Scalable Sociality and 'How the world changed social media':

Conversation with Daniel Miller

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 and

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Abstract

Daniel Miller is Professor of Material Culture at University College London. His prolific work in consumption studies, material culture studies and, more recently, digital anthropology has made fundamental contributions to our understanding of consumption, markets and culture. Miller is currently in the midst of a five-year European Research Council grant titled, Social Network Sites and Social Science, which funds the Global Social Media Impact Study. Developing concepts such as *scalable sociality* and understandings of 'Why We Post', anthropologists in nine locations around the world have conducted ethnographies, each of fifteen months, focusing on everyday social media use in relation to issues of migration, family, politics, education, and commerce, as well as, on the ways in which genres of content flow through different platforms. The project's output includes eleven scholarly books, the launch of the Why We Post website, and an online university course, all of which are open access and have creative commons license. Miller is a Fellow of the British Academy and has won the Royal Anthropological Institute's Rivers Memorial Prize given in past years to luminaries Bronislaw Malinowski, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, and Mary Douglas. This interview took place in London, 19 October 2015.

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After an hour or so with pints of India Pale Ale in an increasingly loud pub decorated for the Rugby World Cup, we decided to continue our previous interview's theme and move on to unusual mixed drinks. Daniel Miller walks at the pace many people jog, so I was sweating by

the time we reached the massive castle-like structure of St Pancras, next to Kings Cross Station. Drinking at St Pancras, in what was the former ticket hall, has become something of a worshipful experience, with immense church bells sacrilegiously hoisted to the Booking Office Bar's ceiling creating a shadowy belfry atmosphere among those ordering the House Cocktails, some created anew from the Victorian era's forgotten recipes.

The Quince and Apricot Royale, the Rhubarb and Ginger Sour, not to mention lavender infused Gin, cause positive first impressions. Miller has no favorite to guide us, so we read through the menu. Pink Grapefruit attracts my attention. Miller's thoughts turn to rhubarb. Then, I see the Ambassador's Reserve: dandelion and burdock with maple reduction and Fernet-Branca. Miller eschews any encounter with Fernet-Branca, but notes the traditional, perhaps working class, tones of the dandelion and burdock combination. I quickly settle on this, while he considers the Herbalist: green chartreuse and absinthe, which I observe might take the interview in a promising direction: he shifts to a Rhubarb Gimlet. The background glare of clattering glassware, constant conversation, and wafting strains of a horn section creates no distraction from beginning the discussion.

Janet Borgerson (JB): So I want to ask you about some things you mentioned earlier this evening in relation to your current project and the Why Do We Post website which I had a chance to see: scalable sociality and 'how the world changed social media', which I believe is the name of a book coming out of your recent research. What about that? What is social media without the world?

Daniel Miller: The central point that comes out of our research which is based around nine anthropologists who simultaneously carried out 15 months' field work at sites all around the world was, amongst other things, to answer that question. Most studies of social media concentrate on platforms: They're studies of Facebook, they're studies of Twitter.

Our autumnal drinks are set down on the table, but we don't take time to pick them up. Also, a small mason jar of black pepper-specked buttery popcorn, which I suggest I will eat while he talks, though Miller shortly proves he can do both at the same time.

JB: You've done some work like that.

Miller: Yes, I have, and an implication, then, when you do that is that there is something causal in the nature of the platform. This is what academics often call "affordances" – that which the platform lends itself to, and therefore we find the consequences. This is what Facebook did to the world. This is what Twitter did to the world.

JB: You disrupted that a bit in your research on Trinidad and the mobile phone. You showed that the mobile phone didn't just come in and simply operate as a phone. It was used to create and motivate different social relations.

Miller: The starting point is often, what has the thing or the platform done? With this project, we realized that actually we may have got this wrong. Although something is done on Facebook or on Twitter it doesn't necessarily follow that the platform itself and its affordances are the reason why we can explain the content we find there. The best evidence against that is that in our current research we find that you have whole genres of content that happily migrate between entirely different platforms.

JB: Whole genres of content?

Miller: What social media is largely about are genres of content. And these genres of content by and large existed prior to social media. So, for example, I might be studying the banter that takes place between school children. Now, that existed in the playground, off-line, before social media was ever heard of, and then when the on-line possibilities developed, actually, the main places these developed were on BBM, the proprietary messenger service of Blackberry phones. Blackberry subsidized its handsets and made cheap phones. For a lot of school kids the only phones they could afford were Blackberry phones. They saw the BBM as a relatively private service, hidden, where they could get away from their parents and others. Where they could get away with fun and often quite negative child banter and quarrelling below the radar. It was private. It wasn't seen, and if I'd been studying this at that time I might've come along and said, Oh, I can explain why this is all on BBM. BBM has these affordances, and I might've come to that conclusion. And that's

typically what people studying media and communications will do, including myself. But then I discovered that the same genre existed, of course previously, on the playground, but then goes to BBM, and then migrates again. In Trinidad we find it migrates mainly to Facebook, whereas in England it migrates principally to Twitter. Now, Twitter couldn't have less in common with BBM. It's highly public and none of these kids made their profiles private. Anybody can see what they're doing, and it has very different qualities; and Facebook is different again.

The genres, these kinds of conversations, this kind of banter and joking, the way kids talk to each other, is not changing. So, what this demonstrates is that an assumption that it was the quality of the platform and the affordances associated with that platform that were causative was wrong. Actually, what is robust are the genres of communication. Genres may be the way we talk in pubs or restaurants, or the way young mothers want to circulate stuff about their babies.

As our popcorn diminishes, another small offering arrives. I think of the wide, red help-yourself plastic baskets set near popcorn poppers at dive bars across the United States, for example the legendary Torch Bar in downtown Flint, Michigan. In contrast, this fashionable mason jar's dimensions make it difficult to extract more than one kernel at a time, and the effort is creating considerable rustling noise near my microphone, so I dump the contents out onto our drink coasters. Miller looks puzzled by this move, but continues to talk and eat, now picking popcorn up off the table.

It's not that a genre of communication is unchanged by the context in which it is now found; but it's the robustness of these genres that transforms the social media into something that the inventors of those social media never expected. Obviously a lot of these genres are also local, so you'll see for example in China genres of communication to do with parents, or for example, the way in that case school children tend to form tight groups that remain closely associated as a supportive network for the whole of the rest of their lives in a way that certainly does not happen in the UK. That is reflected in social media. Again, in China, there's the way that money is given in the way we would tend to give gifts. There it is seen as appropriate to give cash, in red envelopes.

So WeChat, which is one of the main platforms in China, quite similar to our WhatsApp, is a place where they have a virtual red envelope where cash is given through social media. WeChat might as well be WhatsApp. Similar function, but we would never use WhatsApp as a place to gift cash for ceremonial occasions, but the Chinese do, because that's the way Chinese sociality works, and that's a genre of sharing communication.

JB: So, the sociality of some cultures under examination is altering the media to fit already existing forms.

Miller: Well, precisely. What is social media? Social media from our point of view is content. And then you have to say, what is responsible for the kind of content we actually see? Is it the result of the nature of the media, or is it some other factor? And by and large we find some other factor. Having said that our research can never be over generalized, because we have nine different sites. There are places where social media is transformative, where it can extend or radically change what was previously going on. Often it simply extends it, but sometimes it's a totally different direction. Take the Turkish site we work on right on the Syrian Turkish border, a site of great interest for many different reasons at the moment. (Daniel is chewing, causing some mumbling, and I have to ask him to repeat a phrase). What we discovered there was that, okay, this is a very conservative society. It's a Muslim society, a traditional society. The Kurds have tribal social formations, but if you look at the social media, like Facebook, does this reflect that conservative society? The answer is, no, actually it creates something that is way more conservative, because the activities that are now under the influence of more liberal ideas in the society happen off-line – people might meet in the café or in a public space. They're never shown on line. On line your older relatives are seeing what's going on and will inevitably disapprove. So even at weddings, you're not showing your grandma's dresses. These days in most of the wedding photos, we see the food that was served, because that's not going to threaten anyone. People will, as Lisa Costa who did the work shows, make sure not a single bodily hair is visible in a Facebook posting. If you look at that society from the point of view of Facebook, it's far more conservative than it is off line, which is not something that was intended. Facebook wasn't invented to make societies ultra conservative.

JB: Or, to help promote public personas that uphold traditional values that will not present a threat to the people who are behind those personas.

Miller: People have to be incredibly cautious. You think there's this hugely political contentious area, but actually it's just social media. So the main thing they're concerned with is don't post anything that will offend relatives and friends, which means when it comes to politics, instead of this being this free liberal space, people avoid politics altogether. The more important politics is, the less politics you see on social media. Completely the opposite of what people have assumed about politics over here, but that's because these have been students that have gone out to look for politics. If you look for politics on Twitter, you'll find it. But in our project we look at how much politics is there in the day to day usage of social media, and the answer is, very little. It's not sensible to talk about politics in such a contentious space.

JB: So, the people who are participating in those social media are transforming what someone thought social media might produce. Then, is that an example of how the world transformed social media?

Between the popcorn and the increasing crowd, I'm having to listen more intently. At this point, we halt and say a cheers, taking a moment to reflect on our drinks. I'm wanting to know how the Rhubarb Gimlet, in a small martini glass with a thin reddish twist, smells: "Very rhubarby, which is a very good thing for a cocktail to be", says Miller. The gimlet tastes tart, not too sweet, not too fruity. The Ambassador's Reserve's herbal qualities are perfectly balanced: Bitter, we decide, but by no means Fernet-Branca bitter. Miller takes another sip, then dives back into the explanation.

Miller: At the same time, in the same society, social media does exactly opposite: the major consequence of social media as a transformative element is not in politics, it's in gender. When you have new social media like WhatsApp, which are much more private, in a way

they're the opposite of Facebook, even though they're owned by Facebook. Facebook got conservative. WhatsApp got more liberal, because on WhatsApp, young Muslim women, maybe for the first time in history can directly contact young Muslim men. And do, at the rate of 700 WhatsApps a day sometimes. Without anybody being aware of what's going on.

JB: Of course, there might not have been a relevant policy about that previously that would say that it's wrong, if they hadn't figured in something like this non-visual distant contact, it could possibly be that …

Miller: It certainly doesn't destroy their reputation in the way some things might in societies with strong notions of shame and honor. You're not seen to be with that person, as you may be on Facebook, so no, not as destructive. The point is that, it's not either or. It's not that the world has made social media completely different, or that social media has changed the world. It's obviously always going to be dialectical. Both. But in this case, it provides a new space for genres to occupy, which are not themselves particularly changed. In other cases, we see two opposite elements of Muslim society, both of which are exacerbated by the possibility of the social media. The conservative element has gotten more conservative, there are liberal elements that have got more liberal.

In the English site we have something rather different. We have a history, which, first, it was social media that was transforming, and then people worked out how to tame it and make it into something that was quintessentially English. The subtitle of my book on social media in village England is going to be, most likely, 'How to keep people at exactly the right distance'. Because what the English want to do is to have what I call a Goldilocks strategy. You don't want to be too warm to people, and you don't want to be too cold to people. You want to have it, you know, 'just right'. People think social media is a way of 'friending' people; they don't realize that social media can be a way of keeping people at a distance. But if you're English and on social media, then you friend your cousins and the people you met when you were on holiday and so you've not rejected them, you're in touch with them, but, hey, you don't actually have to see them or waste your time with them, or any of those rather difficult things, because, well, we're friends on social media and that's enough.

JB: You don't have to invite them over for dinner, you don't have to plan another holiday where you're sitting with them on the beach, you just keep them up to date on Facebook.

Miller: Absolutely. But you haven't been impolite, you haven't rejected them, because their friends of yours on Facebook. So you've turned something that might've been threatening . . . at first when social media came in it was like, Oh, this is terrible, we're having to be friends with all these people.

JB: Having to feel responsible for wishing people happy birthday whenever the birthday reminder pops up, fearing you'll miss birthdays if you're not on Facebook each day.

Miller: Then, after a while it became an extremely English way of doing sociality. The work explores a traditional form of English sociality.

JB: That's wonderful

Miller: Neither to close, neither too far, keep them on Facebook, that's just distance enough.

JB: So the idea of scalable sociality: you suggest in relation to social media that people can be extremely public or extremely private or have a very small group or a very large group with which they can communicate. But, also what I picked up when I saw your website was the sense that individual people could choose at any time to engage in sociality according to their wants or needs or desires. They could be out there or not.

Miller: The concept of scalable sociality really grew in our previous work on polymedia. On the issue of polymedia, we argue that instead of treating each media separately we needed to realize this was an ecology of a series of new media, all of it coming on stream together; and what that meant was you could start choosing: with this kind of discussion we would use email, but for this we needed Skype. My parents are going to be really cross about this, better not be on Skype, better to be email, because then I can say, 'Oh, I wasn't on my email for a while', so I've got some time and distance for them to get less angry. They can't shout

at me, so I'll use email. It became a mechanism, which meant you can choose your media out of all the different media, but of course you are judged on which media you picked. Why didn't you contact me with voice when I wanted to speak to you? So, that was polymedia.

Then we realized that there is a bigger picture, and if you're doing a five-year project on social media, at some point you have to take responsibility for saying what social media is. What the hell does this term actually refer to? We started to realize there was a generalized pattern to what was going on, in that prior to social media on the whole, and there are always exceptions, but on the whole historically you had two kinds of media. You had dyadic private media – telegrams, letters, telephone calls – and that's basically a one to one. Then you had public broadcast – radio, TV, newspapers – unlimited audiences, but you had no control over them. The first social media, what used to be called social network sites, like Facebook and Myspace, were scaling down from public broadcasting, so you're broadcasting, but maybe to a couple of hundred people rather than just anybody, and you could control that. More recently you have Wechat and WhatsApp that are coming from messenger services, but scaling up, like Snapchat. And they tend to be groups of twenty, thirty, more trusted, more intimate, but not one to one. They are genuinely groups. This is not simply an ego-centered network, in the way that people like Barry Wellman have discussed. These are genuinely group based, in other words a WhatsApp message can come from anybody to anybody within that group. So they're not the decline of groups, they're the reinforcement in some ways of groups. Could be family or friends or whatever it is.

Now, you put those two things together and as new platforms develop, they start to occupy the niches along the spectrum. So now whereas once you had either the extreme of dyadic, private, two people or the extreme of public broadcast and absolutely anybody, now you have a scale. And that scale goes from little groups, Snapchat going to twelve people, closest friends; WhatsApp going to maybe 25 people; Facebook going to maybe a couple hundred people; to Twitter going to to a couple thousand people. You have a genuine scale and that includes both the size of the group and the degree of privacy you choose as appropriate to any particular message. We argue, putting these all together as polymedia, you end up with something we would call scalable sociality. You can choose the scale of the sociality that you want for any particular genre of communication.

JB: That's great.

Miller: And it's not just communication. Social media is also a place in which we now live. You can hang out with your girlfriends, you can go out with your whole class or your work groups, or you can go out with pretty much everybody you know. So, whether we think of it as a place we're living or a form of communication, it's both those things, that's the fundamental difference social media has made to human sociality. Not the only one, I have to say. There's scalable sociality, but the other big difference that we concentrate on is the transformation that social media has made in human communication from something that was either oral or textual to something that is increasingly visual. The visual is a much stronger component, element in social media than previous forms.

JB: Right. The increasing influence of the visual, and visual consumption. And an example of this visual focus from your website is the person who says, I used to only be able to reach out via text, but now I can upload videos and that changes my ability to communicate, especially with a larger group.

Miller: Also, there are memes. Somebody who is quite shy and didn't want to express political views or opinions, didn't want to give religious opinions, they will send memes. Memes are basically moral messages whether relating to expressions like, Every morning you should kneel before god and give praise for all the good things that have happened to you, or to Kermit the Frog says, Hypocrites going to the gym and looking hot end up leaving their fit partners to go out with someone big bellied who has got more time.

JB: Who has got more time because they're not going to the gym.

Miller: These memes basically denigrate what they don't agree with or laud behavior they do agree with; so memes are what we call the moral police of the internet.

JB: What does it mean that you're going to use cat memes to communicate some of your content on the website?

Miller: One of the points is that we feel if we are working on the Internet, we don't want to be abstract academics who are pontificating on a medium that is actually very engaging. We can be in and of that medium. If cat memes are a big part of the internet, then we can prove that we're capable of conveying academic information through cat memes.

JB: (laughing) Academic information through cat memes!

Miller: We hope to have cat memes that summarize fifteen discoveries that are on our website (at www.ucl.ac.uk/why-we-post). In the same way, we find from our research that a lot of informal learning on the side of formal education is through YouTube. People learn a huge amount on YouTube.

JB: People are looking up things all the time on YouTube: How do I put together my new stereo system? How do I teach my cat to roll over? How do I stew prunes? So, using YouTube as a formal learning tool.

Miller: The posts on YouTube that are watched tend to be five minutes or under. We study these phenomena, so we feel we should integrate them into our own dissemination. We have over a hundred films from the field sites, showing illustrations of how people use social media, but none of the films is over five minutes. We have a new university course that is open access on the FutureLearn platform which is part of the Open University in the UK. None of our lectures is over five minutes. Our lectures, our discussions, all our teaching units are five minutes or under, and they're YouTube videos; because if that's the way people effectively learn, and there is good evidence from our research that they do learn effectively through these methods, then instead of boring people into doodling on their notebook after the first half an hour because you have a boring forty-five minute lecture, our job is being effective educators.

JB: One of the delightful things about the approach is that you're not taking a righteous attitude: people must listen to our long rigorous lectures. People must be able to endure a certain length of presentation. You're going with the idea that here's what people already

are engaging when they're using social media – five minute YouTube videos, cat memes – and asking, How can we integrate that so that what we're trying to help people understand is being given to them in a form with which they're familiar and that they're enjoying.

This is a component of the project, Miller responds, but he assures me he has nothing against long lectures, it's only his own that are boring. Clearly, I'm not to walk away from the interview thinking this research has been watered down or trivialized, just because the Why We Post website aspires to cat memes.

Miller: We have not compromised one iota on academic scholarship. Every single one of our projects is a full fifteen months down the line classic ethnography. We didn't take any short cuts. And we are also writing eleven books, several thousand pages of academic findings. So, if people want to see the evidence of what we present, instead of a couple of journal articles you have thousands of pages of evidence. Since you've done that, you can then afford to create levels of dissemination that can reach people that to be honest are not going to read several thousand pages of academic evidence.

JB: It seems important that people who wouldn't read thousands of pages of academic evidence or case studies should have access to an understanding of how social media has been integrated into their lives, whether it's desired or not, whether it's through their loved ones, their children, or they themselves trying to adapt to a world where part of their relationships are occurring in this form.

Miller: I think we have an obligation here. I mean, when people ask me what is my target audience, of course it could be anybody; but the group that I tend to choose in particular relates to several projects I've done in South Asia and India. I know from experience that that is a part of the world, vast population, in which there are tens of millions of women who because of traditions of that area, once they are married, are not allowed to go back into formal education. But they often have degrees, they are educated.

The waitperson comes to ask if we want anything else. Miller is in such a groove he doesn't pause to consider her question, but he automatically snags the glass still holding a sip and the rhubarb twist when she reaches for it. I optimistically ask to see the menu again.

Social media has personally transformed their lives; so, if they're interested in anything that is going on in the modern world, they are certainly interested in the nature of social media and they're reflecting on it.

JB: So, they're being transformed by social media, but also are transformed by the traditional customs of the society in which they live; and sometimes the society in which they live alters what they have access to. Going back to your point about gender, here we have an educated class of women, aware of social media, who nevertheless are living in a traditional society that makes them into wives and mothers, and that might take them out.

Miller: They are no longer able to develop and further the education which they may have seen as fulfilling to their lives, and that we would feel as outsiders, they have a right to.

JB: Right, but that would be true of the United States too.

Miller: It's true about many, many societies.

JB: Women give up possibilities emerging from education for these roles.

Miller: If we are involved in education, we have a responsibility to be proactive to reach the kinds of groups of people who want education, but will not get direct access to things like the universities in which we traditionally teach. If we are studying this new media, then we also have a responsibility to think how that same new media that we are studying become the instruments for providing a kind of global education. In this project you've got an ideal: on the one hand, we've engaged in global research. In other words, the premise of our work is you can't understand social media from any one place. It is something that is ubiquitous across the globe, thus we have nine different sites to try and represent the multiplicity of social media in its cultural diversity that exists around the world. That's one end of the

spectrum. At the other end, having learnt about it, and trying to respect the uses represented by often quite low income groups that are just now starting to get involved in education – in Brazil, in China, in India – and having asked those people to participate as our informants in gaining this information, can we then use the same ethos to create a different kind of education whose goal is to reach the same kind of populations that we are studying. That's why one of the key elements of our work is to produce much more accessible, popular versions, so we have a series of layers. At the bottom we have the eleven books, and above that we have a university course of five weeks. The books themselves are open access and creative commons license. The university course is on a platform developed by the Open University and again with open access. Everything has a creative commons license. Then we move up to the website in which we announce our work in terms of a popular form, 'discoveries', that includes things like the cat memes.

JB: I want to contribute to a couple of those. I've got two beautiful cats that are very expressive.

Miller: Please send us the photos. We're short of a few emotions amongst the cats.

JB: Mine are very expressive cats.

Miller: That's what we need. Good. So, the clincher, if you like, is the commitment that we have translated the entirety of the university course and the entirety of the website into all the languages of the all field sites. Everyplace we worked, our material will be available in the language of that place. There I think may be the single most important element of trying to achieve this goal of reaching back to the audiences from which we have learnt in actually conducting our research and trying to make these things accessible and popular. We also have people who are examining . . . one of the problems with academia is language. We've tended to use a language that is used really for speaking to academics, whereas in our work we have a specialist in colloquial English who removes any words that we have used that she regards as not accessible to Upper School level English. I personally think that I have been misled by the traditions of academia in which I have been raised. Extremely complex

ideas and original insights including valid philosophical insights can be expressed in colloquial language.

JB: Well, it's funny. I realize when I try to explain various ideas to my mom, I'm able to put them into language that she can understand; but when I go to write my papers, I don't use that language. I've been learning more and more as I've been spending more time around people who aren't in academia that it is possible to keep things clear and give good examples in straightforward language.

Miller has taken advantage of this brief respite to have a last sip of his drink. It's later. It's louder. We've had our popcorn jar replenished several times and we're finishing that off. Maybe we should've gone to dinner.

Miller: There's clearly a problem when ideas that claim to be radical are actually constructed within a genre that is elitist. As Bourdieu pointed out in *Homo Academicus*, despite himself being an example of just that problem.

JB: This also is making me think about some work I did in international health research involving human subjects where these international health researchers go into various communities, and they always say that at the base of the research is the desire to help the population from which they received the information, the groups that contributed to them gaining the knowledge that they gained in Namibia or South Africa; but really all those people often get left with is a cement block building that housed the research team's dispensary, and they never really do see the benefits even though academics are typically saying, We're giving back benefits to the populations.

Miller: In the past it was difficult, but the situation has changed. When you work in places like China and India there has been a massive transformation in the last couple of decades in that university systems are developing. People who never before would have had the possibility of higher education are gaining it. In this project, it's precisely because I have a topic that lends itself to popular interest, social media; and I think social media is the most

discussed thing, I mean, what's on your screen is discussed in England more than the weather, and that's the first time anything has ever been discussed more than the weather.

JB: (laughing) The first time anything has been discussed more than the weather.

Miller: Given that, we have a topic that lends itself…it wouldn't be true if you were working on a particularly esoteric topic, and I do not want to disrespect esoteric, difficult science or philosophy. It's just that I have a project which lends itself to a different kind of ambition. And what I am trying to do is create this notion, not just scalable sociality, but scalable education, from the gravitas of the several thousand pages of text right through to the website as its most populist form, so that we respect the range of levels at which people might want to engage with education, including people who are not involved, or cannot be involved, or cannot afford formal education. This could hopefully become a model, and in the same way that social media has increased the importance of visual communication, so in the same way in our work we try to concentrate on things like films and infographs and visual media so that people who are intimidated by difficult texts can actually gain a sense of the insights that we hope they'll be interested in and possibly contest.

JB: It's not insignificant, either, in the realm of entrepreneurship and women gaining access to business opportunities or innovative opportunities themselves, because I think one of the telling statistics in recent years is that women in business have been more able to be successful when they've started businesses online than when they've tried to do it within a traditional context where sexism and other kinds of barriers, including gender roles, prove difficult. That online access has allowed some women to do things they wouldn't have been able to do in the offline world.

Miller: One of the topics we've obviously dealt with is the relationship between commerce and social media. When you read about this, you tend to read mainly about the big commercial firms, the corporations, be they social media companies or be they other corporations who want to exploit social media for the purposes of selling. However, if you look at our findings, we think actually that the focus should be somewhere completely different. Social media are social. They're mainly about personal relations. The most

effective uses in social media that we see commercially are people who are able to exploit what we'd call weak and strong ties, but personal ties. In China, setting up and marketing the eggs of one's chickens to people who you know is an ideal way of using social media. In Trinidad, using social media, if you are a bar where people come and drink and there's a personal relationship, works very well.

JB: I'm remembering some photos not dissimilar to those you have on the Why We Post website from the Trinidadian bars. A Swedish colleague, Jacob Östberg, and I wrote about a group of, what would you say, minor aristocrats, the Stockholm Brats, who posted photos on line from their nightly exploits out and about at exclusive bars in Stockholm. We analyzed the uploaded photos for what we called 'embodied figurative tropes', and pointed out the influence of advertisements in the dualistic gender roles blazing through their body postures, facial expressions. The Brats were posting the photos themselves, pre-Facebook, they had their own website, but anyone could see the content, and this was straight up great promotion for the bars, with these displays of in-group wealth, booze, sexuality.

Miller: Social media works closely in alignment with commerce that is social and personal. By contrast, if you look at what the big companies try and do, take my English site. Big companies try to finance things these days by what they would call personalized advertising, target advertising. But actually what that means is algorithms based on abstractions, because of course they do not personally know the people.

JB: Well, that's where these issues of big data and dark data come in.

Miller: My evidence is that the impact on consumers is often negative, because when people suddenly see an advert that clearly shows that the company, be it a social media company or big corporation, knows that they are currently passing through their menopause or have cancer, and they've been targeted by adverts that says, Hi, I know you're passing through the menopause, are you interested in this? What do you think the response of the consumer is to that advert. Basically, what the fuck is this company doing knowing my business? I don't want to see something that reminds me that I'm having hot flushes. That is not going to improve my relationship to social media or to the corporations

behind it. There's an interesting irony, that the policies that are mainly pursued by the big corporations which are actually quite impersonal and insensitive, I suspect is having if anything a relatively negative effect on people's relationships with those companies. Whereas the commerce that is coming from people using their actual, authentic if you like, social networks, but exploiting that for commercial purposes on a small scale, seems to us from our evidence to be much more effective in terms of the commercialization in social media.

JB: But also the thing about entrepreneurship is that if you have people learning how social media is working, they themselves can be motivated to create something via social media that they wouldn't have thought of before.

Miller: That's true. Social media is a platform for creativity, but the nice thing about it is its mass creativity. And a good example of that would be something like Instagram. Instagram shocked the world of photography, because it took filters which previously were quite professional and involved in professional photography and democratized it, made them available to school kids, to anybody who could then make interesting photographs.

Our cocktail connection asks if we're interested in ordering something more, and we are, my drink is sadly low, a shaker is rattling ice around somewhere in the distance, but there's no time to look at the menu as we're in mid flow, so we put her off yet again. Somehow, at our prior interview at Hakkasan, we managed to digest the menu and be ready with our order. I'm beginning to suspect our investigations into the House Cocktail list will be unsatisfyingly shallow here at the Booking Office.

Miller: Actually I think Instagram is effective in a way that I'm impressed by, in the sense that it has come down to the level of people's craft, and even the topics that are taken by Instagram tend to be, Oh, I baked a really good cake. I could go on the Great British Bake Off, which is the most popular program in the UK right now. This cake is so good. Take a photo, make it look even better with a filter, put it on Instagram. Or, I spent hours making myself look really good to go out tonight. I'm going out with the girls, who knows who I may or may not meet, but I just look fantastic. Put it on Instagram. Instagram is a photographic

craft that is in a sense a kind of final point of craft activity. You went to a restaurant: this dessert is pretty. Take a photo, put it on Instagram. This is a craft dialog that has been democratized by Instagram, and I think that's something to respect in terms of the facilitation of ordinary creativity. But at the same time that's exactly why it will be denigrated by people who are trying to protect traditional forms of exclusivity in aesthetic production.

Miller pauses for a millisecond. There's a trumpet blasting from somewhere, and we're hearing a police siren just outside St Pancras, seemingly heading to King's Cross Station, next door. Protesters have been storming the Eurostar platform this week in support of migrants attempting to make their way to the UK via the Channel Tunnel. Police have been using tear gas and there are reports of injuries.

JB: When you talk about scalable sociality, and the difference between access to a small audience and a large audience, or the private and the public aspects, and this is a cliché really, but the access to the public or the large audience was often controlled by groups that many individual people or marginalized populations did not themselves have access to. What becomes clearer through the notion of scalable sociality is that social media offers the public and the mass audience to smaller groups or to the individuals: we're not just thinking of the public or the mass as accessible only to the corporations that have the foundations and resources to make certain forms of communications.

Miller: I think that's right. It is expressive. Having said that you don't want to err on the side of assuming that everything that people do with this is creative and positive.

JB: Nor that there's equality to access online.

Miller: Indeed, inasmuch as mass behavior includes gossip, bullying, mobilizing people to oppress other people, social media lends itself equally to that. It's not like we should be adjudicatory. We should recognize that it is equally facilitating of things that social groups were doing that are horrible, as well as things that we would regard positively. The point is

either way, it facilitates. It allows a new arena in which activities can take place and be disseminated more easily, be shared more easily, sometimes oppressed more effectively.

One of the key points that comes out of our research, for example, is if you look across our sites as a whole, a lot of people tended to think, sort of the technophiles, that these processes would help create equality. They would negate traditional forces of inequality, and we have not found that at all. Our general evidence is that equality online by access to things like Smartphones, has no positive impact on inequality offline.

JB: And that's something specifically that your website is addressing.

Miller: All our material gives considerable evidence that examines the relationship between online equality and offline inequality. Because we have nine sites across the world, although there will always be exceptions when you have nine sites across the world, you can also make generalizations as in this case about the ineffective impact of online equality on offline inequality. Effectively we do not see evidence for a decline in the latter.

JB: Does that have to do with people's access to computers?

Miller: That was the old digital divide argument: Access creates online equality. You can then do the same things that rich people do online. But we're beyond that. Smartphones are becoming ubiquitous. So we now need to look at a different set of questions. Does ubiquitous access effect offline inequality? Which it might have done, but our evidence is that is doesn't.

We've talked ourselves to the point where we have no time for another drink. I want to hear more about an understanding of 'Why we post' and we turn what's left of the discussion in that direction.

Miller: Whether it is used for positive or negative purposes, online access provides for the thing that drives people's lives perhaps more than anything else, which is sociality. In a society which is led particularly in recent decades toward fragmentation, isolation, the

break up of family, the breakup of community, social media is perhaps unique in that it is not a continuation of the fundamental trajectories of modernity towards fragmented individualism.

JB: OK.

Miller: From Durkheim, to Mauss, to Marx to Weber we have a grand narrative of social sciences which claims everything leads towards this breakup of traditional group formations into increasing individuality. All our evidence suggests this is not true on social media. Social media amongst other things enables people to ameliorate the negative consequences of other aspects of modernity, inasmuch as families who are now split transnationally or at least in different urban areas, which is the norm, can be back in contact. They become more viable again as families.

JB: And that relates to the work you've done on the nannies who come from Eastern Europe and find themselves in London and stay in touch with family at home via skype.

Miller: I think it has to do with the modern political economy, the international division of labour, the effect of mass migration, but also just even in affluent US and UK, the life chances of one's kids, which are likely to lead them into different areas. There is a geographical breakup. Social media has clearly been used as a response to that, to allow people to not just communicate but actually to live together. I mean, couples who are now working in different places, I think in a very genuine sense live together online. They see as much of each other sometimes online, through Skype and other forms, as much as they did when they were living together in the same place. We found whether it's caste in India or tribes in Kurdistan, traditional forms of groups are being repaired by the possibilities of social media. The imperative towards social media is in some ways the general discourse that exists not just in social science but also amongst populations at large, that modernity has had a cost. And the cost is a cost that leads to fragmented individualism, isolation and loneliness. And we are social creatures, and not surprisingly if you think of the name, social media, we use social media to be social.

We've run out of time. We finally admit this to the waitperson and she goes to get our bill.

JB: But, in part, since that sociality is scalable, we're going to see a variety.

Miller: It allows for flexibility. It's not the same as traditional sociality. It's a new kind of sociality, but I think it's one that is here to stay. This is not some transient new element. One of the things I wrote about in the book about webcam was what we call a theory of attainment, that new technologies are often seized upon when they would allow us to do something we would always have wanted to do, but didn't have the technological capacity to do. In this case, why would we have been constrained to the dualism of private as against public communication, if we could have the possibilities of scalable sociality? If some new technology arises that allows the possibilities of scalable sociality, we will seize upon those possibilities for good and for bad, and I assume new platforms will develop that will fill in the niches that have not yet been filled in to achieve an even greater scalable sociality in the future. That would be my prediction with regards to social media. End of lesson, story, tale, rubbish, crap, cocktails.

JB: No! Not the end of cocktails!

We gather up our things and try to exit through a series of landings and hallways, a path Miller obviously favors, past an immense grand staircase, but we are stopped by a security guy with a slick black earpiece who insists we leave by the front entrance archway. "Private conference," he says. My just-off-the-plane jetlag is kicking in (it's certainly not the excess of alcohol), so instead of walking Miller to his train I turn directly back toward Russell Square. Miller had ducked us into alleys and through narrow passages to reach St Pancras, but I take the non-native route back – Euston Road, Woburn Place. Northern India, the Philippines, Trinidad – he returns to these places again and again. And his PhD students' fieldwork takes him to China and Brazil and Thailand. I have a feeling he slips through the streets in these places with the same London ease.

Acknowledgements

Notes

More information about the Global Social Media Impact Study is available at:
http://www.ucl.ac.uk/global-social-media/aim-objectives
The Why We Post website will be available at www.ucl.ac.uk/why-we-post

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