How photographers use language and image to curate the internet

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Many thousands of photographers around the world use the photo-sharing site Flickr to organise, display, share and discuss their photos. In May 2013 there was a major re-organisation in the site layout. As an immediate response, nearly 30000 overwhelmingly negative comments were posted on the Flickr discussion forum. Similar reactions appeared on web-sites of professional photographers, photo magazines and technology commentators, as well as small clubs and associations. Discussion on these diverse sites pointed out uses and practices which different groups of people had developed and which were now more difficult or not possible within the changed site.

This paper examines what these comment threads reveal about users’ online practices, how they act within the changing affordances of the internet and their stance towards the site owners. It investigates how they use language to position themselves as active users of the internet and it explores why there was such a negative reaction to the changes. The analysis begins with a quantitative overview of a corpus of the comments. This leads in to a detailed study of the language of these discussions, drawing upon discourse analysis, thematic analysis and the analysis of stance.

The paper argues that the activities of many users and groups of users can be seen as acts of online curation where, as well as being content creators, they design and organise the web to provide a stable resource to share with others. This is a multimodal activity involving the interaction of language and image. The paper also uses the concept of curation to discuss how there was a shift in perceptions of power relations between users and site owners, along with a developing realisation of corporate aspects of the internet. Overall, the paper argues that ‘curation’ is an important concept for sociolinguistics research on new media.

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