

Facebook as research field and research platform

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Opening Statements by

Philipp Budka (EASA Media Anthropology Network, Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Vienna, <http://www.philbu.net/>)

Jordan Kraemer (CASTAC, Wesleyan University, <http://www.jordankraemer.com/>)

Martin Slama (Institute for Social Anthropology at the Austrian Academy of Sciences, Islamic (Inter)Faces of the Internet, <https://www.facebook.com/IslamicInterFaces>)

Sydney Yeager (DANG, Southern Methodist University, <https://sydneyyeager.org/>)

Facebook's Relevance – Some Remarks

Philipp Budka

When I started to become interested in what people do with internet technologies and on internet based platforms, there was no Facebook. There were no “social network(ing) sites“ or “social media”. At least these terms weren't used, neither in public discourse nor in academia. This has rapidly changed over the last ten years. Social media and particularly Facebook have become part and parcel of everyday life, at least in those places where people are connected to the internet and where they have access to internet services and platforms. During my PhD research I learned how people particularly in remote and isolated communities have been constantly struggling to get connected to the internet. To become part of the so called “network society” or “information society”. I realized peoples urgent need for being part of a global development process, of being able to network, to communicate, to represent and express oneself, to be able to utilize different online services – from “serious” stuff such as e-health and online education to “mundane” things like online gambling, picture sharing, or music and video streaming.

I was working with KO-KNET (Keewaytinook Okimakanak Kuhkenah Network, <http://www.kochiefs.ca/KNet>), an indigenous organization that has been providing internet access and different services to remote First Nation communities in Northwestern Ontario, Canada, since the middle of the 1990s (e.g. Budka 2015, Budka, Bell & Fiser 2009). I got particularly interested in one KO-KNET service which allows users to create their own homepages, to visit each others pages, or to exchange messages via “communication boxes”: MyKnet.org (<http://myknet.org/>). When I started my research, MyKnet.org was still very popular – particularly among the region's youth – but the times when it was the only service used to create an online presence were over. Other online services and platforms had become increasingly interesting to internet users in the remote communities: Bebo, Piczo, MySpace and Facebook. Some years after my initial fieldwork Facebook has become the dominating platform, others were gone or no longer interesting. It seemed that almost all people were using Facebook. The results of a follow-up online survey confirmed that Facebook has replaced MyKnet.org as dominant online communication tool, particularly for staying in touch with family and friends (Budka 2012). Yet another study showed that Facebook has indeed become the driving force of online social networking in the huge but thinly populated region of Northwestern Ontario and its indigenous communities (Molyneux et al. 2014).

To be frank, I was disappointed seeing my research and fieldwork site, MyKnet.org, getting ranked behind a commercial service like Facebook. I thought that MyKnet.org as a service provided by a First Nation organization to First Nation communities would always be popular and used by the region's people. I was wrong. Today, and after several technical changes, MyKnet.org is only a shadow of its glorious past. It is still made available and supported by KO-KNET and some people still use it, but it has definitely lost its former relevance. So what is the lesson here? A small, non-commercial organization from Northwestern Ontario and its homepage service doesn't stand a chance against a multi-billion dollar company and its services. People simply follow technological innovations and trends. People follow other people from one service platform to another. This logic of the masses as social media inherent characteristic is stronger than “loyalty” to an individual service provider. There is no such thing as “loyalty” to a service provider even though this provider enabled internet access and connectivity in the first place. KO-KNET as service provider hasn't given MyKnet.org the same attention it has given to other services. ...

Facebook has become a crucial research field, not only for anthropology. Its dominance in social media is mainly because of its impressive user numbers. And despite shifts in user demography, it seems that Facebook continuous to be the world's largest and most dominating social media

platform. Anthropologists therefore have to consider Facebook and related sociocultural practices and phenomena. But, anthropologists also have to be critical about Facebook and its dominant role in social media. What does it mean when people communicate, access and share information and data through only one online platform? What does it mean when Facebook has become “the internet” for many people? What does it mean when a single company controls much of the social media environment? What does it mean when users willingly provide a company with personal data? What are the online social networking alternatives, and how are they used or why are they not used? Anthropology is also the science and the analysis of human diversity. And personally, I would like to see a more diverse social media environment again.

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Ethical Entanglements

Jordan Kraemer

I joined Facebook with some reluctance in 2007, lagging after many of my peers, ostensibly in preparation for dissertation research on social and mobile media in Berlin. I'd learned about Facebook the previous year, through summer interns at a youth development nonprofit where I worked, but as a longtime denizen of LiveJournal, and sometimes-user of MySpace, I was not especially interested in a new social network site. Within a few years, however, Facebook became entwined in my daily practice, personally, and professionally, with consequences for how I later conducted my dissertation research. This media trajectory isn't unusual—when I visited Germany for predissertation fieldwork in 2007, MySpace was still the most popular social network, and social media were not yet interleaved with daily life as they since became.

By 2009, Facebook was where I enacted many social relationships, moving through multiple worlds and contexts, from friends in graduate school to alternative music scenes. Connections to electronic music enthusiasts and producers, in particular, lay groundwork for dissertation fieldwork with small circles of music fans in Berlin (the techno capital of Europe), where I studied changing experiences of place among mobile, networked, urban middle-classes (see Kraemer 2014, 2015). But when I arrived in Berlin in October 2009, I quickly faced a conundrum—use my existing Facebook profile, or create a separate account for conducting research?

I chose the former, partly out of inertia, but largely because I was concerned that a brand-new profile with no prior “Friends” would look artificial and even raise suspicion. Maintaining my personal account established me as a real, legitimate person, connected to people in the music scenes I planned on studying. This reflects complexities of ethnographic fieldwork that many fieldworkers face, especially when conducting research in large-scale or urban contexts. For example, how should I determine at the outset who counted as a potential research participant? Conversely, how could I make my presence as a researcher explicit, especially in online contexts where it's easy to observe unnoticed, as a “lurker,” even when people share very personal things.

My choices, however, had ethical consequences that threaded through my fieldwork, in ways my university's human subjects review board could not account for. The trade-off for being legible as a person online, with real social connections, lay in the difficulty in asserting clearly that I was conducting research. This was compounded by Facebook's limit on maintaining one account, in contrast to sites like Twitter, on the principle that one profile equals one subject. It also meant that adding me as a Friend furnished me with access to personal updates and information, beyond what my IRB protocol could address. Despite scrutinizing my consent forms and recruitment flyers, for example, IRB had little to say about what I did with my ethnographic observations once participants' consented to being observed.

I devised a number of solutions to offset these considerations, none entirely satisfying. Adhering to IRB's close oversight of my recruitment materials, for example, actually hampered devising new means to provide information about the project on the fly. I created a page on my personal website, with links to all consent and information sheets, in German and English, lifting the language directly from my approved materials. I created both a Facebook Group and a Facebook Page with the same name: “Scaling Berlin.” Not the most self-explanatory title for a research project on social media and scale! Multiple people joined the Facebook group, but that created further ethical complications, as now potential subjects could be identified as members of this group. Separately, I created a Friend Group of my own (that is, a subset of my Facebook Friends) including those I met in Berlin and their online contacts, so I could switch between my unfiltered Facebook News Feed

(or rather, filtered by Facebook's new algorithms), and those whose practices I was supposed to be studying.

In practice, I navigated these ethical dilemmas in the ways I collected, analyzed, and wrote about my findings, informed by professional anthropological guidelines and my contextual understanding of the lives and worlds I study. I focused on participant-observation with subjects whom I also interviewed formally, as interviews provided the best opportunity to share comprehensive consent information—but this was always tricky, as those I studied were caught up in social webs beyond the number I could interview. More complicated still was (and is) how to explain ethnographic methods, especially participant-observation, to those unfamiliar with anthropology. This was less a question of education or uneven power dynamics—though always inherent in ethnographic research, my primarily middle-class, educated subjects were my peers in many ways—and more about how and where ethnographic materials are analyzed and shared. IRB, for example, protects against privacy breaches of large-scale, aggregate data, where privacy entails stripping away personal identifiers like names or addresses. But where quantitative data loses individual specificity when aggregated and analyzed, ethnographic description resists generalization, deriving value instead from its fine-grained resolution.

Although ethnographic analysis resists generalizing, the topics I set out to study in practice posed minimal risk to most of my participants. Except in rare instances, I did not edit out or conceal findings that might expose anyone to harm. But many did share information that could lead to uncomfortable situations, from gossip that might earn social censure, to leisure activities that risked more serious professional opprobrium. Yet, at the end of the day, my research is less about what someone said about an ex, or how they really feel about someone they used to know, and more about the role of social media in constituting (and transforming) such relations. Like most ethnographers, I tell their stories through composite and recombination, to preserve the dense granular texture of ethnographic narrative without over-exposing the particulars. Still, some will inevitably recognize themselves in my writing, where I hope they find something of value.

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From Facebook latecomer to Facebook researcher and the limits of a Facebook focus

Martin Slama

When I joined Facebook in January 2012, eight years after its invention and around four years after it started to grow exponentially on a global scale, many of my Indonesian friends were already on Facebook. They were among the first with whom I connected on this platform, and until today Indonesians form the majority of people listed as “friends” on my Facebook account. This does not only tell us something about my social universe of friends and acquaintances based on a long research experience in Indonesia, but also about the country’s position in the global Facebook landscape ranking number four in terms of user numbers (after the US, India and Brazil). So back in 2012, I definitely was a latecomer on Facebook (later than around 40 million Indonesians) and in the first weeks of my new online existence I had to realise how much I must have missed: pictures of cool people with and without sunglasses; lavish dinners in restaurants with family members, old friends or colleagues; selfies of just oneself (with and without sunglasses); selfies with family members, old friends and colleagues; selfies with all kinds of celebrities (actors, singers, politicians etc.); dinners at home including close-up pictures of the dishes and instructive recipes; graduation ceremonies at universities and other rites de passage ranging from marriages to funerals; holidays inside and outside Indonesia; people (the mother, the father, the son, the daughter, a friend or oneself) in hospital and out of hospital again; etc.

Among these genres of posting were also religious expressions, that is especially Islamic ones since most of my Indonesian friends are Muslims (almost 90% of Indonesians are in fact Muslims). Here, again, the feeling haunted me that I had missed already a lot: pictures of religious gatherings (so-called majelis taklim, literally: study gatherings) that are popular especially among urban middle-class Muslims; selfies with prominent Islamic preachers; visual and verbal accounts of pilgrimages to the graves of Islamic saints in Indonesia and to Islam’s holy sites outside Indonesia, especially Mecca and Madinah; pictures of the food that is served for breaking the fast in Ramadhan; postings of verses of the Qur’an and of the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad; re-postings of posts of Islamic scholars/preachers and of Islamic organisations; Islamic-inflected reflections about a vast variety of everyday issues; Islamic poetry etc. In Indonesia, Facebook is certainly not the only social networking site that is used for religious purposes, but my first encounter with Facebook was actually very inspiring and resulted in the drafting of a project proposal that I submitted to the Austrian Science Fund. The basic idea of the project was based on my observation that for many Indonesian Muslims social media, and Facebook in particular, became part of their everyday religious life being utilised for their personal and collective religious practice. I thus proposed to view social media as social networking interfaces where Indonesia’s many “Islamic faces” are displayed, a play on words that is reflected in the project’s title “Islamic (Inter)Faces of the Internet: Emerging Socialities and Forms of Piety in Indonesia”. The project was approved in May 2014.

As a consequence, I have already been able to celebrate my second anniversary as Facebook researcher, and the project, instead of running a conventional website, is present on Facebook as well (<https://www.facebook.com/IslamicInterFaces>). Given the crucial role Facebook has played in the brainstorming phase of the project, its prominent position in the project proposal, a project title that is clearly inspired by it, and the project’s use of Facebook as its major public outreach platform one might think that this whole research endeavour is centred in and around Facebook (and to a certain extent it actually was designed like that). However, as fieldwork in Indonesia started, it quickly became clear that Facebook certainly is a popular social networking interface but that my interlocutors used other social media not less enthusiastically, and that for them Facebook was not necessarily the most significant one. A primary focus on Facebook is thus not sufficient if one seeks to grasp the complexities of Indonesian Muslims’ online religiosity (and its embeddedness in offline

life). I am well aware that this is not a surprising insight, but things are getting more instructive if one asks why Facebook does not occupy such a significant position in Indonesian Muslims' religious life despite the fact that it is by far the most popular social networking site in the country.

To answer this question, we have to consider how Facebook is used by Indonesian Muslims. It is mainly used for exhibiting visual and textual material that evinces one's piety and/or (implicitly or explicitly) aims at enhancing the Islamic practice of others. Users refer to the latter attempt as *dakwah* (usually translated as "proselytization", although in the Indonesian context it is mainly directed towards other Muslims and not towards adherents of other religions), and *dakwah* is clearly regarded as a much valued endeavour in Muslim societies. For example, one interlocutor told me that one of her Facebook posts was about the negative consequences of watching TV soap operas, which she explained to me as being part of her *dakwah*. So this is not an insignificant practice. At the same time, what these Facebook practices usually not comprise are longer conversations, elaborate dialogues or other forms of more complex exchanges. Such posts about soap operas etc. are liked, they are briefly commented on (sometimes also in a humorous way), they are somehow recognised and usually approved, but they do not spur any deeper involvement of users.

Yet my research so far indicates that many Indonesian Muslims seek a kind of deeper emotional involvement when they use social media for religious purposes. Then, however, Facebook is not their choice, also not Facebook's Messenger, but rather other messaging apps such as LINE, Telegram and WhatsApp (which, I know, was bought by Facebook). These social media are used to form groups where, for example, the Qur'an is read together which is called ODOJ, an abbreviation for One Day One Juz, where every member of the group reads one chapter (juz) of the Qur'an everyday so that the group, consisting of 30 people, reads the whole Qur'an everyday (the Qur'an comprises 30 chapters) and every individual member of the group completes reading the Qur'an in one month. They are also used for having private conversations online, for having a heart-to-heart talk called *curhat* (an acronym for *curahan hati*, literally "to pour out one's heart) or for *nge-charge hati* ("charging one's heart") that provides one with positive energy when needed. Indonesian Muslims, especially women with a middle-class background, are expecting from the preachers that they like to invite to their religious gatherings (*majelis taklim*) to be available online for *curhat* and *nge-charge hati* conversations. So, what many of my interlocutors are first and foremost interested in is not the preacher's Facebook account (which is easily accessible anyway) but his mobile phone number that allows private exchanges in the communication channels of the messaging apps where users can raise a range of personal problems that the preachers are expected to solve with their Islamic wisdom.

Thus, the accounts of Indonesian Muslims that I have recorded during my fieldwork so far indicate the importance that these personal connections with Islamic authorities and the membership in particular social media groups have for them. The affective relationships facilitated by LINE, Telegram, WhatsApp and so on clearly count more for them than the less emotionally engaging, less personal, less dialogic practice of posting on Facebook. In other words, Facebook is for talking to a crowd to which one sends a clear message, whereas messaging apps are for talking about what really concerns one on a personal level and what might be emotionally disturbing and thus not so clear that one wants to share it with a wider public. In any case, in the context of my current research, one cannot afford to disregard Facebook, since it remains part of the media ecology of Indonesian Muslims and, I guess, will remain so for quite some time. In fact, only the comparison between the uses of different social media brings their respective significance to light. So my research experience can only confirm that we have entered a condition of polymedia, as proposed by Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller, implying that research that focuses on or relies on one particular interface alone, such as Facebook, should be regarded with suspicion.

Why Facebook? Sydney Yeager

The need to justify Facebook, and more generally the Internet, as a valid and fruitful research site, has haunted me throughout my Ph.D. process.

Facebook offers its social network platform freely to users, but as a company its goals are still profit-oriented. The underlying business strategy of Facebook can be summed up in a quote by Andrew Lewis: “If you’re not paying for [the service], you’re not the consumer; you’re the product being sold.” 1.49 billion active users from a wide variety of backgrounds and ranging from 13 year olds to senior citizens accept their role as a product with varying degrees of awareness and understanding of its implications.

But the ethics of Facebook’s business tactics aside, researchers are obligated to study this widespread cultural phenomenon. Anthropologists bring their unbiased objectivity to the study of numerous cultural contexts that include complex political-economic components.

Why is it important for anthropologists to consider Facebook? The easiest answer is that it is where the people are. Facebook and similar platforms now play a significant role in people’s daily lives and decision-making processes. The Internet and digital media have significantly impacted other media including news programming, film, and television—even books and newspapers. Scholars spent the first years after the dawn of the Internet asking “why?” Why would people spend so much time doing this? Why would people from so many walks of life, levels of education, nationalities, careers, and cultural backgrounds all choose to participate? 12 years into the Facebook phenomenon, it is time we look more seriously at what people are doing on Facebook.

People’s daily lives are regularly infused with simultaneous digital and physical social interactions. It is the blend of the two which is experienced in everyday life. It is said best in the *Why We Post* publication: “We reject a notion of the virtual that separates online spaces as a different world. We view social media as integral to everyday life in the same way that we now understand the place of the telephone conversation as part of offline life and not as a separate sphere.” (Miller et. al. 2016: p x). This understanding of life with digital technology necessitates that we must ask how the interplay of digital and in-person social interactions is affecting people and changing cultures across the world. By looking at localized manifestations of online phenomenon, we can gain deeper insights into the meaningful impact of Facebook and other social media.

George Marcus (1995) argues that multi-sited research allows anthropologists to acknowledge the importance of world systems’ theory on the macro-level while not constraining the projects which need to be contextualized in a way other than spatial locality (96). The ethnographer needs to employ the multi-sited techniques Marcus (1995) refers to as “following the people/metaphor/thing” to study a topic in its full complexity. “Following the people/metaphor/thing” and the discourse which surrounds it as it is invoked in speech, text, and visual media both as it is shared among the in-person community and with the border outside world through social media (Marcus 1995: 106-108). Polymedia theory is primarily concerned with the examination of the “people or metaphor or thing” across a range of media and platforms, while understanding how social media and in-person interactions are intertwined. For my project that involves following the path of grieving and memorialization which includes physical locations and in-person events as well as digital interactions.

If the question then shifts, more appropriately to ‘Why do I use Facebook, in particular, as a

research site?" I am studying a particular online phenomenon: digital memorialization of the dead. Since 1996, researchers have documented the memorialization of the deceased on the Internet (Roberts & Vidal 2000). More dynamic interactive forms of memorialization have developed on Social Networking Sites (SNS) which merit deeper investigation. While this phenomenon takes place across numerous Internet sites and platforms, the networked memorialization of the dead on Facebook offers socially significant dynamics which static websites lack. MySpace lacks the 'current relevance' of Facebook, and Twitter does not provide the same memorialization in regards to the average person. Memorialization is social, grieving requires social support, and Facebook is intrinsically public and social (Hertz 2005; Kaufman & Morgan 2005; Bloch 1971). My preliminary research delved into the variety of ways people memorialize the dead online and looked into various platforms. In my ethnographic interviews, I make sure to collect the full range of the way in which the person has been memorialized both online and offline. All relevant media is considered for each research participant. But in my particular local region, Facebook is the most prevalent.

Facebook memorialization offers an entry point into understanding the contemporary grieving process. My focus on Americans in the mid-South grants a localized context. Facebook by itself provides an excellent recruitment and communication tools, its content offering a wealth of data for analysis. Facebook grants me a platform through which I can educate research participants about anthropology and my research methods. It also allows me to share my findings directly with my research participants in a way meaningful to them. Sharing information with research participants on Facebook in an accessible format allows the researcher to stay connected with participants and re-enforces a degree of accountability. Engaging with participants and the general public by posting research content to Facebook, the research findings are no longer being published in a book that remains dusty far away from the eyes of research participants.

But depending on the social issue and type of social interactions being studied, it is important to consider the full range of social media platforms and digital media relevant for the specific genre of interactions. While it is important to consider the interactions on Facebook, it is important not to limit the study's research site to a single platform. In the preliminary stage, it is important to determine which platforms are relevant. I recommend utilizing preliminary in-person interviews, whenever possible, as an opportunity to ask research participants to give a full account of the variety of platforms and media they make use of in relation to the topic of study. All relevant media and platforms should be considered in trying to understand any cultural phenomenon.

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