WHY WE POST – TAKING ANTHROPOLOGY TO THE WORLD

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While we should consider all anthropological projects to be of equal importance to our own discipline, studies which focus on topics such as the history of kinship are seldom anticipated by the general public with bated breath. But if you are engaged in a global study of what people actually do with social media and their consequences, the considerable popular interest in the topic carries with it additional responsibilities. By the same token this also presents a rare opportunity to demonstrate just what anthropology is capable of achieving in enhancing our understanding of our contemporary world, and you may not want to squander that chance. The good news is that if you work on digital media you can also appreciate that there is a whole slew of new ways in which we can engage in this form of popular dissemination.

As a group of nine researchers in the Why We Post project, we find ourselves in just such a position. So this report is not about the results of our project, but it is rather an account of how we are trying to meet the challenge of sharing our results, and re-conceptualising the whole process of reaching diverse audiences from the most academic to the most popular. Briefly, however, the project comprised a team of nine anthropologists who carried out simultaneous 15 month ethnographies. The fieldsites included one of the new factory towns and a rural town in China, a town on the Syrian-Turkish border, low income settlements in Brazil and Chile, an IT complex set between villages in South India, small towns in south Italy and Trinidad and a village in England. Overall, our study's results range from a new definition of social media as `scalable sociality' which challenges traditional ways of explaining why people use particular platforms, to comparative discussions of the impact of social media on topics ranging from gender and education to politics and visual communication.

The project was highly collaborative from the outset. During fieldwork all nine anthropologists focused on the same topic each month, each of us exchanging 5k of notes which we then discuss online monthly While writing-up the resulting nine monographs we followed the same procedure, all working on the corresponding book chapters at the same time. We also created an e-learning course and the Why We Post website collectively and without individual attribution. All team members worked in exactly the same manner irrespective of whether they were formally PhD students, Post-doctoral researchers or full-time faculty We decided most of our research plans through voting. Our commitment to a genuinely collaborative and comparative project turned out to be an essential element in the subsequent dissemination of our findings.

At this point instead of thinking in terms of any particular mode of dissemination we tried to envisage a spectrum. At the most academic end we are committed to writing academic journal articles. Here we have no choice but to follow standard conventions since otherwise our papers would not be accepted, so this is where we

engage with how our findings relate to wider academic debates and contributions. We see the next level as our eleven books; one monograph for each site, and two comparative volumes. Here, we strove to write in an accessible and non-jargon filled manner, since these books are intended for a wider audience. Anthropologists know from experience that 15 months of fieldwork often provides so much descriptive material, original insights and requirements for contextualisation that even a full length book seems to traduce the richness of ethnography. We therefore use our books to convey the findings of each ethnography with stories that demonstrate our experience of how social media impacts upon the lives of individuals. The books are written in colloquial English and we tried to keep most of our discussion and reference to other academics within our footnotes so that the main text would be accessible to non-academic audiences. But we hope there are just as many original insights suited for academic teaching as in any more conventional anthropology monograph. Given the visual nature of our topic we made one chapter in each book and one of the comparative books largely about images such as photographs and memes with abundant illustrations.

We have also made a commitment to offer all our books and many of our journal publications as free Open Access downloads. We were fortunate to coincide with the foundation of UCL Press, the UK's first university press committed to Open Access. One of the arguments for Open Access, that is particularly pertinent to anthropology, is that the cost of books may have limited our global appeal or access for lower income populations This seems borne out by the evidence from the downloading of our books. The first three books of the series were launched on 29th February 2016. The fact that there were nearly 10k downloads within the first month suggests this concern with a wider readership was warranted. During that month our comparative volume *How The World Changed Social Media* was downloaded across 129 countries, and countries where we see more than 100 downloads include Brazil, China, India, Mexico, Russia and Turkey with high figures also from Indonesia, Nigeria and Romania.

In recent years traditional forms of lecturing have been challenged by the rise of free e-learning courses known as MOOCs (massive open online courses). Recently the UK Open University developed its own initiative through a platform called FutureLearn. Again we were fortunate that at just the right moment University College London signed an arrangement with FutureLearn and we were chosen to create the first UCL FutureLearn course. Rather than using traditional lectures the steps of a MOOC are typically short videos and readings. With its focus upon interactivity a FutureLearn MOOC is itself a re-purposing of social media as an instrument for learning. As is common for such courses, the 13 thousand registrants reduced to some five thousand actual `learners'. Even with this smaller number, some of our modules received over a thousand comments and we really enjoyed being active in these conversations. We intend to repeat this MOOC several times more.

Once again the audience for this course was clearly global, as this map shows. There were more than 100 registered students from places as diverse as Ukraine, Mexico, Indonesia and Russia.

Typical students of our MOOC are people studying social media, or anthropology, around the world. Most of them have an undergraduate degree. To reach beyond that audience we developed a still more accessible *Why We Post* website. We followed advice from people working on popularizing anthropology to announce our research results as ‘discoveries’. Fortunately, we had committed to making short films while in the field, more than one hundred of which have become the highlight of the website. We’ve also included short stories from the field sites, and even created cat memes to help share our discoveries with website visitors.

Obviously any anthropologist would at this point be feeling a bit queasy about the idea of their complex, critical, sophisticated and nuanced understandings being reduced to a cat meme. But the joy of this holistic approach to research dissemination is that by explicitly linking these levels we in effect protect ourselves from the simplifications required for popular dissemination. A person using the website is drawn up to the MOOC, in turn the MOOC uses material from the books. So there is a connection between the simple statements on the website and over two thousand pages of detailed ethnographic reportage represented by 11 books. We also devised a structure to the website that spoke to this issue. Though each `discovery’ is a short statement in simple terms, it is commented upon by each of the nine fieldsites, sometimes suggesting that the discovery does not apply in a particular place, or that it only works in a specific local manner.

The next problem was that of language, most people in our fieldsites do not speak English. We therefore translated the entire MOOC and website into Chinese, Hindi, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Tamil and Turkish including subtitling all the films.

Because FutureLearn could not support the different languages, the translated MOOCS were hosted through a different platform, UCL eXtend, where people can take the course at their own pace. Even before we had really launched our publicity Juliano Spyer attracted over 1,300 registrations to the Portuguese version. We also put a lot of work into our media strategy. Having a page in *The Economist* about our research and plenty of BBC coverage was the best way to ensure discussion within the media of targeted countries such as *O Globo* in Brazil, *El Mercurio* in Chile, or *The Times of India.*

Two final steps took us to our conclusion. We asked an expert in the British school curriculum to ensure that our language was accessible to a wide audience. That same expert has since been ensuring that our material is incorporated into high-school curriculum teaching for 16-18 year olds, as a means to attract them into the study of anthropology at college level. Meanwhile Shriram Venkatraman, had observed how certification is simply essential for any widespread take up in South Asia amongst the less elite institutions, many of which also do not have good internet access. In response he personally distributed DVD copies of the course in Tamil to individuals but always accompanied with further discussion with educators to ensure that since all our material is under a Creative Commons licence, educators are free to incorporate it under their own local certification schemes. The ethos of our dissemination is thereby as much Open Source as Open Access.

Anthropologists are used to thinking holistically in relation to ethnography and globally in relation to our equal commitment to all regions of the world. So we are in a good position to also think holistically and globally about the possibilities of research dissemination and, where possible, factoring this into major grant proposals from the beginning. Not many projects will have the scale of funding that allow them to envisage all these strategies, but much of what we achieved here was not just a result of sufficient funding. Rather, we have remained committed to collaboration, team work, and a willingness to subsume the individual within a collective endeavor. This has allowed us to achieve a scale of dissemination strategies at which things become possible that we could not otherwise have attempted.

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