

## Imagined Data Communities

Nadav Hochman | February 2014

In our earlier work ([www.phototrails.net](http://www.phototrails.net)) we theorized and visualized the changing nature of contemporary visual experiences, and offered potential ways to explore these experiences over large sets of photos. We examined the presentation of images within social media applications and showed how the ways images are organized and structured with other metadata (such as time indications, location etc.) construct particular socio-cultural practices.

Writing about media interface presentations and their relation to larger cultural trends is tricky. Different elements are constantly added, changed or removed, new services are frequently developed and released to public use, and new technologies capture the imaginations of many. Within this flux, what can we say about social photography in particular and contemporary image productions in general, that is not confined to the characteristics of one platform or another? Can we identify overarching processes that cross platforms and are destined to change the way we interact with images?

One of the most crucial and dramatic processes that we can point to is **the fragmentation of images**: the automatic and manual annotation of images with “external” metadata (such as time and place of creation, or textual tags added by users), and with “internal” metadata that is extracted from within images’ content itself: images taken inside vs. outside, the identification of people in a photograph, automatic detection of different scenes or atmospheres in photos (i.e. nightlife; happy; sad) and much more.

This fragmentation opens up new ways to organize and present online visual information. Even in the short time since we launched Phototrails, many new features were added to various visual information tools that indicate the progress of this continuous process: both Facebook and Instagram incorporated into their software automatic and manual people tagging; Apple’s iOS7 presents its users’ photos in montages organized by time and location; Google+ offers to stitch photos with overlapping landscape views into a panoramic image, or pick out the best pictures from hundreds. In merely 7 months, services that were once used by professional industries have become a common practice.

The result of these new organizational forms for visual information is **the re-condition of the terms under which text, images and numbers come together and relate to each**

**other.** Words (such as tags) or numbers (such as location indication, or time) are not meant to explicate an image (as an indexical sign) but rather to group it with all other images that share data similarity. What this atomization process facilitates is that images that once pointed towards themselves (i.e. our interest was first directed to what was going on inside the image and only then towards the outside world—what has known as the symbolic aspect of an image) now point directly outside, looking for connections, relations and patterns with other images in a collection.



A visualization of 100,000 Instagram photos with the tag #selfie (yellow) and 100,000 photos with the tag #me (blue); Green – overlap.

We can articulate these relations in another way. If earlier visual forms such as a work of art or a film have been discussed and conceived as a representation of an “imagined world”, and how the content of the image reflected (or not) larger cultural patterns, with social media images these relations are turned on their head. The “imagined” aspects of an image are no longer inherent to the individual pictorial surface and the construction of its various visual elements, but rather they are derived from the relations of these elements with countless other similar pictorial fragments. Everything that is outside of the image or actively “dissected” from the image (i.e. content atoms such as people, tags, etc.) connects it to **imagined data communities** that only potentially and relationally exist.

In other words, while what is going on inside the image shows us what the world is right now (derived from the immediate registry and sharing of everyday life) everything outside of that image (metadata such as tags, location coordinates etc.) **considers the what if, or what might be, or how we might think about what is the world through the lens of the aggregated, simultaneous representations of particular data units**. In short: the “real” is everything that is going on inside an image (images of particular subjects in the world), while the symbolic is everything that is outside of that image and is connected to it via similar fragmented informational atoms.

These imagined data communities point to future challenges for visual and social research. How do we study these communities? What type of relations they suggest? How do we visualize the differences and similarities within each data community and between different communities? What each of these communities “mirrors” about social life in time and place?

The Selifecity project aims to continue to offer potential ways in which we can explore these types of questions. It uses the recent explosive popularity in self-documentation to investigate current techniques of visual fragmentation, illustrate the current and near-futures of visual materials within and outside of the social media stream, and to rethink processes of knowledge production across billions of photos.

In light of these changes in the production, consumption and analysis within the endless universe of social photography, our project is an illustration of a potential way to study, navigate, visualize and “see” commonalities and differences in one, particular kind of these communities: #me.