Abstract:

Popular memories of Polaroid cameras construct the product as consumer item that revolutionized the practice of amateur photography. From a business perspective, Polaroid provides a popular case study as an innovative technological company led by a scientific genius that fell victim to another disruptive technology – digital photography. This paper argues for a nuancing of this narrative. Through an analysis of historical documents – including advertisements, annual reports, internal communications and popular press stories – I argue that Polaroid situated its cameras squarely within the framework of amateur photography created by Kodak. Despite suggestions about its revolutionary impact, this positioning prevented them from establishing “instant” as the standard for consumer photography or dramatically changing the culture of amateur imaging. This paper raises the possibility that the company’s failure to shift the prevailing cultural logic of consumer photography put it in a more vulnerable position regarding the rise of digital photography.