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Collaborative Documentary Photo Projects: from Techno-utopia to Imagined Community

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Karine Chambeft-Kay

- 1 Many experiments across the media and visual worlds have embraced social networks and collaborative tools and explored their artistic, social and political potential. This article studies three photographic projects, *The Polling Place Photo Project*, *Mapping Main Street* (United States, 2008 and 2009) and Simon Roberts's *Election Project* (Great Britain, 2010), which operated with similar goals and modes—to re-engage the public and citizens by committing them to building an online archive of images.
- 2 The term “collaborative documentary” has been used for such projects to encapsulate the new modes in which photographs are produced, displayed and browsed by means of collaborative digital tools (Gye, 2011, Rose, 2012). Studying the features of the three projects, and comparing the different material options taken by their designers should provide an insight into the collaborative mode and the way it transforms the traditional documentary approach. By contrast with the notion of a documentary “style”, the phrase “collaborative documentary” lays the emphasis on photography as a social practice. It is as if “documentary” as a mere aesthetic category had become insufficient, if not irrelevant. The shift in focus is patent in recent historiographical and theoretical writings. In Britain, it is epitomized by the works of Elizabeth Edwards on the English survey movements and how they both reflected and shaped 19th century historical thought and collective identity (Edwards, 2012). Similarly, the publication of *The Pivot of the World: Photography and Its Nation* (Stimson, 2006) and *The Civil Contract of Photography* (Azoulay, 2008) signalled a new theoretical orientation towards the politics of photography. More recently, some artists and critics have been using the term “new documentalism” to shed new light onto the political and social function of the documentary and especially on its relationship with democracy (Ribalta, 2012).

- 3 In line with this, the processes involved in *The Polling Place Photo Project*, *Mapping Main Street* and Simon Roberts's *Election Project* may be analysed not just as new material practices but also as new documentary strategies: by probing the links between photography and democracy, they are experiments in the micro-politics of photography.

Presentation of the Three Collaborative Projects

- 4 *The Polling Place Photo Project* appealed to the public in the context of the 2008 United States presidential election. It had been launched in 2006 before the mid-terms elections on the initiative of William Drenttel from the Winterhouse Institute, a foundation which undertakes non-profit-making actions in the fields of design education, and social and political projects. For the 2008 presidential election, the project amplified as it was supported by the *New York Times*. Participants were asked to post photographs they had taken on Election Day and to provide details about the material conditions of their vote by answering a questionnaire.¹ Here is how the project is described on its homepage: "Photographs of polling places, and the information that accompanies them, is a visual record of how voting happens in America: where it occurs, what the process looks like, how people act, and, ultimately, how the voting experience can be designed to be easier, less confusing and more rewarding." Eventually, 5,941 photos were taken in the fifty states. Those are now accessible through the *Polling Place Photo Project* website with a navigation system which allows users to look up images by means of key words, names of places or any information supplied by contributors.²
- 5 *Mapping Main Street* was designed in 2009 by two Harvard PhD students, Jesse Shapins, James Burns and media artist Kara Oehler.³ It was sponsored by several media institutions—the Association of Independents in Radio, National Public Radio and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting—and supported by the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University. A multimedia platform invites users to upload photographs, videos, and sounds recorded on any street named Main Street in the United States. The project's homepage reads: "The goal is to document every street named Main in the country by going to each of these over 10,466 places, taking a photo, recording a video or writing a brief story." Thus the approach is explicitly documentary, or even topographical. It consists in recording, reporting, and contributing to a new kind of map: a citizen-made visual map. Technically, the site uses Flickr as an image hosting device. Users only need a Flickr account to upload their photographs. At the time of writing, 8970 photos have been posted by 486 different people documenting 834 different Main Streets in the United States. The photos can be viewed on the Mapping Main Street website. They are displayed as slide shows which tap the Flickr image bank. The viewing routes are automatically generated by an algorithm so that, starting from the town they requested, the viewers are taken on an apparently random trip to other Main Streets in other towns of the United States. Thematic routes can also be followed, based on the key words tagged to the photos by contributors: "sign", "people", "parade", "field", "abandoned", "bar" for example. The search by key word, however, is not available to the users on the website—it is possible only by directly browsing the Flickr base. Consequently, the website does not require

active exploration as the algorithmically-generated slideshow provides a narrative for the viewers.

Screen Shot of *Mapping Main Street* website, 2012

- 6 In Britain, Simon Roberts, an independent photographer, has repeatedly integrated collaborative practices into his own work. For his 2008 project called *We English*, the photographer experimented with participation of the public. As he went on a road trip around England, he invited people to follow his route on a blog and to suggest emblematically “English” locations and events for him to shoot. For his *Election Project*, Simon Roberts took the experiment one step further. In the context of the 2010 United-Kingdom General Election, he was commissioned by the House of Commons Speaker’s Advisory Committee to be the Official Election Artist⁴. Thus he took to the road again to photograph candidates in their constituencies during the campaign. Using a 5x4” plate camera, he chose to focus on moments when politicians were canvassing and meeting their constituents. This time, collaboration with the public consisted in asking people to submit their own photographs of the campaign. 1696 photos were contributed, and exhibited in an online gallery on the project’s website. Some were selected to make up a 15-metre installation which was shown in Westminster along with Simon Roberts’ own 25 prints. A limited edition newspaper was printed, publishing all twenty-five of Simon Roberts’s photographs alongside a selection of the public gallery.

View of the installation "The Election Project, Public Gallery" with the public's photographs in Portcullis House, Westminster, 2010

© Simon Roberts, 2010 / Reproduced courtesy of the Speaker's Advisory Committee on Works of Art

Political Purpose

- 7 Beyond technical aspects, *The Polling Place Photo Project*, *Mapping Main Street* and Simon Roberts's *Election Project* share a common feature: they were all designed in an electoral context. *The Polling Place Photo Project* was an openly political undertaking. First, the promotion of voter participation was an explicit goal. Indeed, voter turnout in the United States Presidential Elections had been at a low 50.3% in 2000, before rising to 55.7% in 2004.⁵ The project was meant to demystify the voting process in the hope that intimidated voters might turn out in the 2008 presidential election. Moreover, the project was captioned to be "an experiment in citizen journalism". Contributing was not just a form of amateur photojournalism, it was an act of citizenship. It was hoped that photos might bear witness to flaws in the voting system, which could be remedied for future elections. That is why many contributors submitted pictures of obsolete lever machines and of scenes of confusion.

Screen shot of The Polling Place Photo Project, 2012

- 8 It turned out that Obama's victory was not a narrow one, but one may well imagine that, had it been otherwise, such pictures might have served in disputes and calls for recounts.⁶ Ironically, they might have served on two accounts: as proof of irregularities but also as irregularities in themselves, because as some lawyers have pointed out, taking photos in polling station is actually forbidden in some states. At any rate, what was involved was a form of Do-It-Yourself journalism, and beyond that, "DIY citizenship", to use Mandy Rose's phrase (2011).
- 9 *Mapping Main Street*, though not explicitly committed to re-enchanting politics or democracy, pursued parallel goals. The project was inspired by the repeated use of "Main Street" as a foil to "Wall Street" in speeches delivered during the 2008 presidential campaign. For instance, Barack Obama used the term in the first presidential debate, on 26 September 2008:

You know, we are at a defining moment in our history. Our nation is involved in two wars, and we are going through the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression. And although we've heard a lot about Wall Street, those of you on Main Street, I think, have been struggling for a while, and you recognize that this could have an impact on all sectors of the economy.
- 10 The phrase "Main Street" was often used in the media following the 2008 credit crunch, as a symbolic reference to middle class Americans, ordinary people one can easily identify with. *Mapping Main Street* was meant as a response to the *cliché*. "When politicians and the media mention Main Street, they evoke one people and one place. But there are over 10,466 streets named Main in the United States. There's a Main Street in San Luis, Arizona that dead-ends right into the Mexican border. The Main Street in Melvindale, Michigan runs through a trailer park in the shadows of Ford's River Rouge plant, once the largest factory in the world. Main Street is small town and urban centre; it is the thriving business district and the prostitution stroll", reads the project's homepage. Thus, the project's designers meant to bring participants to question the catchall phrase of "Main Street", to reconsider "accepted turns of phrases and political mythologies" (Burns and Shapins, Interview by Anna Kim, 2009). It was hoped that by engaging in a documentary process, people would look at their

environment with new eyes and gain an awareness of the complexity of “Main Streets”, and perhaps of issues of town-planning and allocation of resources. In other words, the purpose was to re-engage people with their environment, and by and large, to bring citizens to question political discourse. As participants were instructed to “go out, look around and contribute to this re-mapping of the US”, there was also a call for more communication, more encounters: it is worth noting that contributors could post not only pictures but also video interviews with people they had met on Main Streets. “The project isn’t just about geographical relationships, or the relationships that people have to their streets; it is also about the relational connections between people.” (Ibid.) Hence, the expected outcome of this collaborative documentary project was a bridging effect, a form of mediation and a renewed political conscience.

- 11 As for Simon Robert’s *Election project*, it was conducted during the 2010 General Elections in Great-Britain. There is no doubt that the collaborative dimension of the project was a plus in Roberts’s nomination as Official Election Artist, at a time when the British Parliament had hardly recovered from the expenses scandal and was looking for a means to reach out to a disenchanted public. In 2009, the *Daily Telegraph* had revealed both illegal and extravagant spending by MPs, causing outrage in Britain and worsening the general loss of confidence in politics. There was also great concern in Great Britain over the declining voter turnout since the 2000s (around 60%, down from 70% in the 80s and 90s). As voters grew disillusioned, all possible means, and particularly social networks like Twitter, were seen as a panacea for the declining voter turnout. Thus at the start of the project, the Parliament website was keen to announce that an “official election artist want[ed] voters to get involved” (British Parliament, 12 April 2010). Works of Art Committee Chairman Hugo Swire commented that “getting the public involved in the project also emphasise[d] the democratic process Simon [was] documenting.” (National Media Museum, 01 April 2010) Simon Roberts however, remained cautious on the outcome of the collaborative leg of his project. His own photographs were to be the core of the project. In line with his previous artistic work on English landscape (Roberts, 2009), he was mostly “interested in seeking out the political theatre that temporarily transforms our urban and rural landscape during the period of electioneering.”
- 12 The *Polling Place Photo Project*, *Mapping Main Street* and Simon Roberts’ *Election Project* all pursued political goals. Although they embraced the new material practices brought by digital photography and social networks, the three projects were definitely issue-driven rather than technology-driven. In this respect, the different modes of collection and display of photographs chosen by the projects’ designers may be analysed as strategies towards their goals. Those strategies must be further investigated, especially in the way they alter the classic definition of the documentary.

Strategies

The Authority of Amateurs and the Enduring Life of Documentary Realism

- 13 One of the common features of the three projects is that they appealed to a multiplicity of contributors, in fact a crowd of spontaneous participants, in order to build up a collective archive on a given subject. All projects were launched by professionals or

professionals in the making. Hence *Mapping Main Street* was designed by Harvard students specializing in various fields ranging from media to statistics. None of them was a professional photographer. The project, however, received strong institutional support, especially from NPR, which was instrumental not only in funding the platform but also in broadcasting features related to the project, and thus mobilizing participants.⁷ *The Polling Place Photo Project*, originally launched by a non-profit-making organization in 2006, was co-opted in 2008 by the *New York Times*. As for Simon Roberts, he had been established as a professional photographer for a few years when he started *The Election Project*. Conversely, the contributors to the three projects could be just anybody. Their real names—when available—or their FlickrR usernames are of little help to identify them as amateur or professional photographers. The technical quality of the snapshots that were submitted cannot be a criterion either, as high performance cameras are more and more affordable. From this perspective, one may well ask why professionals and institutions would appeal to the wo/man in the street to collaborate on their documenting enterprise. Why would they intentionally disrupt lengthily acquired professional techniques by bringing in potentially—though not necessarily—substandard productions?

- 14 Amateur contributors are valued precisely because they are the people “in the street”. They are assumed to know better than assigned professional photographers because they have first-hand experience of places and events. Moreover, their productions are immediate, in that they dispense with any intermediary and that they are available on the spot for publication. In the history of photojournalism, 9/11 was the watershed event in terms of news coverage by amateur photographers. The 2002 exhibition entitled “Here is New York. A Democracy of Photographs” acknowledged this by juxtaposing images taken both by professionals and by amateurs: “Anyone and everyone who had taken pictures relating to the tragedy was invited to submit their images to the gallery, where they were digitally scanned, printed and displayed on the walls alongside the work of top photojournalists.” By allowing disintermediation, collaborative platforms and image sharing devices foreground the legitimacy and authority of amateur photographers.
- 15 In the case of *The Polling Station Project*, amateurs documented their own voting experiences by taking pictures of their own polling stations. They were asked to provide information along with the pictures, such as the kind of polling station they used or the number of people there was in the line, so that the personal circumstances of their vote were also recorded. The intertwining of their personal stories with that of a public place and national event gives documentary weight to their pictures. In *The Election Project*, participants were expected to document their own experience of the campaign in their constituencies. Accordingly, the photos found in the public gallery include snapshots of people posing with their favourite candidates. There are also quite a few photos of TV sets reporting the campaign or the results. Those seem to have frozen the media frenzy of the elections period and suggest the viewer’s excitement at witnessing historic moments. One reverse angle shot shows a couple watching TV on election night in their living-room and looking rather bored. Here amateur participants have a direct, personal and perhaps emotional relation to a place or moment, and their contributions add documentary value to the representation of it.
- 16 *Mapping Main Street* is also a place-centred documentary project, albeit with 10,846 places to document. A report published by the AIR commented that the project relied

on “the inherent assumption that those individuals—living in this case on or near Main Street—are considered authoritative sources by virtue of their personal and community experiences.”⁸ The relationship between people and their Main Street is also emphasized on the project’s home page. Main Street “is the places where we live, the places where we work, and sometimes, it is the places we have abandoned.” A closer inspection of the image bank that can be accessed via Flickr reveals, however, that this sense of the authentic local gaze may sometimes be more an assumption than a reality. Indeed, a quarter of the 8970 photos uploaded were produced by Jesse Shapins and Kara Oehler, designers of the project as they were driving 12,000 km around the United States. In that case, it might be said that a tourist gaze is involved rather than a local gaze. This underlines that documentary legitimacy may sometimes result from rhetoric rather than from a real situation. Hence, the authority of the local amateurs and the impact of their photos might be seen as discursive effects. John Tagg showed this when he analysed the power of American documentary photography of the Great Depression era as the result of the New Deal political narrative (Tagg, 2009). In line with this, the operating modes chosen by the designers of the three projects and the discourses that are produced about them may be construed as strategies towards the identified political goal.

- 17 Central to this assertion of amateur authority is the re-assertion of the documentary in photography: interestingly, two decades after the advent of digital photography, one must admit that the indexical quality of photography has survived surprisingly well. As some have pointed out, the expected dissolution of the documentary into the digital has not happened (Gunthert, 2007). News photo coverage still commands the same belief as before. It is even accepted that some images may be slightly modified without losing their informative value. Thus, despite the advent of digital tools, photography is still used and perceived by most as a form of recording. If anything, the massive spread of digital cameras now included in mobile phones has reinforced such uses and perception⁹.

Crowdsourcing and Creativity

- 18 Besides trusting local amateurs with field investigation, collaborative projects are supposed to tap new sources of creativity and to achieve greater originality than commissioned work. As Simon Roberts put it, “utilizing photographs taken by the public, uploaded from digital cameras or transmitted via mobile phones, will create an alternative photographic vision alongside [his] own captured via the more traditional means of [his] plate camera, and will add a collaborative and democratic dimension to the overall work. They will also help to provide an antidote to the more stage-managed photographs increasingly seen from the campaign trail.” (British Parliament, 2010) Hence, it is hoped that participants provide an “alternative”, perhaps fresher vision than that of mainstream photographers. Their pictures can act as a counterpoint to professional photography which may be subject to the constraints of specific assignments and verge on illustration work rather than true photographic report.
- 19 From that angle, collaborative projects might be viewed as forms of crowdsourcing, or *crowdsourced documentary*. The concept of crowdsourcing, first defined by Jeff Howe in 2006 (Howe, 2006), has exerted wide appeal in a number of fields ranging from media studies to organizational management or research and development. On his dedicated

blog, Howe provides the following definition: “Crowdsourcing is the act of taking a job traditionally performed by a designated agent (usually an employee) and outsourcing it to an undefined, generally large group of people in the form of an open call.” In other words, crowdsourcing is a means to tap a crowd of potential subcontractors or contributors by way of an open contest. According to Howe, this practice is increasingly valued by businesses and the media because, as a form of outsourcing, it enables cheaper production. Moreover, crowdsourcing is presented as a revolution in the creative process because it helps companies to reach out to lone geniuses across the world to solve their problems. It is argued that because those isolated individuals operate away from institutions and sometimes from very different fields of specialization, they can come up with innovative solutions that escape the grasp of more focused research and development units.

- 20 In many ways, collaborative photographic projects rely on similar hopes. Crowdsourced documentary archives are expected to provide alternative viewpoints to those of assigned photographers and mainstream media. This may be a clue to understanding why a prominent American newspaper was involved in one of the projects. Two years after the launching of *The Polling Place Photo Project*, *The New-York Times* co-opted the website, which was then re-named “the *New York Times* Polling Place Photo Project”. It is beyond the scope of this study to enquire into the financial and legal aspects of such co-opting, namely the copyright terms and legal status of amateur contributions to a professional medium. However, it is clear that one motive of *The New York Times*, besides promoting democratic elections, was to experiment new ways of engaging their readers at a time when the printed press had started its decline. The experiment would show whether publishing amateur contributions along with professional content would attract more traffic to *The New York Times* website. This was a most pressing issue since the news site was now competing with the *Huffington Post*¹⁰ launched in 2005.
- 21 The parallel with crowdsourcing shows that the collaborative mode somewhat ironically seeks and values individual creativity. In other words, it re-asserts the authorial quality in photographs. This may appear to stand in contradiction with our previous conclusion that amateur participation and disintermediation re-assert the indexical quality of photography albeit in the digital era. As a matter of fact, this apparent contradiction has been the backbone of the historiography of photography since its beginnings. This dual nature has been at the core of the “idea of photography” ever since its birth (Brunet, 2000). It may be argued, however, that collaborative documentary practices just ignore this ontological paradox. In embracing both indexical and authorial features, they merely illustrate or register the shift in the definition of documentary that was initiated by postmodern theory¹¹. It is almost as if the authorial/documentary chiasm had become secondary, if not irrelevant, thus allowing photography to find a new lease of life and open up onto new micro-politics (Ribalta, 2010).

Multiplicity and Overall Agency

- 22 The third and most prominent feature of collaborative documentary projects is multiplicity. For obvious reasons of scale, none of the projects could have been conducted by a single photographer; but whatever the scale, a multiplicity of contributors was required as the strategy was to multiply viewpoints. Because truth is

complex, the more viewpoints, the better. Jesse Shapins, one of the initiators of *Mapping Main Street*, highlighted this aspect:

In the context of documentary media, there is the significance, the importance, of being able to bring together multiple perspectives that de-stabilize a sense of a unitary, singular truth. There is something about collaborative and participatory processes specifically connected to documentary that foreground that dimension. I think that part of what collaborative participatory media means in the context of news making is to point out that this is what happened from one perspective, and that this is what happened from another perspective. I mean something definitely happened, it's not to sort of completely relativize—there are truths that exist in the world—but I think it is to open up the possibility for having many different vantage points that can possibly help us get to different forms of understanding truth in the process. (OEHLER and SHAPINS, Interview by Mandy Rose, undated)

- 23 The same interest in multiple viewpoints was expressed by Simon Roberts when he launched *The Election Project*: “I am today appealing to the public to please keep sending their images in! By documenting local political experiences, you will be contributing to an archive of photographs that capture the complexity of Britain’s political landscape in 2010.” (British Parliament, 12 April 2010) Multiple viewpoints are assumed to guarantee more comprehensiveness and more openness in the representation of reality, in other words, greater independence from ready-made discourse or turns of phrase like “Main Street”. Lisa Gye analyses collaborative documentary projects as attempts to “liberate documentary and documentary viewers from what Tagg (2009) describes as documentary realism’s tendency ‘to incorporate its targeted audience in an identification with the imaginary coherence of its system—an identification that enacts and secures a particular regime of truth, of subjectivity, and of sense, closing down the openness and disputability of reality.’” (Tagg, 2009 quoted by Gye, 2011)
- 24 What makes collaborative projects relevant, on the other hand, is the aggregation of those multiple viewpoints, through collective exhibition or through the navigation process. Indeed, images make extra sense as they are combined together in networks.¹² This raises the question of the overall agency in those networks. The collective display of pictures is indeed paramount to *The Polling Place Photo Project*, *Mapping Main Street* and Simon Roberts’s *Election Project*, but the three projects differ in their methods. Simon Roberts assembled the public’s photographs in an online gallery and an installation. He acted as a curator for the pictures.

I wouldn’t call myself a collaborative artist. In some ways, it’s an oxymoron, if you’re a documentarian, you’re documenting a subject, but if it’s collaborative and other people are documenting it, you are really a curator rather than [an artist]. So for example, for the *Election Project*, I’d say the primary result of that was the 25 prints they have in the archive of the [Election Art Commission], but alongside that, there are the images of the public too, which is a dialogue with mine.” (Simon Roberts, 07 July 2012)
- 25 Conversely, the *Polling Place Photo Project* is navigated as a mere data bank. By entering a place name or key words in the provided engine, each user follows their own path. However, the range of possible words is limited and so are the possible networks between different photographs. They are pre-determined by the set of questions that the contributors had to answer. Consequently, the participation of the public in the overall agency of the project and the networks of images is rather limited.

- 26 Finally, *Mapping Main Street* adopts a different approach. It uses an algorithm to generate relations between pictures, a process which Jesse Shapins terms “algorithmic curation”:

some type of “interesting-ness” system or some means through which the most interesting material that is produced by both professionals as well as by citizens is brought together or foregrounded, and that the juxtapositions that are fostered are also the ones that are interesting. I think what we wanted to try to do with *Mapping Main Street* was make it possible also for a project to not be a place where you go and, suddenly, you have this gigantic database and as a visitor have to make 10,000 choices about how you want to go into that system. We very intentionally make it possible for you to arrive on this site and click once and then you will be in a stream of media that hopefully provides a fairly interesting narrative and experience about the topic of Main Street across the country. And if you want to start following different patterns and search and follow different tags you can do that, but I think that part of what we are interested in from the user-experience perspective is making it possible to have a more immersive viewing and in that sense actually often more passive viewing experience—where you can almost fall into and let something unfold. (Oehler and Shapins, Interview by Mandy Rose, undated)

- 27 Here, the relations between pictures are partly created by the machine, based on the producers’ intentions or sense of “interestingness”.
- 28 Thus in all three projects, there is an ambiguity in terms of agency: the individual agencies involved in the production of photographs are faded out and give way to an overall agency which is not collaboratively elaborated. When an artist-curator, an institution, or an algorithm selects the pictures or produces the relationships between images, the collaborative reaches its limits. The photographs may well have been produced by a crowd of people, but their modes of display have not. This leads us to draw a structural parallel with the democratic process. Indeed, when they elect representatives, individuals relinquish self-representation to allow for a collective representation. This is the paradox of representative democracy, and it is also found in the collaborative documentary process.

Is the Medium the Message? The Pitfalls of Techno-utopia

- 29 Studying the strategies of the *Mapping Main Street*, *The Polling Place Photo Project* and Simon Roberts’s *Election project* shows a consistency between their political purpose and the features of collaborative documentary. As the projects’ common purpose was to enhance citizenship and democracy, to foster involvement and community, their strategies may be analysed as photographic emulations of the democratic process. Everyone has an equal right to participate or to compete for the public’s attention. Each viewpoint is equally valued or equally legitimate, in a process that can be paralleled with universal suffrage: the crowd of contributors, the *demos*, is the source of representation in collaborative or participatory projects just as the people are the source of power in a democracy. In other words, there is an apparent congruence between the message and the medium, and we have seen that the narratives and the strategies at work in the projects construct and promote this.
- 30 Such narratives or strategies must nonetheless be questioned. They seem to assume that the use of democratic modes of collaboration might enhance democracy almost

regardless of the content of pictures. This tendency to focus on technology and media and the belief that they affect social organization is encapsulated in Marshall McLuhan's much quoted aphorism: "The medium is the message" (Mc Luhan, 1964). The phrase was used by McLuhan as he took the example of a light bulb, not traditionally considered as a medium because it contains no information and yet inevitably transforms people's lives and behaviour: "Whether the light is being used for brain surgery or night baseball is a matter of indifference. (...) It could be argued that these activities are in some way the 'content' of the electric light, since they could not exist without the electric light. This fact merely underlines the point that 'the medium is the message' because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action." (McLuhan, 1964, 7) McLuhan also stresses that "a light bulb creates an environment by its mere presence". In this regard, collaborative platforms have sometimes been seen as the new light bulbs, creating new spaces for human action and transforming it in the process. Similarly, social networks have raised hopes that society will become more open and more participatory. As far as photography is concerned, collaborative tools have apparently opened up new prospects. They could be a means to renew the social function of the documentary.

- 31 It is worth asking, however, if such hopes are not a case of techno-utopianism or *social media fetishism*: the result of some over-optimistic belief in the power of technology to transform the social and political environment. There is indeed a risk that the collaborative dimension of collaborative documentary projects might be overemphasized by the designers, contributors, public, and academics, at the expense of content. Taking for granted the democratic effect of the collaborative process, they may eventually consider the collaborative for its own sake. It is precisely on such grounds that McLuhan's theory was criticized. As Raymond Williams put it, McLuhan's theory articulated a form of "technological determinism". By placing the emphasis on technology, it overlooked the cultural content of the media and the importance of the historical and social context.¹³ Thus, as they construct meaning through a collaborative process, *Mapping Main Street*, *The Polling Place Photo Project* and to a certain extent, Simon Roberts's *Election project* run the risk of bringing process into focus more than content. Simon Roberts's response to this risk was to maintain the dual character of his project: his own pictures, made with a 5x4" camera, remained a separate body of images throughout. Their arresting format and great depth are a counterpoint to the mass of the public's gallery. As they draw the viewers into the landscape and its many details, Roberts's images are reminders of the here and there, of space and content. Bearing that in mind, let us ask what exactly is happening in the three collaboratively created photographic archives? What is the meaning of such democratically collected content?

Public Spheres for Collective Self-imagining and National Identification

- 32 Ribalta sees the social function of documentary photography in the creation of "a de-territorialised public sphere that offers a general and equally shared condition of citizenship." (Ribalta, 2012) It may be argued that an online collaboratively produced archive creates such a public sphere or "environment", but as far as *Mapping Main Street*, *The Polling Place Photo Project* and Simon Roberts's *Election project* are concerned, it is not de-territorialized, quite the contrary.

- 33 Indeed, the context of each project tends to equate such a public sphere with the national community. First, the projects are developed within the boundaries of the nation—*Mapping Main Street* is a mapping of the United States, the *Polling Place Photo Project* shows democracy at work across the American territory, while the *Election Project* deals with the United Kingdom selecting MPs for Westminster. Second, the projects are related to national political issues. Consequently, the nation is a consistent thread in all three projects, even though it is not a stated concern in any of them.
- 34 The nation emerges not so much in terms of national identity, but rather in terms of national identification. As the personal stories and memories of contributors are intertwined with national geography and events, and as individuals reach out by contributing to a collaborative platform, the photographs seem to constitute as many individual engagements with the national community and its history. They provide an insight into the relationship between personal and social identity. Thus they offer a vision of nationalism as “banal, personal, embedded”. (Hearn, 2007) From that perspective, what should be analysed is the way participants are individually tied to the collective spheres created by the collaborative photographic projects.
- 35 For the three projects, contributors were asked to make public what was originally their own private experience of a place or a moment as recorded in a snapshot. To put it differently, their feelings towards a specific place or moment are objectivised for other users of the archive. In *Mapping Main Street*, familiar townscape, “memory lanes” for the locals who submitted the pictures, are but neutral views for others. However, they are imagined by the public as somebody’s immediate familiar environment, therefore creating an imagined link between contributors, places, and viewers, and overall, conjuring up an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1991, 6). Thus, a collective sphere is created through the tension between the private and the public.
- 36 There is also an articulation between the local and the national in *Mapping Main Street*. Watching the slide shows, one gets a strong impression that individual photographers selected details in Main Streets which point to both local and national history. Indeed, many pictures seem to have been inspired by an interest in conservation: old buildings, lamp posts and churches are favourite subjects. Typical shops, bars and diners are well represented. Cultural practices such as parades or fairs are also documented. It seems that photographers were mostly interested in the cultural aspects of Main Street. Fewer images actually centre on people and their daily activities. Work is rarely a subject. The economic circumstances in the various towns can hardly be gathered from many of the pictures displayed. Rather, the photographs act as a cultural mapping. They are a recording of the details that shape people’s understanding of their local and national culture. They are a form of “flagging” of American identity, a contribution to what Billig defined as “banal nationalism”. (Billig, 1995)
- 37 This seems to stand in contradiction with the original purpose of *Mapping Main Street*. The project was meant as a response to the use of the phrase “Main Street” by politicians and journalists when they mean middle class America. It was intended as an exploration of the diversity American cities. There are indeed many towns on the computer-generated routes of *Mapping Main Street*, but what comes out of the pictures is on the contrary *one* national community. The pictures do not *record* this sense of community, but actually *produce* it, all the more so as they are displayed in networks. They echo other networks of discourses produced by politicians, the media or other cultural agents, which all shape the people’s understanding of their community. Barack

Obama's speeches belong in these networks and they are good examples of the "flagging of the nation" mentioned above. One of his most famous speeches was delivered at the United States Capitol Building in Washington, DC on 12 February 2009 and was appropriately entitled: "One Nation and One People". The way Obama intertwines individual stories, his personal story and American history is comparable to the way photographs of Main Streets work, by intertwining the personal and the public, the local and the national. As for *Mapping Main Street*, what goes round comes round, as it were: if the project was meant to deconstruct the mythology of Main Street, it eventually and rather consistently exudes another mythology—that of the national community.

- 38 Simon Roberts's pictures elicit the same sense of community related to territory. The images of his previous project *We, English*, had already explored how a sense of place and national identity may arise from landscape and people's outdoor activities. In *The Election Project*, the public's photos combined with Simon Roberts's produce some "anthropology of ourselves",¹⁴ as *Guardian* critic Sean O'Hagan wrote. The public's contributions display "the humour and the simmering anger", "stoical scepticism tinged with an undercurrent of surreal black humour", in a nutshell, "a definable kind of English eccentricity". (O'Hagan, 2010) Such comments show how the original political purpose of promoting democracy may be perceived to be overwhelmed or transcended by the broader cultural content, here understood as national features. It exemplifies how an online collaborative documentary project may be construed as a new place for collective self-imagining and still elicit age-old, and sometimes clichéd, national references.

Conclusion

- 39 Studying three collaborative photographic projects has revealed that such practices are strategies towards new micro-politics of photography. They grant a new status to amateur photography. They downplay or perhaps overcome the ontological chiasm between documentary and authorial quality to foreground the social function of photography.
- 40 When this social function is defined as promoting democracy and fostering community, however, the pitfalls of social media fetishism and techno-utopia should be remembered. Apart from an interest in the process, it is necessary to direct our attention to the contents and driving forces of the archives thus collaboratively created. What emerges from the pictures is a sense of shared place and identity which transcends the immediate context of the projects and proves to be a most powerful piece of collaborative work, far beyond the grasp and agency of the projects' designers. National identification—rather than national identity—eventually transpires as a core aspect of the three projects.
- 41 In turn experiential, personal, historical, local and national, the collaboratively produced documentary archives of *The Polling Place Photo Project*, *Mapping Main Street* and Simon Roberts's *Election Project* are repositories of collective memory and public spheres for social self-imagining. As such, they deserve special attention and also special conservation care in the digital age. They also require us to broaden our methodological and theoretical scope beyond artistic or aesthetic considerations—bringing in history, politics, sociology, or philosophy—to account for the ways in which

popular, everyday uses of photographs may shape collective identification and self-imagining.

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NOTES

1. A set of multiple choice questions was provided concerning the time of day, the number of people in line, the ballot type. Participants were also asked to rate the quality of service at their polling station from excellent to poor and to say why they voted in this election, choosing between: Felt strongly about issues/ Felt strongly about candidates/ Want to support my party/ Encouraged by friends or by family/ Never miss an election/ Other.
2. There was also an exhibition in March 2009 at the Silpe Gallery, Hartford Art School, with a selection of 200 images.
3. At the time of the *Mapping Main Street* launch, Jesse Shapins was an urban media artist studying for a PhD at Harvard's Graduate School of Design; James Burns, a PhD candidate in the Department of Economics at Harvard and Kara Oehler was a public radio producer and media artist.
4. The House of Commons Speaker's Advisory Committee on Works of Art both purchases artworks, including furniture or historic objects, and commissions new works, relating to parliamentary life in the United Kingdom. In 2010, it was the first time the Works of Art Committee had commissioned a photographer to follow a general election.
5. Source: US Census Bureau.
6. A repetition of the dispute over the 2000 Bush versus Gore election, eventually settled by the Supreme Court, is a frightful prospect for politicians and anyone concerned with democracy in the US.
7. Kara Oehler received a grant from the Association of Independents in Radio, within a broader project called Makers Quest 2.0, looking at innovative ways of combining traditional broadcast media with digital media. There was also funding from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.
8. AIR (the Association of Independents in Radio) was one of the sponsors of *Mapping Main Street*.
9. Gunthert contends that the real ontological change in photography has come not from digital cameras but from social networks: "Revolution in photography comes from conversation" (Gunthert, 2012). As anyone can share their pictures with the rest of the world, by uploading their images onto Facebook walls, blogs or some professional media, the modes of display and reception of photographs have changed. Photos are now more than mere illustrations of conversation: they are the core and basis of communication.
10. This news website aggregates contents produced by famous bloggers or experts on a wide range of topics. It is worth noting that in 2011, a class-action was filed by bloggers against *The Huffington Post* for failing to remunerate their contributions.
11. See for example, essays by Alan Sekula (1984) or Martha Rosler (2004).
12. For a sociological approach to networks in the digital era, see the works of Bruno Latour, which were an inspiration for *Mapping Main Street* designer Jesse Shapins (Latour, et al, 2012)
13. See for example Raymond William's criticism in *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (1974)

14. A reference to the Mass Observation photographic project launched in Britain in 1937 by Charles Madge and Tom Harrisson in order to document the lives and behaviours of ordinary Britons, which was captioned to be “an anthropology of our own people” (letter published in the *New Statesman and Nation*, 30 January 1937).

ABSTRACTS

This article studies three collaborative documentary photographic projects, *The Polling Place Photo Project*, *Mapping Main Street* (United States, 2008 and 2009) and Simon Roberts’s *Election Project* (Great Britain, 2010), which operated with similar goals and modes—to re-engage the public and citizens by committing them to building an online archive of images. The features of the collaborative documentary mode are analysed as a number of strategies involving the authority of amateurs, forms of crowdsourcing and a new kind of agency as photographs are produced by multiple contributors and displayed online. As these strategies seem to be photographic emulations of the democratic process, the question arises of the apparent correspondence between such strategies and the explicit purpose of enhancing citizenship and democracy or fostering involvement and community. Is the medium the message in collaborative documentary? This study shows the limits of a technology-oriented approach to the collaborative documentary and proposes to direct attention to the social, political and historical context of the three projects and to their contents: instead of mere experiments in collaborative photographic practices, the archives may be construed as public spheres for collective self-imagining, and in particular for imagining the national community.

Cet article étudie trois projets photographiques de type documentaire collaboratif *The Polling Place Photo Project*, *Mapping Main Street* (États-Unis, 2008 et 2009) et *The Election Project* de Simon Roberts (Grande-Bretagne, 2010), dont les intentions et les modes opératoires sont similaires: dans le but de stimuler l’engagement citoyen, on a invité le public à contribuer à la construction collective d’archives photographiques en ligne. Les caractéristiques du documentaire collaboratif sont envisagées comme autant de stratégies qui incluent la légitimité des amateurs, le recours au *crowdsourcing* et de nouveaux modes d’agentivité dès lors que les photographies sont produites par des contributeurs multiples et exposées en ligne. Il ressort que ces stratégies semblent rejouer ou imiter à bien des égards le processus démocratique, mais cette apparente adéquation entre but recherché et mode opératoire doit être discutée : le message se réduit-il au processus dans les projets de type documentaire collaboratif? Cette étude cherche à pointer les limites d’une approche strictement formelle et propose de prendre mieux en considération les contextes sociaux, politiques et historiques ainsi que les contenus des trois projets : plus que simples expérimentation du mode collaboratif en photographie documentaire, les archives constituées peuvent être alors être interprétées comme des « lieux de mémoire » ou encore des espaces publics où s’écrivent les identités collectives et en particulier les identités nationales.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Photographie documentaire, documentaire collaboratif, archive photographique en ligne, Simon Roberts, Mapping Main Street, Election Project, Polling Place Photo Project

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