

Opinion

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 27, 2019

‘Pix clutter your phone? You may be an artist’

Data reveal average number of photos stored on any smartphone is 952

LEONID BERSHIDSKY

AS SMARTPHONE CAMERAS continue to improve, we are understandably taking more and more photos with them. Priceonomics, a San Francisco-based firm that analyses data to create content, attempted to figure just how many more.

Using data from Avast, a company that makes antivirus and maintenance software, it found that the average number of photos stored on a smartphone anywhere in the world is 952. Five years ago, a study based on data from another app developer, Magisto, put the average number at 630. Though the large datasets used in both cases are not directly comparable, it's likely that they accurately capture how much more we're photographing with our phones. They also reveal the same trends—for example, more photos taken in certain Asian countries than elsewhere, and more pictures snapped by women than men.

Is this increase in snapping and storing good for us, though? That depends on how we use that camera.

In 2013, Linda Henkel, a psychologist from Fairfield University in Connecticut, described a “photo-taking-impairment effect.” People told to walk around a museum photographing some objects and merely looking at others turned out to have clearer memories of the exhibits they hadn't snapped. Other studies with different experimental setups have confirmed the existence of this effect.

An early theory explaining the impairment effect held that people forget things they photograph because they, consciously or unconsciously, want to get rid of unnecessary information they'd otherwise keep in their heads. “Cognitive offloading,” researchers named it. Two years ago, Julia Soares and Benjamin Storm from the University of California at Santa Cruz, found that the impairment effect is present even when people use an ephemeral messaging app such as Snapchat to take a photo, or when they're told to delete the image manually. This suggested that memories aren't simply offloaded, they're merely dimmed when we put a camera between ourselves and an experience.

It gets even more complicated. The work of Alixandra Barasch from New York University, Kristin Diehl at the University of Southern California and Jackie Silverman at the University of Pennsylvania has shown that taking pictures tends to aid recall when people consciously look for specific details or aspects to photograph. They called this “volitional photo taking.” This doesn't



Stepping away from a scene to take a picture, and thus losing touch with it, creates a false familiarity with the subject and makes us less likely to make an effort to remember it

actually contradict Henkel's work: She, too, found that people in her museum experiment tended to remember better when they zoomed in on specific details.

Thus, the question of whether the phone is a memory aid or a trash can for unwanted memories hinges on our level of engagement. We can behave somewhat like professional photographers, looking for the best angle, an interesting detail, an object among many that we want to bring back from an exhibition. Or we can just click that button indiscriminately. Soares of California-Santa Cruz, who found that Snapchat photos are forgotten as fast as the ones that remain stored, referred to the latter practice as “attentional disengagement.” Stepping away from a scene to take a picture, and thus losing touch with it, creates a false familiarity with the subject and makes us less likely to make an effort to remember it.

In another series of experiments, Barasch and Diehl, along with Gal Zauber- man from Yale University, discovered that

taking pictures tends to make any activity — from a bus tour to an ordinary lunch — more fun when it increases engagement with the experience rather than interferes with it or adds a new element to what's already highly engaging. And, in a separate paper, they showed that the intention to share photos can detract from the enjoyment because it “increases self-presentational concern during the experience.”

Notably, all this science is consistent with the finding by a group of UK researchers that selfie-taking is positively correlated with smartphone dependency and anxiety. In addition, people who are less phone-dependent tend to take more photographs of nature. Those people also tend to be older. And, interestingly, somewhat older users, according to the Avast data, tend to store more photos on their phones than the youngest people. The average number of pictures on the phone of a person aged 18 through 24 is 836; a person between

25 and 34 keeps 1,067 of them.

Priceonomics offers a plausible explanation: The youngest people are more likely to use ephemeral messaging apps that don't save photos by default. That means they take more photos with the purpose of sharing them. It also likely means more selfies, which are used as a means of visual conversation, and other low-engagement pictures. Snap, send, forget.

The higher accumulation of photos cluttering the memory of the phones of relatively older age groups isn't necessarily a problem. Often, these pictures are taken in contemplation, as a way to study something closer, take in and remember more details. Then, the snapping habit isn't just benign — it's a private form of art, not necessarily shared with anyone. And even if we never return to our photo galleries, the intimacy of the contact we once established with our subjects can stay with us.

— BLOMBERG



INSIDE TRACK
COOMI KAPOOR

Some up, some down

Is national security advisor Ajit Doval up or down in the Modi-2 regime? On one hand, with Amit Shah as home minister, Doval's wings automatically get clipped in internal security matters. When Rajnath Singh was home minister, Doval held forth freely at North Block meetings. But with Shah as boss there is less scope for interventions. At times, when Doval issues instructions to the IB chief or other agency heads, he is informed that they have to first check with Shah. On the other hand, there is physical evidence that Doval's clout is expanding in other areas. For instance, earlier he occupied just one floor of Sardar Patel Bhawan as his personal office. Now Doval, raised to the rank of Cabinet minister, has taken over most of the building for the National Security Council (NSC) Secretariat, which has expanded noticeably. There are even three deputy NSAs and the building entrance has got a facelift. Most importantly, the rules of business were re-framed this month so that the NSC can generate Cabinet notes and act like a full government department.

Om, thank goodness

Defence minister Rajnath Singh sent word to the Indian ambassador in France that he wanted a pandit to be present when he landed in Bordeaux for the formal ceremony of officially handing over the first of the 36 Rafale jets manufactured for the Indian Air Force. The French authorities, alerted that a puja would be performed on the runway, made discrete inquiries as to what the procedure entailed. At the Dassault Aviation Centre, Rajnath, carried out the rituals of a shastra puja, the ceremony for worshipping weapons. He offered a coconut and flowers, while a lemon was placed under the aircraft wheel. Singh put kum kum on his finger to inscribe the auspicious figure 'Om' on the jet. The French witnessing the ceremony, including the minister for armed forces, top army brass and senior officials of Dassault, heaved a sigh of relief. They had been informed that traditionally Indians inscribe a swastika during a puja. The swastika is an unhappy symbol for France since it evokes memories of Nazi occupation of the country during World War II.

Advice not wanted

Veteran journalist Ashok Malik's field of expertise is the media. His last job in fact was as press secretary to the President. But in his new position as “policy advisor” in the ministry of

external affairs he has reportedly been told not to offer advice on the media. The External Publicity Division is possessive about its turf, even if its efforts for positive coverage on Kashmir in the foreign press have fallen rather short.

Preventive strike

The recent BCCI elections demonstrated that this is yet another sphere in which Amit Shah holds sway. However, it was not Shah alone who rooted for Sourav Ganguly over Brijesh Patel for the president's post. Along with MoS finance Anurag Thakur, Assam minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, who controls the seven votes from the Northeast states, and Congressman Rajiv Shukla who is influential with the Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Hyderabad cricket boards, also backed Ganguly. While the common surmise is that Shah coveted a winning face for his party in the Bengal Assembly polls, the BJP president realises that Bengal's cautious dada has a history of keeping on the right side of all political parties, whether the TMC, CPI(M) or Congress, and is unlikely to throw his lot solely with the BJP. The common target of the new BCCI members from different camps is Vinod Rai, till last week head of the BCCI's Committee of Administrators (CoA). The cricket bosses who lost control of the most lucrative sport in the country for over three years had announced to all and sundry that they would settle scores by investigating some of the financial transactions of the CoA. Forewarned, the Supreme Court, while permitting the elected office-bearers to take charge, scuttled attempts for a potential witch-hunt against predecessors by inserting two safeguard clauses. No proceedings against the CoA members is possible without court clearance and legal expenses will be borne by the BCCI.

Waiting for cook

The Garvi Gujarat building, the new Gujarat Bhavan in Delhi inaugurated by PM Modi on September 2, has won plaudits and publicity. But the Bhavan, located on the prestigious Akbar Road, still awaits a resident cook. It is not easy to persuade a skilled Gujarati cook to move to Delhi, since cooks find the cost of living much cheaper in their home state and they prefer the familiar surroundings. The Gujarat authorities put out tenders for an agency to run the kitchen. The tender has finally been awarded, now everyone is waiting for the cook.

Into crisis mode

The young South African team is going through a difficult transition, but their decline is alarming

RINGSIDE VIEW

Shamik Chakrabarty



FAF DU PLESSIS was hurting. The South Africa captain is a fantastic player in his own right. He played in winning teams, alongside the likes of Jacques Kallis, AB de Villiers, Dale Steyn and Hashim Amla. But at Ranchi, after his team was hammered 3-0 by a ruthless Indian side, du Plessis looked to be searching for answers.

At Ranchi, in the third Test, lots of overs had been lost because of rain. Still, South Africa conceded an innings defeat very early into the fourth morning. In the second Test at Pune also, they had suffered an innings defeat. Only in the first Test at Vizag, did the visitors show some fight and managed to take the game to the final day. A young South African side looked mentally and technically inept to counter India's quality and aggression. The Proteas have now lost three of their last four Test series. Du Plessis admitted that they were out-

classed. He spoke about the Indian fast bowlers' pace and consistency, and the ruthlessness of India's batting, which according to the skipper made them mentally weak.

“It takes a lot of energy and it takes a lot of toll and that's why you could see towards the end our batting line-up was mentally weak. You don't want to be mentally weak. Obviously you try as hard as you can. But the ruthlessness of them (India) right through this series... you just feel like there's no opportunity or moment in the game when you can hide, you know. It's like constantly your body is tired, your mind is tired and then you make mistakes,” du Plessis had said.

South Africa's decline is alarming. Of course this is a young team, which is going through transition. They have lost their big guns — de Villiers, Steyn, Amla, Imran Tahir and Morne Morkel. You can't buy their class and experience in the market. Young players need time to grow. The Saffers have an exciting batting talent in Zubayr Hamza and a world-class fast bowler in Kagiso Rabada. Their team management erred in not picking Hamza for the first two Tests — he had an excellent ‘A’ tour for South Africa in India last year and also



South Africa's captain Faf du Plessis, looking back after being dismissed by India's Mohammed Shami during the third day of India versus South Africa test match in Ranchi

impressed during his half-century in the first innings at Ranchi.

Handling transition is not easy. Mind, after the 2011 World Cup, when India had been going through that phase, suffering whitewashes became the norm — in England and Australia. India had even lost a home series to England during that period. India, however, had a vast talent pool to choose from for a quick rebuild. South Africa don't have that advantage.

Four years ago, Cricket South Africa (CSA) submitted a document to the national government, outlining its roadmap to implement transformation policies that would create opportunities for “previously disadvantaged” people. Under the policy, a quota system was introduced at all levels of cricket. At first-class level, picking six non-white players — at least two black Africans — became mandatory. For the national team, the quota number became the same, although it was decided that instead of every match, an average would be taken every year.

In the grand scheme of things, it was the right decision. To make cricket popular in South Africa, the sport had to get rid of its white exclusivity. But the policy also threw up a ‘merit versus opportunity’ debate. Those who were left out, decided to move on. Many of them took the Kolpak route and switched to playing county cricket in England at the expense of international cricket.

South African players are eligible for the Kolpak deals via the Cotonou Agreement with the European Union (EU), and since 2004, the Proteas have lost dozens of cricketers to Kolpak, including stars like Morne Morkel and Kyle Abbott, and also exciting young talents like Simon Harmer. Du Plessis described how Kolpak has hurt South African cricket. “...we are also losing our experience in domestic cricket. Your top players domestically are going overseas. Your guys that get left out of the South African team, they go overseas. So you are missing out on all your best players and your talent pool is all of a sudden a lot smaller. And even like I said, the guys going there post international cricket, guys like Hashim Amla, those guys, they won't be playing domestic cricket back home. So you lose all of that experience.”

Money, too, is a big reason for the Kolpak exodus, as the South Africa skipper pointed out, “Pound is stronger than Rand”. Du Plessis hoped that a no-deal Brexit would close the Kolpak route, because in that case UK will no longer be a part of the EU.

All valid reasons aside, the CSA needs to revamp its domestic structure. The country's domestic cricket has become weak. Also, schools, the breeding ground of the future stars in South African cricket, somehow are not unearthing quality young talent at a steady pace. It's time for a reboot.