Photographic Presidents
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As Barack Obama’s two terms as president came to a close, media outlets of all sorts ran stories summarizing the key moments of his presidency and speculating about his legacy. The technology blog network Engadget declared Obama to be “the most tech-savvy president” and “the White House’s first social media ninja.”\(^1\) Obama’s legacy would always be tied to how he and his administration took advantage of new media technologies of the early twenty-first century. And future presidents would feel the impact of those choices. Terrence O’Brien writes, “After Obama, expectations about how the president interacts with the public have forever changed.”\(^2\)

The rise of Barack Obama paralleled the birth of social media, and it is impossible to overestimate the impact of social media on the role of photography in the culture. Numbers tell part of the story. In 2012 Fortune magazine reported that “10% of all photos ever taken were taken in 2011.”\(^3\) By the time Obama left office in January 2017, Instagram boasted 150 million users per day, and social media giant Facebook dominated the landscape with upward of 1.3 billion daily users.\(^4\) These platforms sold themselves as spaces for sharing, capturing, and connecting, terms that not only echoed the feel-good Kodak moments of the past but also pointed to a fundamental transformation in our relationship to photography. In 2012 Pete Brook argued in Wired magazine that “photographs are no longer things; they
are experiences.” That is, photographs are not so much records of what happened as they are real-time chronicles where everyone with a camera announces, “This is happening; I am here.” These technological and cultural transformations have had profound implications for photography’s role in social and political life.

One of the challenges of studying the Obama administration’s relationship to photography is that it is difficult to account for the magnitude and diversity of the photographic practices that shaped and were shaped by the Obama presidency. Yet as contrary as it might seem in an era of “spreadable media,” official White House photographs of Obama turn out to be a powerful lens through which to tell the story of social media photography. The Obama White House Flickr photostream chronicled Obama’s unfolding presidency and operated as an axis around which other social media practices and public debates about photography circulated. Launched just months after Obama’s 2009 inauguration and frozen in time at the end of his two terms with 6,668 official White House photographs, the photostream operated as a real-time curated archive, making it an ideal site for exploring the story of social media photography in the Obama era. Furthermore, as of this writing it is the most complete, official, publicly available visual record of the Obama White House. During Obama’s presidency, the Flickr photostream functioned simultaneously as a collection for posterity, a real-time public relations effort, a site of contestation over interactive social media, and a playful and politicized space for appropriation and remixing. It reflected broader social media practices that transformed photography in the early twenty-first century as new visual values of sharing and remixing took center stage in ways that directly affected presidential communication. In exploring the case of Barack Obama and Flickr, I ask not what Barack Obama did with social media but what social media did to and with photographic presidents.

**The Digital White House**

The Obama campaign’s branding of its candidate as a social media pioneer extended into the Obama presidency as the administration sought to use every available social media channel to engage the public. A look at the Obama White House’s adoption of social media makes this long-term, multiplatform commitment clear:
2007: Senator and presidential candidate Obama launched a Twitter account.8
2009: Official White House YouTube channel, Flickr photostream, Twitter account, and Facebook feed launched; first Twitter Town Hall9
2010: Creation of West Wing Week, a short, punchy weekly video summary of the president’s activities that week.10
2012: White House began to use Google Hangouts; 2012 campaign joined Pinterest; Obama did an “Ask Me Anything” session on reddit.11
2013: White House Vine, Tumblr, and Instagram accounts launched.12
2014: White House Medium account appeared.13
2015: Obama added an official presidential Twitter handle (@POTUS) and a personal POTUS Facebook page.14
2016: White House Snapchat account launched.15

The Obama White House consistently used all available means to reach twenty-first-century audiences. And those audiences were large. In 2015, for example, the White House Twitter feed boasted more than 6 million followers, Michelle Obama’s Instagram feed had 1.8 million, and the White House’s Facebook page boasted more than 3.6 million followers.16

The demands of social media changed the nature of White House communications work, requiring larger staffs and different modes of engagement than those of previous administrations. In 2010 the full Obama communications operation at that time consisted of a total of sixty-nine people; George W. Bush had fifty-two and Clinton had forty-seven.17 Historian of the White House communications operation Martha Joynt Kumar reported in 2015 that the White House Office of Digital Strategy alone boasted a staff of fourteen, bigger than the makeup of George W. Bush’s whole press office in 2005.18 The Obama White House created the Office of Digital Strategy to focus on how to get the president’s message out in ways that traditional approaches like policy addresses could not.19 Kate Albright-Hanna, director of new media video in the 2008 Obama campaign, said of the value of social media, “When people are able to tell their own stories directly (even if in reality it is a third party doing the writing) it allows them to construct their own narratives of self and reframe their public presentation. Consumers of this social media feel like they are getting this information directly rather than through a publicist or the perspective of a journalist.”20 Macon Phillips, who served as new media director for the campaign and later at the White House, said that the White House’s digital strategy involved
three goals: “publicizing the President’s message, increasing the visibility of
White House activities for the public, and creating opportunities for citizen
input in government.” Jason Goldman helped to establish social media
platforms such as Blogger, Medium, and Twitter and was later recruited
by the White House to become its first chief digital strategy officer. He ar-
gued that social media allowed the White House to foster connection and
to exert direct control of the message: “It’s going direct to individuals, not
through intermediaries. And it’s [about] purpose, it’s about getting folks
emotionally involved so that they’re ready to act. . . . And all of that’s in
the context of using our tools and using the platforms that we control to
achieve that goal.”

Scholarly assessments of the goals of publicity, visibility, and citizen
input suggest that while the first two were successful, the administration
ultimately failed to foster meaningful, sustained, interactive citizen en-
gagement. What the White House called “citizen engagement” ended up
being primarily one-way communication, not the two-way communication
fostered by social media. James Katz, Michael Barris, and Anshul Jain argue
that at best the Obama administration used social media “to mobilize sup-
port and to give the impression of responsiveness.” Others suggest that
while Obama’s first presidential campaign pioneered new media persuasion,
the Obama White House was less revolutionary. One example frequently
pointed to is the White House petition system called We the People, begun
in 2011. Branded with the tag line “Your Voice in the White House,” the
site invited citizens to exercise their right to petition by promising that
the White House would respond to any petition that met the signature
threshold of one hundred thousand signatures within thirty days. Katz
and colleagues argued that while initiatives like We the People invited par-
ticipation, it required not a substantive, engaged response on the part of
the administration but only “a nominal reaction.” In this way, they argue,
social media for Obama became more of “a ‘broadcast’ tool” than a genuine,
sustained give-and-take between citizen and government.

If the Obama administration was less successful at creating the give-
and-take that Web 2.0 promised, it did succeed at using social media as a
tool for dissemination and control of the president’s image and message.
As Jason Gainous and Kevin M. Wagner write, “Social media alters the
political calculus in the United States by shifting who controls information,
who consumes information, and how that information is distributed.” As a
result, political campaigns began to sidestep traditional media, which were no longer the primary way to get their message out. With social media it was easier to communicate with people directly and shape your political image to your liking.

When Obama first took office in 2009, some in the mainstream media fretted over the dangers of excessive exposure for the new president, concerned that his “sheer visibility” as a “constant of pop culture” might get in the way of accomplishing actual policy goals. Eight months into Obama’s presidency, Jennifer Senior wrote in New York magazine, “It’s a steady beat of press conferences and town halls and YouTube addresses—a communications lollapalooza, rain or shine. It’s messaging not just as a means to an end, but as a kind of end itself.” What initially emerged as worries about the overexposure of President Obama, however, later evolved into concern about growing polarization among citizens. These anxieties reflected a larger conversation about the role of social media in politics. Recognizing the capacity of social media to create “filter bubbles,” in which citizens expose themselves only to ideas that they already support, some journalists raised concerns about the president’s capacity to reach all Americans using social media channels. Juliet Eilperin of the Washington Post wrote in 2015, “The White House can reach more people without the filter of the traditional media, target its audience with precision and receive almost immediate feedback. But the approach raises the prospect of fostering further political polarization if the president opts to communicate mostly with parts of the electorate that identify with him ideologically or can be helpful politically.” In addition to these concerns, the choice to invest deeply in the online space also brought risks, including the unpredictability of the space, the inevitability of racist comments on social media posts, or the possibility of missteps that circulated too quickly to correct. Still, as Obama White House deputy communications director Amy Brundage told the Washington Post in 2015, “These platforms just reach so many people, we can’t not play in that space.”

**Pete Souza and the Obama White House Photo Operation**

When the White House chose to play in the new space of social media photography, it chose an old hand at presidential photography to make the pictures. Barack Obama named photojournalist Pete Souza as chief White
House photographer just a few weeks before his inauguration in 2009. A seasoned photojournalist who previously worked as a White House photographer during Ronald Reagan’s second term, Souza took on a set of tasks that were very different from those of early White House photographers. In the Lyndon Johnson era, Yoichi Okamoto worked for the president and only for him. By 2009 the position had evolved into a 24/7 job in which a chief photographer not only followed the president’s every move but also served as director of the White House Photo Office, managed a staff of photographers and editors, collaborated with colleagues in the White House communications operation, and directed visual coverage of every public event related to the president, the vice president, the first lady, and the White House. Souza initially met Obama when the photographer was working as the Chicago Tribune’s Washington Bureau photographer. Souza photographed the then junior senator from Illinois as he was sworn in and began to serve in the U.S. Senate in 2005, eventually producing a book of photographs of the senator that was published during the 2008 presidential campaign. He established a good working relationship with Obama, who tapped him to become the chief White House photographer. While Souza’s primary job was behind the camera, during the Obama years Souza became a celebrity in his own right, appearing on programs such as Charlie Rose, the BBC’s Newsnight, and CBS’s Sunday Morning, along with numerous photography podcasts and in White House social media Q & As. In these contexts he shared the stories behind some of his images and talked about what it was like to photograph Obama behind the scenes.

In interviews Souza repeatedly emphasized that his job was to serve as a “visual historian.” He told CNN in 2009, “The most important thing is to create a good visual archive for history, so 50 or 100 years from now, people can go back and look at all these pictures.” Souza recalled in 2017 that he was inspired by Johnson White House photographer Yoichi Okamoto: “I was determined to take Okamoto’s approach and document his [Obama’s] presidency. I wanted it to be the best archive that we’ve ever had of a president. That was my personal mission.” Despite Souza’s declarations that he was photographing for history, within a few months selections from the already growing body of official White House photographs began to be posted regularly to Flickr, a social media photography site, and shared via a growing number of White House social media accounts. Souza’s visual chronicle was more than a collection for posterity; it constituted a living,
Barack Obama and Flickr

The growing archive of a presidency. The confluence of Souza’s access to Obama, his artfulness with the camera, and the rise of social media photography made possible new and transformative ways of picturing the presidency. No longer were presidents limited to official White House photographs made primarily to be socked away in a museum for later display or bound up with the vagaries of relationships with photojournalists. The social media president could bypass traditional news media to share seemingly spontaneous, behind-the-scenes images directly with the public. While previous presidential photographers chronicled their bosses for history, Souza and his colleagues in the White House Photo Office also used their images to document a historic presidency nearly in real time.

The shift to digital photography made it easier to shoot more photographs of the president. But during the Obama years it was not so much the quantity of images that increased as it was their real-time public reach. George H. W. Bush’s chief photographer, David Valdez, said that he shot sixty-five thousand rolls of film in the four years of Bush’s presidency, which comes to roughly 1.5–2 million photographs for Bush 41’s single term.41 Each photographer on Bill Clinton’s four-person photography staff shot between ten and twenty rolls of film per day, which meant a maximum of three thousand images per day.42 George W. Bush’s chief photographer, Eric Draper, oversaw the shift from analog to digital photography during Bush’s second term. Draper estimates that he personally made one million images during the second Bush’s presidency, while that number is closer to four million if one includes the rest of the photo staff. This number is consistent with the higher-end estimate of roughly two million photographs produced per term during the analog years of George H. W. Bush and Clinton.43 Pete Souza estimated that he personally made nearly two million photographs during Obama’s two terms, nearly double the number made by Draper alone.44 A 2010 National Geographic documentary film and companion book on White House photography estimated that the Obama White House was at that time producing between five and twenty thousand images per week.45 The actual number likely stands somewhere near the middle of those figures. Steven Booth, archivist at the Barack Obama Presidential Library, reports that the Obama audiovisual archive consists of approximately four million photographs, which works out to just under ten thousand photographs per week across the two terms.46 While the Obama White House does not appear to have made substantially more photographs than other recent
administrations, what did differ was the extent of the public circulation of those images while Obama was in office.

The work of Souza and his colleagues in the photo office was embedded in a much larger communications structure, though as the director of the White House Photo Office, Souza had substantial control over what images would be made public. He and his photo office colleagues would select the images and then run them by the press office before releasing them on Flickr, whitehouse.gov, or other social media sites. In 2017 Souza recalled, “The way it worked was I would ultimately choose whichever photograph would be made public, for whatever reason, and I would show that photograph to someone in the White House press office, and I would say 99.5% of the time they would say, ‘that’s fine,’ and then maybe they might have an objection about something I hadn’t thought about.”47 Alice Gabriner, who served as a White House photo editor and deputy director of the photo office, emphasized the importance of recognizing the dual functions of White House photography: “It’s so important to be able to think about what we’re doing, because we’re uploading to the web, we’re uploading to Flickr, but we’re also creating an archive that’s a lasting archive for history.”48 Describing how particular images were selected for public circulation, Gabriner observed that in addition to aesthetic considerations such as light, composition, and color, she was also looking for “an image that I haven’t seen before. So it needs to feel fresh, it needs to feel surprising.”49

In 2015 Souza told the Photo Brigade podcast, “This administration happens to sit at this time of history when social media has exploded. It just so happened that it occurred during this administration.”50 Yet the Obama White House’s investments in social media photography were not merely happenstance. As this book has demonstrated, presidents are deeply invested in controlling their visual images. As the nation’s first African American president, Barack Obama likely recognized that need even more keenly. Despite careful control of candidate Obama’s visual image during the campaign, the visual culture at large offered its own mediated, vernacular, and often disturbing images of Barack Obama. Throughout the 2008 campaign, Obama was depicted through the use of disturbing racial stereotypes. The repeated circulation of images of Obama as a terrorist, thug, or monkey, among other racist themes, constituted a complex burden for the candidate to overcome.51 The prevalence of these characterizations perhaps fueled the administration’s early decision to circulate official White House photographs of President Obama more or less in real time.52
The Flickr Photostream: An Archive for the Social Media Era

Although the Obama White House continued earlier presidents’ practice of posting photos of the day to whitehouse.gov, the administration chose to use a third-party social media photography platform, Flickr, to share official White House photographs with the public. Obama had previously used Flickr during the presidential campaign, most famously circulating an album of 2008 election night photographs by David Katz that was shared widely. Founded in 2004, Flickr initially gained popularity over other photo sites because it allowed both professional and amateur users alike the opportunity to tag and share their photographs, join groups, and comment on other users’ images. José van Dijck argues that Flickr emerged at a moment when “digital photography had already begun to shift people’s memory practices in a communicative and public direction.” Flickr has been called something of a failed platform because it has never been able to decide what its main function is and it could never compete with later behemoths like Instagram. Yet Van Dijck points out that these “vacillating movements” helped Flickr survive, because it offered users “various platform functions: from community site to social network platform, from photo news site to memory service and archival facility.” By the time the White House began to use it, Flickr had also gained credibility as a place to share images of developing world events and natural disasters. Other government entities used Flickr to share their image holdings with a broader public. The Library of Congress partnered with Flickr in early 2008 to pilot “The Commons,” a project designed to improve access to publicly available photography collections around the world and enable Flickr users to tag and comment on the library’s images. Other U.S. public institutions like the Smithsonian Institution soon followed suit.

The White House launched its Flickr photostream in April 2009 to commemorate the president’s first one hundred days in office. It contained only photographs produced by Obama White House photographers and selected by White House photo editors. As Pete Souza put it in a 2015 interview, “One thing that people know is if there is a photograph of mine on the White House Flickr feed, there’s no mistaking that it’s coming from the White House.” Until the full visual archive of the Obama presidency is made available to the public, according to rules set by the Presidential Records Act, the Flickr site offers as comprehensive a behind-the-scenes look at the Obama White House as one can get. While I use the term
“archive” in the colloquial sense to describe the Flickr site, it is important to note that it is not an official archive with the kinds of selection, search, and metadata structures created by professional archivists. Rather, it is akin to what in the language of professional archivists might be called a “fond,” which the Society of American Archivists defines as a collection of records that have “been created and accumulated as the result of an organic process reflecting the functions of the creator”—in this case, the Obama White House, which built and added to the photostream over time.62 Because it was frozen in time at the end of Obama’s second term and is still usable and searchable in its original form, the Obama Flickr site is not merely a stand-in for the larger Obama visual corpus. It also constitutes a discrete photographic archive, one that chronicled a presidency in real time and captured for posterity social media practices and public debates about photography in the Obama era.

The White House Flickr photostream served four distinct yet overlapping functions that, when taken together, illustrate how social media’s new visual values of sharing and remixing transformed presidents’ engagements with photography: the photographs offered an official, behind-the-scenes visual history of the activities and events of the Obama administration; they provided opportunities for public relations activities that bypassed traditional media; they served as raw material for appropriation and remixing; and they pointed to social media photography’s role as a playful space for vernacular practice and interaction and, after Obama’s presidency ended, political resistance. These functions are neither exhaustive of all that photography did in the White House, nor are they mutually exclusive. In fact, they were often in tension with one another.

**Preserving for Posterity: The Flickr Site as a Visual History of the Presidency**

The photostream visually chronicled the Obama presidency. In doing so, it built on the traditions of the most engaged White House photographers of the past by offering a behind-the-scenes view of the White House operations, with images that highlighted the work of the presidency and offered glimpses of the president as a person. Souza’s regular behind-the-scenes access to the president and the daily operations of the White House authorized the archive’s ethos as “authentic” as opposed to staged. Souza’s repeated emphasis on the importance of his role as “visual historian”
Barack Obama and Flickr

constitutes what we might call the “posterity” function of the archive and corresponds with the ways many others who have held the job talked about its purpose. As David Hume Kennerly, Gerald Ford’s photographer, put it, “I think the historical part is the overriding reason for doing it [the job of White House photographer] and everything else sort of comes along” with that.63 While no one questioned Souza’s commitment to or skill in capturing the president for posterity, some photojournalists did wonder whether “historian” was an appropriate descriptor. A 2009 article in News Photographer magazine asked this question of photographers and educators. One respondent said the label of “historian” was not appropriate, given the “gatekeeping and discussion by officials beyond him about what is released.”64 Another suggested that Souza might best be understood as a kind of “embedded photographer” or biographer, while yet another suggested that the term “personal photographer” might be more appropriate.65 The fact that some were unwilling to let Souza get away with the label “historian” did not, however, mean that they believed his images did not have value as documents of history. Photographer MaryAnne Golon observed, “People don’t understand later on how important those images can be; this most powerful position in the world needs to be documented.”66

The White House cued the historic nature of Obama’s presidency with the very first upload of images in April 2009, an album of images called “First Hundred Days.” Themes of posterity and history were clearly on the mind of one commenter on the album who wrote, “Thanks for creating this Flickr stream. This will be a wonderful way to share with us a more personalized view of history in the making.”67 That notion of “history in the making” was punctuated in early 2010 when the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture exhibited seventy-seven photographs by Pete Souza made during Obama’s first year. The press release announced that Souza’s photographs, along with images by watercolorist Jerry Pinckney, “are together an excellent introduction to Barack Obama’s first year as President and the centuries-long struggles of African Americans that made it possible.”68 The White House began to use the Flickr photostream to offer its own first draft of history via Pete Souza’s “Year in Photos,” in which Souza would curate seventy-five to one hundred photographs that he felt best represented the year. This album would become an annual and anticipated ritual. In 2015 Souza explained his process: “I not only found key historic moments from the year, but also chose moments that give people a more personal look at
the lives of the President and the First Lady.”69 This combination of “historic moments” and “personal look” served as the dual pillars of the posterity function of the Flickr photostream.

Perhaps no greater example of the power of photographs produced for history is the image known as the “Situation Room.”70 Made during the raid on Osama bin Laden’s compound in 2011 and released to the media shortly thereafter, the Situation Room photograph embodied the ethos of visual history espoused by Souza and his predecessors. The photo visually stands in for a singular event in the history of the Obama presidency: the killing of 9/11 mastermind Osama bin Laden. And it does so by showing the key players in that decision tensely watching aspects of the raid unfold, seemingly in real time. The photograph offers the kind of documentary evidence one would expect of such an event, picturing who was in the room at a particular moment on that eventful day. At the same time, it communicates something of what it might have felt like to be in that room. The photograph became the singular image of the event (it even has its own Wikipedia page) and one of Flickr’s most viewed images ever.71

A key rhetorical function of the photostream was to offer viewers a glimpse of historic events in the making. But not all of the White House
Barack Obama and Flickr
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Images carried the weight of history in so vivid a fashion. By offering repeated glimpses into what in Erich Salomon’s terms might be called “intimate” moments featuring President Obama, the Flickr site also preserved for future generations an image of Obama the man. Perhaps the best known of the photographs which illustrate this component of the archive for history is that of Jacob Philadelphia, a young boy who asked Obama if he could touch his hair. The son of a departing staffer, Jacob met President Obama in the Oval Office in 2009. After the boy asked the president if his own hair was “just like yours,” Obama bent over and told him to feel for himself. The resulting image embodies nearly everything photography does to capture a moment for history, a quick snap of the frame that for many encapsulates the history-making qualities of the Obama presidency: a young African American boy could not only meet the nation’s first Black president but could also touch him and identify directly, bodily, with him and potentially see himself in him. It is no wonder that this photo hung on the walls of the West Wing for Obama’s entire presidency and that it, along with the Situation Room photograph, features prominently in Pete Souza’s popular volume of his White House photographs, *Obama: An Intimate Portrait.*

Figure 9.2: Pete Souza, “A temporary White House staffer, Carlton Philadelphia, brought his family to the Oval Office for a farewell photo with President Obama,” May 8, 2009. (Official White House photo via Obama White House Flickr photostream.)
few years later Jacob’s father, Carlton Philadelphia, recalled the cultural importance of the photograph: “It’s important for black children to see a black man as president. You can believe that any position is possible to achieve if you see a black person in it.”

Photographs like the one with Jacob Philadelphia and the Situation Room made clear the value of having such behind-the-scenes moments preserved for posterity. But unlike previous administrations that distributed fewer official images for public consumption, thousands of these images made for posterity circulated on social media. While the Presidential Records Act mandates that every photograph created by the White House be preserved, the Obama Flickr photostream, curated in real time, showed only the images that Souza and the photo editors in the communications office wanted the public to see.

PUBLICIZING THE PRESIDENCY: THE FLICKR SITE AS PUBLIC RELATIONS EFFORT

As it grew on Flickr and circulated widely beyond it, the Obama White House’s visual history served the purposes of the present as well. Social media enabled the administration to shape its own media coverage by producing and circulating content in ways previous presidents had not. Journalist Jennifer Senior acknowledged as much in 2009: “Obama, in fact, lives in a moment when he can finally do what his modern predecessors only dreamed of: go directly over the heads of the mainstream press.” Senior called the White House Flickr photostream the best example of this practice, with its photographs “as perfectly composed as an old cover of Life magazine.” Senior’s article in New York magazine was accompanied by photo illustrations constructed to highlight the president’s visual ubiquity. One image conjured a newsstand with a crowded Times Square in the background. Obama’s image appeared everywhere, overpowering the scene on every magazine cover on the newsstand, on every billboard and Broadway marquee, even on the top of a taxicab. In another photo illustration, the stairwell of a stereotypical suburban family house featured a framed gallery of “family photos”—a familiar enough scene, except that this photo gallery featured photographs of the president and his family taken from the White House Flickr feed. The photo illustrations’ clever juxtapositions of the public and private Obama underscored both President Obama’s direct visual access to the masses as well as the Flickr feed’s tantalizing behind-the-scenes glimpses of the president as a person. Because the White House routinely
added to the Flickr photostream—a few times per month early on and later in the second term every few months—the archive grew organically over time. One result of this ongoing growth was that the release of new White House photographs to Flickr became a news event in itself. As online outlets of all kinds responded to the relentless demand for fresh content, blogs and mainstream media sites often reproduced the Flickr images and captions in their entirety, expanding the circulation of the White House’s photographs far beyond the boundaries of Flickr’s platform. In 2012, for example, Business Insider republished thirty of the White House’s most recent Flickr photos under the headline “Barack Obama Is Having an Amazing Summer: Check Out the Photos,” while the Baltimore Sun reproduced without any editorial comment or framing of its own thirteen more.75 As a real-time public relations effort, the Flickr photostream became a key site from which the administration generated publicity and visual news. At the same time, it became a flash point for a White House press corps that grew increasingly frustrated with its own perceived lack of photo access to President Obama.

The Obama White House used Flickr not only to make behind-the-scenes photographs available to feed the online media beast but also to produce or accompany news. In some cases, White House photos seamlessly circulated in mainstream media, published in topical news stories or opinion pieces alongside photojournalists’ images. This created the impression that they were just another kind of news photograph rather than images created by the White House. For example, in June 2009 the New York Times published a long essay by Matt Bai on the Obama White House’s efforts to lobby Congress on health care reform. The story featured five photographs; the three that included President Obama were all White House photos.76 Although they were credited as such, the effect of the intermingling of White House photos with photojournalists’ images was that photographs circulated for publicity purposes were recast within a neutral photojournalistic frame. Some in the mainstream media took notice. “You don’t have to alter photographs to make them misleading,” wrote Dana Milbank in a 2013 op-ed in the Washington Post, when you can release photos that “go out on the White House’s Flickr account and are picked up for free and repackaged by disreputable news services and published by unsuspecting media outlets.”77

Flickr served not only as a storage site for the building of a real-time White House photo archive but also as a platform for photo releases. Photo
releases are one species of a broader public relations genus known as “handouts.” Handouts play an important role in any White House communications operation as the administration seeks to get its own messages out and take control of the news cycle. The administration used Flickr to release specific photographs on topics ranging from the killing of Osama bin Laden to official portraits of the Obama family. The Situation Room photograph is by far the most famous example of a photo release. (See fig. 9.1.) Souza’s photograph both captured a significant news event and became news itself. The photo gained public traction in part because photographs of bin Laden’s corpse were not circulated in public; as a result, the Situation Room photograph came to stand in visually for the whole event, amplifying the president’s role as commander in chief in a challenging moment of leadership. Released along with eight other photographs via Flickr on the day after the bin Laden killing, the photo quickly became the subject of public debate, as well as the inevitable creation of memes. Critics weighed in on the visual power of the image, noting how it simultaneously depicted the power of the presidency and showed the president as powerless in the face of an unfolding operation out of his immediate control. They discussed whether Souza’s photograph would achieve the status of “icon” as have so many other famous, widely circulated images in U.S. public culture, and analyzed its “accidental” and ambiguous qualities. Viewers asked narrower questions too, such as why Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had her hand clasped over her mouth; was it the shock of seeing bin Laden killed? Clinton claimed she was suffering from allergies and probably suppressing a cough; furthermore, White House officials later clarified that the photograph did not picture the moment of bin Laden’s killing, nor did those in the Situation Room see it.

The photograph’s caption was also notable. When a document visible on the table in front of Clinton was found to be classified, Souza asked for it to be declassified, but that request was denied. The decision was then made to pixelate the document on the table to blur its content and thus make the photograph viable for public distribution. The photograph was released with a caption explaining the digital alteration: “Please note: a classified document seen in this photograph has been obscured.” While there was no widespread public outcry about the digital alteration, the choice to release the photo despite the troublesome document highlighted the White House’s investment in circulating a powerful image of a key event in Obama’s presidency. Asked by an interviewer in 2014 why he had wanted
to release the photograph despite its classified content, Souza said, “I just felt that it was such an important photograph, as did my colleagues in the Communications Office.”

The photojournalists assigned to cover the White House did not openly object to Souza’s exclusive on the bin Laden images; given the covert nature of the operation, they could hardly expect to have been invited to cover that moment themselves. Yet photojournalists covering the White House did object to the distribution of photo releases as official records of public events to which they were not given access. On President Obama’s second full day in office, Dennis Brack, the president of the White House News Photographers Association, wrote to Obama chief of staff Rahm Emanuel to protest how the White House had handled Obama’s “re-swearing in.” Chief Justice John Roberts had botched the oath of office on Inauguration Day, causing Obama to transpose words in the oath such that it was deemed prudent to attempt a do-over two days later. While press pool reporters were invited to the short ceremony as witnesses, and Time magazine photographer Callie Shell, on special assignment to photograph Obama’s first days in office, was also present, White House press photographers were not; a photo handout of the moment as captured by Pete Souza was released instead. That same day, Brack wrote to Emanuel, “In the first days of the Obama administration events have taken place that an open and free press were not able to see.” Brack went on to argue that it was not enough to have a photo release from Souza, who was not currently working in the capacity of a news photographer.

Similar issues continued to appear. In March 2010, reporters queried Press Secretary Robert Gibbs about why no press was to be present to cover the signing of an abortion-related executive order. The following exchange ensued:

Q: You also have an event today where you’re signing—the President is signing an executive order on abortion that is a pretty big national issue. Why would that be closed press, no pictures?
Gibbs: We’ll put out a picture from Pete.
Q: But what about a picture from the actual national media, not from—
Gibbs: Oh, the picture from Pete will be for the actual event.
Q: Right, but what about allowing us in, for openness and transparency?
Gibbs: We’ll have a nice picture from Pete that will demonstrate that type of transparency.
Q: Not the same, Robert. Never has been.
Gibbs: I know you all disagree with that. I think Pete takes wonderful photos.\textsuperscript{88}

Members of the press were quick to point out that they were not criticizing Souza, but rather the issue was the lack of opportunity to make and circulate photographs without a “government filter.”\textsuperscript{89}

The accumulation of newsworthy images released directly to Flickr increasingly frustrated photographers in the White House press corps. Things came to a head in late 2013 when close to forty news organizations and journalism associations, including the White House Correspondents’ Association and the White House News Photographers Association, collaborated on a letter to White House press secretary Jay Carney to complain about the lack of visual access to the president.\textsuperscript{90} The letter noted instances where the White House had not allowed photographers access to presidential activities but then had gone ahead and released its own photographs of the same event later.\textsuperscript{91} Examples included a photograph of Obama and his daughter Sasha going for a swim in the Gulf of Mexico to demonstrate that the water was safe after the BP oil spill, a Pete Souza photo of which was later released and widely circulated, and a so-called private meeting between Pakistani activist Malala Yousafzai and the president, first lady, and their daughter Malia, while Souza’s photograph of the moment was released to the press.\textsuperscript{92} Of these and other moments where press photographers were excluded, the letter to Carney stated, “As surely as if they were placing a hand over a journalist’s camera lens, officials in this administration are blocking the public from having an independent view of important functions of the executive branch of government.”\textsuperscript{93} New York Times photographer Doug Mills observed of these practices, “The way they exclude us is to say this is a very private moment. . . . But they’re making private moments very public.”\textsuperscript{94} J. David Ake of the Associated Press invoked the idea of journalism as the first draft of history: “The core issue is the White House uses [Souza’s] images and disseminates them to the public, and they become the only historical document of events.”\textsuperscript{95} Souza was occasionally asked about the controversy in interviews. He pointed out that as someone who had also covered the presidency from the outside, he understood the frustrations. But he disagreed that photographers were not getting access. “This administration has done a really good job of trying to bring photographers in,” he said on Charlie Rose, mentioning Callie Shell’s early access, as well
as that of “a dozen different photographers.”96 While the administration made some concessions and relations with the White House visual press improved (to the extent that they ever can), it also ramped up its own social media activities as new platforms like Instagram offered even more opportunities for circulating the president’s visual image.

At the same time they criticized the White House, some journalists also chastised themselves for uncritically circulating White House images. Photographer Stephen Crowley of the New York Times argued that the problem was not so much when the media were shut out of an event but when the media willingly used White House handouts.97 The American Society of Newspaper Editors also weighed in, issuing a letter to its members in late 2013 stating that if they would not run verbatim a White House press release, then they should also stop using White House photographs and videos.98

COPYRIGHTING THE PRESIDENCY: FLICKR AS A SITE OF CONTESTATION OVER USE AND INTERACTIVITY

The examples discussed thus far position the Flickr photostream as a broadcast medium—a place to present history in the making and a site for presidential publicity. In both of these instances, the archive function of Flickr was foregrounded. But Flickr served as more than just a virtual photo album; it also emphasized active engagement among users. Thus it should not be surprising that new cultural and legal questions of use, ownership, and interactivity emerged in the context of the Obama Flickr site. When the White House launched the photostream in April 2009, it initially designated the images with a Creative Commons Attribution license, the same type of licensing that the Obama campaign had used for its Flickr site.99 The Attribution license “lets people reuse, reprint and remix the photos just as long as they credit the original photographers.”100 This designation was the most permissive Creative Commons license available, so it initially appeared as though the Obama administration was going to embrace the spirit of the age and encourage liberal use of and engagement with its images.

Yet the same day the feed was launched, conversations bubbled up from inside of tech blog circles, wondering why the White House’s images needed to be licensed at all.101 As documents produced by the U.S. government, the photographs were in the public domain and therefore could not be copyrighted. The answer to the question quickly emerged: Flickr did not
provide its users with the option to designate their images as public domain images. Writing in another context, Flickr’s cofounder Stewart Butterfield explained Flickr’s reasons. First, public domain status is difficult to verify, and Flickr did not want to take on potential liability if it turned out that an image declared to be in the public domain was not. In addition, while Creative Commons licenses could be changed, Butterfield pointed out that once declared, a public domain designation could never be revoked. The Electronic Frontier Foundation’s Hugh D’Andrade explored the question with regard to the Obama White House and pointed out that Flickr did in fact offer an existing option through its Commons project, where institutions like the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian could designate a photo as having “no known copyright restrictions.” D’Andrade suggested, “The White House should reconsider its licensing approach, and work with Flickr to flag these government works in the same way. This Administration is pioneering the use of the Internet to reach out to citizens—and part of the precedent it should set is a clear recognition that publicly funded government works should be free to the public, without the burden of copyright and licensing restrictions.”

Just days later, Wired magazine reported that Flickr worked with the Obama White House to create a new designation, “U.S. Government Works,” for the White House to use, and images on the photostream began to carry that label. Creative works with this designation are “usually produced by government employees as part of their official duties” and therefore do not fall under copyright law, because government works are in the public domain. Presumably this designation better fit the purposes of a visual archive being created by U.S. government staff in real time rather than the museum and archive images for which the “no known copyright restrictions” label was being used.

Issues of use and ownership emerged again in October 2009 when Flickr users noticed that a new, sternly worded statement now appeared on the White House Flickr site, appended to the caption of each image in the photostream: “This official White House photograph is being made available only for publication by news organizations and/or for personal use printing by the subject(s) of the photograph. The photograph may not be manipulated in any way and may not be used in commercial or political materials, advertisements, emails, products, promotions that in any way suggests approval or endorsement of the President, the First Family, or the White House.”
Tech writers soon publicly discussed the change. Tim Lee asked on Twitter, “White House Flickr feed says pictures ‘may not be manipulated in any way.’ Any basis for that?” Mike Masnick of Techdirt.com quoted Lee’s tweet and explored the question in a blog post. After recounting the initial licensing issue of attribution versus public domain, Masnick wrote, “It appears that the White House is now trying to claw back some of the rights over these photos that it just doesn’t have. . . . The problem is the White House has no right to say that you can’t manipulate the photo, since the photo is public domain.”

The photostream’s new warning gained visibility a few months later after being erroneously interpreted as the White House’s response to two incidents that occurred within days of one another in January 2010, when it was revealed that images of the first lady and president had been used in advocacy and advertising campaigns without their permission. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) reproduced Michelle Obama’s official first lady photograph (made by Pete Souza) in an anti-fur ad. Included alongside images of celebrities Carrie Underwood, Tyra Banks, and Oprah Winfrey with the headline “Fur-Free and Fabulous!” the image of Mrs. Obama had not been approved by the White House for PETA’s use. Around that same time, an Associated Press photograph of the president wearing a Weatherproof Garment Company jacket while visiting the Great Wall of China appeared on a large billboard erected by that clothing company in Times Square. The White House criticized both organizations for using the images without consent. Within days, PETA withdrew the ad and Weatherproof Garment Company agreed to take down the billboard. While the photostream’s new warning about use appeared before these high-profile appropriations of the Obamas, and the billboard’s image of the president was not a White House photo, the incidents nevertheless seemed to suggest a new wrinkle in the White House’s approach to the Flickr photographs.

It appeared that the White House wanted it both ways. By designating the Flickr images “U.S. Government Work,” the White House affirmed that the photographs were not subject to copyright. But it also wanted to tap into the few exceptions to that rule, including the norm that images of U.S. government workers and government logos should not be used “in a way that implies endorsement by a government agency, official, or employee.” Yet as Lee and Masnick hinted a few months earlier, the
new statement was heavy-handed and did not have legal legs to stand on. First, each image on the White House Flickr photostream was designated “U.S. Government Work,” a label that appeared with a direct link to U.S. copyright law declaring that image to be free from copyright restrictions and stating that users could, among other things, “reproduce the work in print or digital form,” “create derivative works,” “perform the work publicly,” and “display the work.” The statement allowing the creation of “derivative works” seemed to directly contradict the new warning’s prohibition of manipulation “in any way.” Second, commentators pointed out that as U.S. Government Work, all of the photos had been paid for with taxpayer money, so it was inappropriate to deny members of the public the opportunity to use what was technically theirs. In addition, as the next section of this chapter vividly illustrates, in the age of memes it was impossible to avoid the inevitable remixing of the Flickr images. Even if the White House wanted to maintain tight control, social media users had other ideas. Finally, even the White House seemed uninterested in enforcing its own warning. In a February 2012 press briefing, ABC news reporter Ann Compton asked Deputy Press Secretary Josh Earnest about an official White House holiday portrait of the Obama family that was appearing in an internet ad for the president’s reelection campaign: “Does the campaign buy the rights to photographs from official White House government photographs and video? Does it have free access to all government video and pictures taken of the president?” Earnest asked Compton whether the image in question was “a photo that’s available on our Flickr website.” Compton confirmed that it was, and then Earnest replied, “What we have found is that a whole lot of people who have access to the Flickr website use these photos for a wide range of reasons—whether to put them on their Facebook page, to send them to their friends because they think they’re interesting—.” Compton jumped in: “But they cannot be used for commercial—.” Earnest replied, “They cannot be used for commercial uses, that’s true. But we’ve also seen a number of political campaigns, certainly in 2010, that used . . . photos off the Flickr website and incorporated them into their television advertisements and other advertisements.” After Compton pressed him further, Earnest concluded, “My understanding about the way that that material that’s publicly released is, is that with the exception—the commercial uses exception that
you stipulated—that these are basically items in the public domain.”  

Josh Gerstein of Politico described this exchange and reminded readers that the White House Flickr warning on the images was not only about commercial uses. It also referenced “political materials” like those the Obamas had circulated in the online ad that Compton referenced, as well as in another fund-raising email sent in late 2011. For Gerstein, Earnest’s admission that the images were in the public domain confirmed that even the White House knew its photo warning was “mostly bluster.” If the White House were following its own rules, then the campaign would not be able to use Flickr photographs of the president because of the White House photostream’s “ban on political use of the photos.”

A final tension regarding use and interactivity emerged during the first year and a half of the Obama administration, but it got less public attention. Call it “The Case of the Disappearing Comments.” Flickr’s platform aspired to be a space not only for sharing images but also for conversation and interaction. This focus held true for the Obama White House’s initial use of the site. At first the photostream allowed user comments. Because Flickr was favored by professional and amateur photographers, many of these comments noted the quality of the shots or asked questions about Souza’s camera or the conditions in which the photographs were made. Predictably, other comments offered political approval or disapproval of Obama himself, and some of those ideological conversations got messy. The question of the difference between impassioned political conversation and spam or trolling—always difficult for social media sites to navigate—emerged on the White House photostream early on. Flickr required users to sign in with a Flickr account to be able to participate in the community and comment on images. Perusal of the photostream’s comments from 2009 and early 2010 makes it clear that several users likely set up Flickr accounts mainly to criticize the president and his policies. (On the archived Obama site, many of these accounts now show as “deleted,” though the comments themselves remain visible.) A few users violated the site’s terms of service to such an extent that Yahoo! (which at the time owned Flickr) banned their accounts from the site. A user named Shepherd.Johnson, for example, garnered media attention in June 2009 when Yahoo! banned him from Flickr after he left multiple comments in a row on images from Obama’s 2009 trip to Cairo. Johnson claimed that Yahoo! deleted twelve hundred images from
his paid “pro” account after he “protested the Obama administration’s policy on torture photos.”122 Yahoo! implied that Johnson’s account was removed because he had violated Flickr’s community guidelines.123

Although the incident did not generate an official response from the White House, the White House eventually elected to eliminate comments altogether. After June 2010 no photographs uploaded to the White House Flickr photostream allowed the option to leave a comment, though users could still flag a photograph as a “favorite.” Furthermore, this change went unremarked upon by the White House or the news media at the time. Pete Souza later recalled that he had become increasingly disturbed by the tone of the comments, specifically their use of profanity and derogatory language. He asked the White House counsel’s office about whether comments could be moderated or whether they could block users or ask Flickr to do so and was told that First Amendment considerations would preclude that. He explained:

Meanwhile, the comments kept getting worse. One day I received an email from a middle school civics teacher that the Flickr photo stream had become a great tool for teaching her kids about the Presidency, but she had made a decision (I can’t remember if it was a school decision) to not show the photos any more because of the vulgar language. That was the final straw for me. I turned the comments off that day. Then I went to see the White House counsel and told her that I had solved the problem. When I told her what I had done, she smiled and said that she couldn’t make an argument that I couldn’t do what I did.124

Souza’s account of turning off the comments illustrates perhaps better than anything the tensions surrounding ownership and interactivity at play with the White House Flickr photographs. The Flickr site’s potential educational value to schoolchildren ultimately meant more to Souza than the “anything goes” comments sections that dominated early social media sites. In this way the Obama White House Flickr photostream not only collected photographs; it also captured key debates and conversations about photography in the age of social media. These debates embedded themselves into the photostream itself, in ways both explicit (the addition of the stern but unenforceable warning, the U.S. Government Work designation) and implicit (the disappearing comments). These nonphotographic presences and absences are very much a part of the story of what social media did to photography in the Obama era.
REMIXING THE PRESIDENCY: FLICKR AS RESOURCE FOR VERNACULAR PLAY AND SITE OF RESISTANCE

While the White House tried to control who might use the photographs it posted to Flickr, social media culture had the last laugh. The photostream lived—and continues to live—in a visual culture of remixing, appropriation, circulation, and play. In fact, most viewers likely encountered the Obama images not by directly accessing them on Flickr but by encountering them as part of listicles, gifs, and memes that remixed the photographs in playful or pointed ways. After Obama left the White House, when Pete Souza began using his Obama images to criticize President Donald Trump, the Flickr feed arguably also became a site of political resistance. If the Obama White House did not always achieve its lofty goals for citizen interactivity, the public nevertheless made good use of its social media imagery. Circulating and appropriating the Obama Flickr images in ways that went far beyond the boundaries of the platform itself, the public embraced photography’s new visual values of sharing and remixing.

The push to not just view but also use the images emerged immediately after the site debuted, with one article even using its headline to announce, “Official White House Photos on Flickr, Ready for You to Photoshop.” Beginning in the mid- to late 2000s, sites like Buzzfeed emerged to produce and circulate viral content online. Buzzfeed made regular and repeated use of the Obama Flickr site. In honor of President Obama’s fiftieth birthday, in 2011, Buzzfeed shared “The 50 Best Photos of President Obama from the White House’s Flickr Stream.” Features like “Four More Years of Barack and Michelle Being Adorable Together in the White House” (featuring twenty photos of the president and first lady dancing, holding hands, or looking lovingly into each other’s eyes) or “All the Times Obama Lost His Chill around Kids” mobilized the White House Flickr photostream to highlight aspects of the president’s personal character such as the Obamas’ seemingly ideal companionate marriage, his love of children, and his “no drama” personality. These and other social media appropriations of the Flickr site’s photographs on Twitter and Tumblr reanimated the visual themes of Souza’s behind-the-scenes images and arguably benefited the Obama White House even as it had little control over them. Even material critical of Obama administration policy did not stray far from playful framing. After Edward Snowden leaked classified government data in 2013, Buzzfeed participated in the widespread “Obama Is Reading Your Emails”
meme by curating a gallery of Flickr photos of Obama looking at screens that it called “Photos of Obama Reading Your Email.” As the Obamas prepared to leave the White House, *Buzzfeed* launched a flurry of Obama-themed collections, including “33 Pictures of the Obamas That Will Restore Your Faith in Love,” “44 of the Most Iconic Pictures of President Barack Obama,” and, in a video slideshow accompanied by tinkling piano music, “22 Photos That Will Make You Miss Obama.” Some beyond the media went much further than simply reproducing the images; *Huffington Post* reported that a Cleveland, Ohio, couple recreated the poses of several of

Figure 9.3: Screen shot of David Mack, “All the Times President Obama Lost His Chill around Kids,” *Buzzfeed*, Nov. 2, 2015.
Photographs from the Flickr photostream also regularly appeared in memes. Meme archives such as KnowYourMeme.com document thousands of Obama-related memes, and official images from the White House feature in a number of them. The Situation Room photograph immediately generated memorable memes. One inserted the MTV reality show star “The Situation” into the photograph, while others added superhero costumes to everyone in the picture and Photoshopped in popular culture figures such as Big Bird, Elvis, and Pee Wee Herman. Official White House photographs featuring President Obama and Vice President Joe Biden became regular fodder for memes depicting the so-called bromance between the two leaders. These memes drew upon the president and vice president’s well-known deep affection for each other and typically featured Biden as prankster and Obama as straight man. (President Obama even used one of the most popular of these to wish Biden a happy birthday on Twitter.) Not all memes were positive or playful, however. Racist imagery that had appeared during the 2008 campaign followed Obama into the White House and continuously circulated in popular culture; any Google Image search revealed racist memes featuring Obama to be easily accessible.
In addition to serving as raw material for memes, in at least one case the photostream featured President Obama participating in a popular meme. During the summer of 2012, gymnast McKayla Maroney infamously offered a disgruntled smirk on the medal stand after having to settle for a silver at the London Olympics. Within hours, photographs of Maroney’s smirk circulated in a variety of memes labeled “McKayla is not impressed,” including (inevitably) the insertion of her smirk into the Situation Room photo. In November of that year, the U.S. Olympic Gymnastics Team visited the White House. Souza photographed Maroney in the Oval Office with President Obama, each of them mimicking the famous smirk. The photograph, released a few days after the visit, illustrated to some that the president, who had apparently asked Maroney to pose with him doing the “not impressed” face, was delightfully up to speed on popular culture. But Mike Masnick of TechDirt.com noted that Obama’s willingness to participate in a meme ironically contradicted the White House photostream’s own warning about not appropriating its images. Masnick said the Oval Office photo proved that the warning was “especially ridiculous since the entire reason the ‘McKayla is not impressed’ meme became so popular was the memegeneration of putting her displeased face into various other images.”
Masnick then concluded his post with a meme of his own that technically violated the White House warning: the Flickr photo of Obama and Maroney doing “not impressed” superimposed over the words of the White House’s photo warning.140

As “McKayla is not impressed” illustrated, the photostream not only pictured the president and his activities; it also indexed quickly changing social media practices and performances. Another feature of social media performance that the photostream indexed was the rise of selfie culture. The selfie, a self-portrait made with a mobile phone and shared via social media, is not just a portrait; it is also a powerful mode of self-representation.141 While the practice of self-portraiture had been around since the very beginning of photography (the first daguerreotype produced in the U.S. was a self-portrait by Robert Cornelius142), the rise of mobile phone photography and especially the introduction of the front-facing camera fueled the practice.143 The selfie blurs the boundaries between public and private in that it is explicitly designed to be shared with others while at the same time functioning like a personal snapshot.144 Often derided as narcissistic, inappropriate, or even deadly, selfies nevertheless became a cornerstone of photography in the social media era.145 It is no surprise, then, that hints of the rise of selfie culture dotted the White House Flickr photostream. A photograph of President Obama posing for a selfie with a diner patron in Iowa in 2010 showed the woman making the picture with the back-facing camera of a flip-phone; the term “selfie” does not appear in the caption, however, because it was not yet in common use.146 By 2013 the term itself gained traction; in fact, the selfie had gone mainstream to such an extent that Oxford Dictionaries named it “word of the year.”147 Just a few weeks after this announcement, President Obama himself became embroiled in conversations about the propriety of selfie practices when he and British prime minister David Cameron participated in a selfie made by Danish prime minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt at Nelson Mandela’s memorial service in South Africa.148

The Obama White House Flickr photostream contains thirteen photographs that include the term “selfie” in the caption, all made between 2013 and 2015. The term first appeared in quotation marks in a caption for a photograph depicting First Lady Michelle Obama making a selfie with the first family’s dog, Bo, as part of a National Geographic magazine effort to create the world’s largest online photo album of animals.149 The other selfies in the Flickr feed dropped the quotation marks (indicating the newness of
the term had worn off) and consisted primarily of images of the president and first lady posing with high-profile White House visitors (celebrities and athletes) or children. Perhaps the image that best illustrated how the selfie was changing photography was a Pete Souza photograph that did not actually picture the president at all. Made in 2014 in Austin, Texas, the image featured a trio of young women sitting at a restaurant table, posing for a group selfie. Behind them, an older man aimed his own phone camera at something beyond the women, across the room and offscreen. Only by reading the caption would the viewer realize what actually was being pictured: “Patrons pose for a selfie as President Barack Obama greets people at the Magnolia Cafe.”

While the older man pointed his camera at Obama to get a picture of the president, the young women making the selfie were clearly putting themselves into the picture with the president. The photostream not only chronicled the president and first lady’s participation in selfies; it also illustrated how the practice of making selfies was changing people’s relationship to photography itself.

As the 2016 election came and went and the Obama administration drew to a close, I assumed that the White House Flickr photostream would become old news. What I could not predict was what Pete Souza

Figure 9.6: Pete Souza, “President Barack Obama poses for a photo with a patron at Jerry’s Family Restaurant, a diner in Mount Pleasant, Iowa,” April 27, 2010. (Official White House photo via Obama White House Flickr photostream.)
would do with his newfound freedom as a private citizen. Within days of Trump’s inauguration, Souza turned his now personal Instagram feed into an ongoing commentary on the Trump presidency. Significantly, he did so by appropriating and recirculating official Obama photographs to critique the unfolding chaos and daily dramas of the Trump White House. On Trump’s first full day in office, after news emerged that Trump had replaced the Obama-era rust-colored drapes in the Oval Office with gold ones, Souza posted a photograph of President Obama in the Oval Office to Instagram with the caption, “I like these drapes better than the new ones. Don’t you think?” Subsequent posts quickly grew more political. On January 31, 2017, the day Trump announced Neil Gorsuch as his Supreme Court nominee, Souza posted a photograph of President Obama and his rejected choice for that same seat with the caption “Merrick Garland. Just saying.” Souza’s posts, perfectly pegged to the news of the day, quickly snagged him close to 2 million Instagram followers (significantly higher than his Obama-era number of 744,000) and earned him the nicknames “Chief Troll” and “King of Instagram Shade.” Souza’s posts became so popular that Washington, DC, writer Ruth Tam tweeted a tongue-in-cheek quiz to her Twitter followers:

Figure 9.7: Pete Souza, “Patrons pose for a selfie as President Barack Obama greets people at the Magnolia Cafe in Austin, Texas,” July 10, 2014. (Official White House photo via Obama White House Flickr photostream.)
How do you get your news?
(a) Washington Post
(b) New York Times
(c) NPR
(d) Reading Pete Souza’s Instagram captions and working backwards.¹⁵⁴

Souza’s Instagram feed was a surprising mobilization of the Obama archive, yet one completely in keeping with the playful, pointed practices of the social media age. Relying on strategies of antithesis, juxtaposition, and analogy, Souza used the White House visual archive to highlight the personal and policy differences between Trump and Obama. The resulting Instagram narrative effectively turned the Obama White House photographs into a resource for resistance and activism. It also garnered Souza another book deal; in 2018 he published Shade: A Tale of Two Presidencies, which paired his Instagram posts and Obama photographs with items from the news and Trump’s Twitter feed.¹⁵⁵ Souza’s remixed of the Obama images offered more than critique of the new president, however. Especially in the first year or so of Trump’s presidency, Souza’s Instagram feed kept Obama’s visual image present in the public sphere when the former president himself was largely absent. As a result, the Obama presidency was in

Figure 9.8: Pete Souza, “Merrick Garland. Just saying.” Instagram, @Pete Souza, Jan. 31, 2017.
effect reanimated each time Souza reposted a visual fragment of it. That renewed visibility capitalized on many of the same aspects of the Flickr site that I have already discussed. Theoretically, anyone could have performed the same visual critique with White House Flickr photostream images, because they are in the public domain. But because it was Souza himself posting the images, they carried the authority of the office and of his previous, high-profile position. Souza’s juxtaposition of Trump to Obama also reflected the carefully curated publicity aims of the Obama White House, boosting the Obamas’ own visual brand beyond the temporal boundaries of his presidency at the expense of Trump. Finally, it is also worth noting that Souza’s Instagram shade operated largely in a vacuum—not only because of the absence of Obama but also because the Trump team could not offer a suitable visual rejoinder to the Obama visual archive. Trump hired a chief photographer, Shealah Craighead, who had worked as Laura Bush’s photographer during the second Bush administration. They uploaded photographs to a White House Flickr photostream and posted images in other social media outlets as well. In August 2019, roughly two-thirds of the way through Trump’s single term, the Trump White House Flickr photostream surpassed the total number of photographs posted by Souza’s team to the Obama site across the full two terms. Ever watchful, Souza marked the occasion on his Instagram feed with a photograph of President Obama on Inauguration Day in 2009 and a note: “So I guess Comrade Minus [his nickname for Trump] has us beat on that.” Craighead and her team’s access to the president was much more limited than Souza’s, and the Trump Flickr site showed none of the thoughtful editing or careful curation that is a hallmark of the Obama site. Michael Shaw wrote in Columbia Journalism Review of the Trump Flickr site’s early imagery: “What hasn’t drawn broader media attention—saturated as we are by social media and the notion today that ‘everybody is a photographer’—is the haphazard, do-it-yourself approach to both the marketing and the historical documentation of Trump’s presidency.” The Trump White House photos were no match for Souza’s intimate behind-the-scenes pictures.

By depicting broader cultural performances such as memes and selfies, the Flickr site not only built an archive of the Obama presidency, but it also participated in a culture of remixing and indexed a history of vernacular practices of social media photography. Even years after Obama left office, it has continued to serve as a resource for invention and critique.
What Social Media Did to Photographic Presidents

It may be tempting to understand the Obama Flickr site as simply a product of the new visual values of the social media era. Indeed, it almost perfectly embodies photography culture of the early twenty-first century. We are now able to share and remix seemingly every image that we encounter in an endless series of gifs, memes, and other viral creations. The Obama White House embraced the visual values of sharing and remixing across all of its communications, and the Flickr site serves as an exemplar of the digital practices of the White House’s first “social media ninja.” Yet, as I have argued throughout this book, new visual values also tend to run up against more established cultural norms. The social media era is no different. As much as the Obama administration embraced the ethos of sharing and remixing, it—like other administrations before it—also sought to carefully control the president’s image. In doing so, it created a visual archive that embodied those seemingly contradictory goals. The Obama Flickr site functioned simultaneously as a historical repository, a real-time public relations effort, a chronicle of the challenges of interactivity, an index of vernacular practice, and, after Obama left office, a site of resistance. The story of what social media did to photography in the Obama era is a story of how tensions between control and interactivity played out amid the early twenty-first century’s new visual values of sharing and remixing.