used stock images in order to conceal his identity and protect family and friends. However, this was at odds with his choice to use his real name and an identifiable personal photograph on his *Rainbow Family Tree* member page. In a later interview, Mahdi revealed that his motivations were influenced by ‘being a bit shy … or a bit vain!’ He also did not have many photos of his childhood and certainly none that conjured the kind of isolation he had felt (Figure 2). Instead, he substituted a stock photo of a sweet young boy standing against a brick wall (Figure 3), looking longingly into the space on the right hand side of frame. Mahdi chose to hold this shot, slowly zooming in on the boy for nearly 20 seconds (much longer than any others in the story) as he takes on the voice of his religious teacher: ‘Being gay is a sin … no argument! Everything in Islam is black and white! You will be killed and burned in hell!’ Mahdi’s voice returns to his own soft intonations as he acknowledges: ‘At ten years old,
his words scarred me … left me feeling lonely, and really afraid.’ Despite the lack of personal photos Mahdi’s emotionally wrought recollection and material reconstruction resonate deeply with audiences. His careful selection of assorted images in the public domain, as opposed to his own, reflect a precise re-membering (Myerhoff, 1982) and speaking back to the powerful figures of his childhood (Foucault, 2001).

**Artistic abstractions**

Some storytellers use their own artwork and/or special commissions in their digital stories, both for aesthetic and political purpose. Kate, a young woman who grew up with two dads and a mum, uses re-created kids’ drawings (Figure 4) of home to evoke her family. Interestingly, she had difficulty drawing these with what she regarded with authentic

![Stock photo of depressed man.](Image)

**Figure 2.** Stock photo of depressed man.
naivety and she asked a child who had dropped into the workshop for lunch to draw a version of Kate’s family. Kate laughed afterwards, ‘I never would have thought of labelling them with ‘Dad 1’ and ‘Dad 2’, or the ‘bring lollies’ thing … that’s awesome!’

**Figure 3.** Stock photo of lonely child.

**Figure 4.** Re-created kid’s drawing in ‘That’s So Gay’. Reproduced with permission.
Meanwhile, *I am Sarah* is illustrated by Sarah with hand-drawn images of a slightly cartoonish pair of caterpillars, one brown and plain, the other attractive and with long eyelashes. The narration starts with, ‘I was different; not how other people wanted me to be … my body alien to my inner self’, and becomes increasingly poetic and slightly abstract. As the caterpillars become chrysalises we hear, ‘fear cannot deny truth any longer, nor hold sway … all that was wrong has finally become right.’ Finally, we see first one beautiful butterfly, then a flock (Figure 5) accompanied by, ‘Into such a diverse world I am not unique … different perhaps, depending upon your perspective … but I know who I am.’ Much of Sarah’s story comments implicitly on gender norms as measured by physical representations of beauty. However, by using representative images of caterpillars and butterflies, she both maintains her privacy (through not using before and after-transition shots or images that might identify place, family or friends) and avoids affirming the very gender stereotypes she wishes to deconstruct. To the untrained eye, butterflies and caterpillars are without gender or social roles. The issue of visibility and invisibility is also apparent in Sarah’s image choices. She describes herself as a private person, and in a perfect world she would choose to ‘blend in’. She also recognizes this impulse in other M2F (male-to-female) friends.

The majority of girls that I see, while they may not be as reclusive … as socially isolated as me, by choice, um … they tend to want to be invisible. Now, as I am, I can’t be invisible, unfortunately. Not without, um [makes noise], a road closure, or a scaffold, and a building team, reconstruction papers, and certificates, whatever. I joke about it. (interview with Sarah, 2010)

Towards the end of the story, Sarah breaks with the visual style she has established by showing herself in a head and shoulders photograph, dressed and beautifully made up,
half smiling against a neutral background. The narration states: ‘I am Sarah, not part of a clique.’ Sarah reflects upon the inclusion of this photograph:

I changed my mind on that about ten times I think … ‘cause I’m not photogenic. I never have been. The camera does not like me. I always look about 500 years older … The idea was to get people to see that I’m not comfortable with being upfront and in your face and exploring my entire life history in open, you know? But what putting that photo at the end does, is it shows that people can get past that. And I hope that with people who want to transition, or people who are in transition and struggling, I’m hoping that that final frame takes them by surprise, and they go, ‘Oh, that’s what you look like!’ That final image just validates the message and says, ‘Look, here I am. Um, I’d rather not be here. But here I am. So if I can do it, why can’t you?’ (interview with Sarah, 2010)

Sarah’s decision to maintain a sense of privacy through poetic yet material abstraction while taking a visible stand in support of other trans people treads a fine line typical of the queer everyday activist.

Re-enactments

Some storytellers choose to re-create events or memories through re-enactments, documented with stills and, in some cases, moving images. While digital video is not traditionally used in digital stories (it is much more difficult for the non-professional media-maker to import, select and edit), in some initiatives there is scope for co-creative collaborations with editors (as was the case in the Positive Stories initiative).

Bloody Brenda! features an unconventional digital storytelling production pathway, enabled by the extended workshop process and the substantial creative involvement of facilitators. Brian was plagued by a series of minor and major illnesses that thwarted his attendance at several scheduled workshops. He was also confronted with the problem of how to realize an event – a violent street bashing – for which he had no photographs. One of the workshop facilitators offered to help Brian video a re-enactment. As the original occasion involved numerous friends, fancy dress and drag, a car, a taxi, passers-by and took place at night, this proved to be quite a substantial logistical undertaking, something Brian was able to pour his creative energies into in lieu of greater involvement in the editing process. The re-enactment proved empowering in an unexpected fashion. Brian cast several of the people who had been at the original attack, and the energy and enthusiasm everybody put into re-living the event somehow dissipated the pain and shock that had been lingering ever since. The re-enactment helped reinscribe the original encounter with new memories. The end product, in its material and shareable digital form, addresses and counters the violence, giving him and his friends a voice, in a way that was not possible in the first instance.

Conclusion

Personal photographs – especially in the ways they have been collected, curated and displayed, first in the home and later online – have long been resources for the construction and sharing of life narratives. This social function of personal photography has been
amplified exponentially with the advent of online photosharing and internet-based social networking, with implications for the idea of cultural citizenship and the privatization of the public sphere. In the digital storytelling movement, too, and especially since the emergence of online distribution and social media, the practices around personal images have a politics that extends beyond the individual and his or her domestic context. The desire for a degree of privacy (and correlated safety) in public space calls for manipulations, abstractions, substitutions and re-enactments of personal photographs and creative self-representation. In their media practices, queer activist digital storytellers consciously negotiate the tensions observed by Hogan (2010) and Van Dijck (2008) – tensions between the desire to take advantage of digital affordances in the service of these political goals, while managing areas of personal risk that can also have ramifications for friends and family. These tensions are played out and negotiated at the most granular levels of production and distribution; in the material choices the storytellers make as they select, arrange, edit and manipulate personal images that are combined into relatively stable texts; and in the material decisions they make in sharing these stories with intimate and unknown, as well as sympathetic, indifferent or hostile publics. By documenting and sharing non-normative identities, queer digital storytellers enact a version of Butler’s performativity (1990), re-inscribing public spaces with new ways of understanding identity; and queering the ‘family gaze’ associated with domestic photography in modernity (Haldrup and Larsen, 2003). Further, the complex and sometimes contradictory ways in which storytellers frame memories and identities in their digital stories on one level and then provide further context as they share them (for example, in personal member pages and in descriptive text that accompanies stories) provide enduring digital artefacts and archives replete with evocative and constitutive socio-cultural nuance that is greater than the sum of its parts. They articulate, in material form for networked publics, the kind of future they would like to be a part of. Meanwhile, intrinsic tensions between privacy and publicness provoke the conscious development of critical and material literacies around the life of the personal image in the digital age.

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