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E-Seminar 56

Pudding – can anthropology teach us how to use media?

by

**Daniel Miller, Elisabetta Costa, Laura Haapio-Kirk, Nell Haynes, Tom
McDonald, Razvan Nicolescu, Jolynna Sinanan, Juliano Spyer, Shriram
Venkatraman and Xinyuan Wang**

"Why We Post" Team, University College London

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/why-we-post>

Discussant

Erin Taylor

(Instituto de Ciencias Sociais, Universidad de Lisboa)

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Erin Taylor (erin@erinbtaylor.com)

Hi all,

Thanks to Veronica for inviting me to open the discussion on this paper, and to Danny, Elisaabetta, Laura, Nell, Tom, Razvan, Jolynna, Juliano, Shriram, and Xinyuan (hereafter known as “the team” or “the authors”) for a thought-provoking paper from a highly creative and boundary-pushing project.

The paper gives a rundown of the project and its findings, but since the paper's title refers to dissemination of findings, this is what my discussion mainly focuses on. At the end, I make a comment on comparative research. Some of my comments may seem contentious, but I hope to provoke a discussion that builds upon the authors' claims productively.

Dissemination

The main question posed in this paper is “can anthropology teach us how to use media?”. But what does this question mean? The authors point out that, in their paper, they do not specifically talk about their own use of recognized social media platforms such as Facebook, and Twitter. Rather, they focus on a far wider range of dissemination strategies, from MOOCs (a kind of social media), school curricula, and open access books. They say that their studies of social media have taught them:

“how to re-configure social media as one part of a much wider programme of research dissemination that confronts the diversity of audience and the diversity of media.”

In other words, then, the “proof of the pudding” really was in the eating: anthropological research helped them to situate social media as part of a broader communication spectrum through which they could develop and enact their dissemination strategy. In doing so, their communications resemble those of the people they (and other researchers) study.

Just as Madianou and Miller (2013) found that people use “polymedia” to communicate, rather than depending on one platform alone, so are the team using multiple platforms at different levels of “scalable sociality” to reach groups of different sizes and configurations (see also Miller et al 2016).

This makes sense and I think it is important for anthropologists who want to communicate with broader publics to take this on board. There are still today (although probably not on this medianthro list!) anthropologists who believe that we should not even try to communicate our findings to the general public (and definitely not to economists), since simplifying will allegedly corrupt what we have to say.

But if this is the case, why, then, is it ok to teach? We are deluding ourselves if we believe that students are universally more receptive to our material than the general public: we are probably both overestimating our students and underestimating the general public. Teaching and communicating with the general public both involve a) simplifications; and b) creating pathways so that individuals who want to dig deeper can do so.

This is exactly what the team has done: present the insights as “discoveries” or other brief insights (such as through cat memes), but providing links for people to find the MOOC, books, newspaper articles, and journal articles, if they feel like it. Effective communication requires creating pathways

through which people can discover material, and it is the responsibility of the learner as much as the educator to dig deeper (or not). Dissemination isn't just promotion, it's pedagogy.

The authors express reservations about the term “discoveries” and justify its use by pointing out that their “discoveries” involve diverse and sometimes contradictory findings. I find nothing wrong with this framing. In 2011, Greg Downey published an article on his Neuroanthropology blog called “Brand Anthropology: New and Improved, with Extra Diversity!

<<http://blogs.plos.org/neuroanthropology/2011/01/28/brand-anthropology-new-and-improved-with-extra-diversity/>>” In this post he builds upon an article by Ulf Hannerz called “Diversity Is Our Business”, calling for anthropologists to embrace the idea that we make “discoveries”, just as science does.

Of course, such an approach can be problematic in many ways, including the dangers of commoditizing our work by framing it in business terms, equating our work with the natural sciences, and the difficulties of getting across complex messages through popular media. However, he argues, we do worse by staying out of public conversations altogether, since we then have no avenue whatsoever to challenge claims that our anthropology does not support.

There is another good argument for why it does not make sense to shy away from public conversations, and I imagine that many of you are intimately familiar with it. Fieldsites are no longer confined to distant lands; our research participants find us on social media platforms and elsewhere through the Internet, and they often expect to hear about the results of our research. The kinds of media venues and organizations that we tend to be afraid of are far from being the only way to communicate about our research. Thus I feel that anthropologists could indeed learn a lot from the Global Social Media Project in rethinking how we communicate with diverse audiences.

We also tend to underestimate how interesting our findings would be to the general public, because to us they are somewhat obvious or esoteric. But sometimes it's precisely the mundane, everyday parts of life that people find most attractive. People want to understand more about why we live the ways we do. Those of us who are engaged in media research are surely well-situated to learn from our own research and invent new ways to present our “discoveries” that can lead people to further learning.

In 2012, a group of us founded the project PopAnth: Hot Buttered Humanity<<https://popanth.com/>> with a view to creating a venue for alternative interpretations and promoting popular anthropology generally (see an interview<<https://thegeekanthropologist.com/2016/04/08/anthropology-blogging-101-popanth/>> on The Geek Anthropologist for more about the concept). PopAnth only publishes articles that are written for a general audience, and roughly covers the “four fields.” All of our articles provide links for further reading so that readers can go into more depth if they wish. We use our social media accounts to promote articles that are either written by anthropologists or mention anthropologists. In three-and-a-half years we have published 153 articles and 20 book reviews by 67 authors and had probably over half a million readers.

While we are clearly reaching a sizeable audience, I do feel that what we are missing, however, is the kind of two-way dialogue that social media encourages. We could do with more endeavours like the Global Social Media Project to push the boundaries of our communications and bring them more into line with contemporary practices.

For whom does the pudding provide proof?

That leads us to audiences. I would like to hear more from the authors about who the “us” in the paper's title could be. I originally expected “us” to refer to the general public, but in fact it largely refers to the authors themselves. We receive hints that the project's findings can be useful for people and organizations using social media for pedagogical and practical purposes (such as educators and parents). But we need to eat more of the proverbial pudding to get at the proof.

But what of individuals using social media for their own purposes? Everyone uses media, and millions of people put in a huge amount of effort to invent ways to use it more effectively. Can anthropology help the general public to understand not only social media but also, as the authors learned, how social media fits into their own broader communications? People are engaging with the project, but what are they taking away and how is it impacting their lives, self-understandings, and world views?

Comparative research

Finally, a word and a question on comparative research. When the Global Social Media project was launched I was very curious as to what the team would discover. Truly comparative projects are not so common in anthropology, precisely because, as the authors point out, we tend to think of different research sites as incomparable. But what is a research site? How are sites bounded? There are a few complicating factors.

First, places are interconnected through trade, migration, and of course communications. Group belonging is often “transnational” (Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc, 2005), even if people are unable to physically relocate (Gregory 2007). Further, as Ulf Hannerz (2012) and Leslie Sklair (2001) have pointed out, some social groups, such as a “transnational capitalist class” may have more in common with the same class in another country than with people from another class living in the same locality.

Second, and, as the authors point out, phenomena like social media have arisen “a posteriori” and so they have no clear point of cultural/spatial origin. Money, originally a highly localized and culturally embedded phenomenon, is increasingly joining social media in this, given the rise of e-money and globalized consumer finance products.

I would be interested to hear the authors' ideas about what forms a good basis for comparison. If you were to do this project again, would you still choose nation-states as the unit within which you choose your populations? Why or why not?

P.S. Note that, in a somewhat recursive move, we are running this seminar on a social media platform to discuss whether social media research can help us to use social media platforms.

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Daniel Miller, Elisabetta Costa, Laura Haapio-Kirk, Nell Haynes, Tom McDonald, Razvan Nicolescu, Jolynna Sinanan, Juliano Spyer, Shriram Venkatraman and Xinyuan Wang.
(d.miller@ucl.ac.uk)

Here is our collective response

Many thanks to Erin for her comments – in academia contentious is always good. It is probably best simply to respond in order.

We seem to agree on the principle behind the paper, that pudding implies eating, that what we learn needs to be turned into a more effective means for other people to learn or at the very least find ways so that a wider audience could at least 'taste' what we had cooked. So that in this case teaching means dissemination to everyone whether they would count as general public or students.

We are less sanguine than Erin with regard to 'discoveries' actually for a reason she makes clear. The term discoveries does sound like natural science and for us this requires some distancing, since if we accepted that categorisation we would be exposed to criteria we know we will never satisfy such as 'proper sampling' 'hypothesis construction' etc. So we use the term solely to meet the expectations of the media and general public, but our approach is to then confront it and actually undermine it by making each fieldsite an exception or caveat which destroys the implied universalism. So we think we take the advantage i.e. being part of the buzz of public discussion, but we hope our approach adds to this by first removing the sting. At the same time it creates a condition for a kind of flow and exchange between the various kinds of media both academic and mainstream

We hope the 'us' is pretty encompassing and agree with Erin that it should be. One of the qualities of the MOOC is that it does just what Erin asks for, it lets every participant talk about their own experiences of using social media and respect that this makes learning a conversation with the people offering the course. It is a really different experience of teaching when there are several thousand people simultaneously engaged with your materials. Some of our steps received over one thousand comments. Indeed it was only because there were ten of us that we could keep up the conversation from our side and discuss many of those comments. We will be repeating this Futurelearn MOOC several times more and hope to improve it based on what we have learnt. So

here the word `us` actually creates an equality between the teachers and learners inside the course itself, rather than the usual `us` as opposed to `them.` So once again we share the very same objectives as Erin and we hope the actions we have taken start a dialogue between this project Erin's PopAnth project and everyone else who wants to turn anthropology into mass public learning based on acknowledging that the public is also an informed contributor.

Finally on comparative research. Erin is right to suggest that a posteriori might imply that there is an origin point for what then become disseminated. Many critical approaches to social media want to privilege places like the US because that makes the work of critique so much easier. But anthropology has to confront all such simplifications whether from the status quo or from overly glib critiques. In our book we point out that the first full established social media was Cyworld in Korea, the first mass use of texting was in the Philippines, it was really Brazil and India that created an effective Orkut. It matters hugely to our project that QQ and Wechat from China rival Facebook and Twitter. It is actually rather a problem if the approaches we want to critique are more sophisticated in their representation of our actually global world than the forces of criticism we might wish to align with. So when we talk of global finance, or a global social media research project let us be true to the term global and not assume that the only agency that we need to contend with is `Western`. There may well be a transnational global elite, but at least so far our project has shown we would say conclusively that a posterior diversity is growing rather than diminishing. So we need to acknowledge the agency of all populations. One of the most interesting places to observe these tensions is the Caribbean and Erin Taylor's own work in that region is a good exemplification of how anthropologists can tackle such issues.

So many thanks to Erin, we hope that with her contribution of PopAnth and the aspirations of our own project we can see a key future direction to the network of anthropologists involved in Medianthro. That all of us will want in the future to contribute in our various ways to seeing how our anthropological study of the media can in turn help us to use media to grow a global consciousness of the potential contribution of anthropology. As anyone who watches the Great British Bake Off will confirm, there is no limit to the number and variety of tasty puddings we can create.

Francisco Osorio (fosorio@u.uchile.cl)

Dear list

It is an impressive project, no doubt about it. Let me congratulate the whole team and I suspect we will be discussing Why We Post for many years.

Using their concept scalable sociality, it seems to me the team is also proposing scalable theory outputs. As far as I understand, data gathered by the team is one (I mean many interviews and observations and so on but one set of facts or findings) but they scale the analysis depending on the receiving audience. Perhaps they scale the analysis's communication (being the analysis one). So, instead of inductive reasoning (from nine fieldsites to what they have in common) or deductive reasoning (from one hypothesis to be tested on those places), they scale, meaning, they adapt the reasoning because today there are many scholarly research outputs.

As a consequence, a critic cannot say "well, the book is OK" because there are several (some already available and others to come) and then you have the journal articles and the blog, the website, the YouTube videos, the FutureLearn course (three times a year for every year given), the press, the Facebook and Twitter accounts and so and so forth.

I completed the course (five weeks) and I was posting myself, so the team (or the following researchers) can now analyse the communication of the communication about social media. This is just amazing: the scale of people involved around Why We Post is growing and growing. Perhaps this is an example of big data anthropology.

Final comment. Very soon I will be teaching again media anthropology at University of Chile and I compare my lectures with the MOOC and I got depressed. What they have done is pioneering and a motive for hope and joy for media anthropologists: long live Why We Post.

John Postill (john.postill@rmit.edu.au)

I'd like to join Erin and Francisco in congratulating the Why We Post team on an amazing project.

Unfortunately I've only had time to visit the website briefly but look forward to spending more time there and to reading some of the publications. A couple of quick questions on the working paper:

1. On page 3 you argue that 'social media does increase online equality but in most places has no discernible impact upon offline inequality'. You then suggest that in most places social media don't increase individualism. But I'm wondering whether it's still early days to know this, given that the research took place at a very specific moment in historical time. On a related note, are there any plans for follow-up or longitudinal research?

2. Like many of your MOOC participants, and our two previous commenters on this list, I'm very intrigued by your notion of 'scalable sociality' – how MySpace and Facebook 'scaled down' from broadcasting whereas WeChat and WhatsApp 'scaled up' from texting to 'colonise' the space of group sociality. Could you say more about the similarities and differences in this phenomenon across field sites? Was that space 'there' to be colonised in the first place, or did these social tools create new forms and/or qualities of sociality?

Many thanks

John

Elisabetta Costa (e.costa@ucl.ac.uk)

Thank you very much to Erin, Francisco and John for their comments and appreciation of the WhyWePost project!

I would like to respond to John's questions. Our arguments shed light on processes of social changes facilitated by social media at the time of our fieldwork, but the direction of changes might vary in the future. For example, one of my main findings is that social media in southeast Turkey has facilitated private online flirting, secret premarital romances, and mixed-gender friendships in a highly gender segregated society. I observed the contrast between the expansion of new online private relationships, and the persistence of a public space that continue to be conservative both online and offline (actually more conservative online than offline). Many couples got married after having met each other on Facebook, or having flirted on Whatsapp and SMS for many months; but they still publicly present their marriage as arranged marriage. My data show that the emergence of

new online communication opportunities for women have not led to new forms of offline communications. Public ideologies of love and marriages, and dominant ideals of femininity and masculinity have remained largely unvaried. But I also believe that the situation might change in the long term. In this regard, a longitudinal research could be very useful to discover whether, in five or ten years from now, the expansion of new private online relationships will also lead to a transformation of public ideals and practices. But I am also aware that a long term diachronic research that focuses on large scale processes is a very difficult mission, especially if it involves nine different ethnographies in nine different countries. How can we compare findings across nine different localities and two or three different times in history? This would imply a comparison between 18 or 27 case studies. It could be a bit complicated. My personal view is that an anthropological research project can either privilege a multi-timed, or a multi-sited ethnography. But I would love to hear different ideas about it.

The contrast between private and public online spaces introduce the topic of the second question. I think that the notion of ‘scalable sociality’ is important because it reduces the importance that social media scholars have traditionally attributed to platforms’ affordances and architectures. ‘Scalable sociality’ is a useful analytical category that allows us to understand social media as always entangled in situated local practices. Anthropologists of media have largely criticised the idea that media and technologies are something settled and predetermined. Yet, the field of social media studies have been less receptive to this criticism, and concepts such as unchangeable ‘affordances’ still dominate the debate. In our research I was looking for concepts that could bring the actors at the center. This was particularly important for my ethnography in southeast Turkey. Here social media users change privacy settings, open several accounts of the same platforms, and create multiple closed groups within the same platform. They actively create and mould different online social environments to keep apart different spheres and different social groups (e.g. nuclear family, extended family, same sex peers, opposite sex peers, public space with all of them together). It’s not a predetermined affordance, but the level of privacy, and the numbers and the kinds of people inhabiting different online spaces, that define a specific genre of usage. As a result, the established theory of *context collapse* (see for example danah boyd) is not suitable to understand the effects of social media in my field-site. People do keep different spheres apart. The *context collapse* is not a consequence of a platform’s affordances, but it’s rather the result of practices of usage that are embedded in specific social, historical and cultural worlds. Through *scalable sociality* I could rather understand how actors have created different online spaces inhabited by different people. I personally think that social media have not ‘colonized’ pre-existing spaces. They have rather created new online environments, and remediated (Bolter and Grusin) pre-existing forms of sociality and offline spaces; and this happened in different ways across all our field-sites.

Thank you very much.

Elisabetta Costa, (Postdoctoral Research at the British Institute at Ankara
Honorary Research at UCL)

Brett F Dwyer (Brett.Dwyer@cdu.edu.au)

Thanks for the paper, I enjoyed it - some of these questions I have had to deal with in my own work in Vietnam

The first question I have actually concerns your most recent response and the issue of methodology; especially in light of us at CDU in Darwin, Aust. starting up an ethnography focus group:

You wrote that: "My data show that the emergence of new online communication opportunities for women have not led to new forms of offline communications. Public ideologies of love and marriages, and dominant ideals of femininity and masculinity have remained largely unvaried. But I also believe that the situation might change in the long term. In this regard, a longitudinal research could be very useful to discover whether, in five or ten years from now, the expansion of new private online relationships will also lead to a transformation of public ideals and practices. But I am also aware that a long term diachronic research that focuses on large scale processes is a very difficult mission, especially if it involves nine different ethnographies in nine different countries. How can we compare findings across nine different localities and two or three different times in history? This would imply a comparison between 18 or 27 case studies. It could be a bit complicated. My personal view is that an anthropological research project can either privilege a multi-timed, or a multi-sited ethnography. But I would love to hear different ideas about it"

I guess from my own perspective, I can see the value of long term - longitudinal research - simply because you get to follow up on claims about what people are doing etc. But this is a small part of ethnography. With respect to your question: in what way are you conceiving of 'new online communication opportunities' and 'public ideologies of love and marriage' being linked? I guess I am asking are these categories necessarily linked? Should they be linked?

Many thanks

brett

Richard Wilk (wilkr@indiana.edu)

Thank you for fascinating presentation, and a stimulating explanation of the way turks are using new media. I just have one brief comment; the situation that you describe can be useful he compared, I think with the way that language communities often maintain different dialects and leave space for individual creativity in what Ward Goodenough called "idiolects."

Diglossia might be another useful category. It describes a situation where a formal standard written public language coexists with an informal demotic that is used on the street. In classic diglossic situations the formal language distinguishes the literate class, and excludes the uneducated. Think for example of the difference between Haitian Creole and French. You could equate this to the "digital divide."

What you describe is closer to what linguists call "code switching " where a language has a range of registers from the most formal "altolect " (often foreign) to the deepest "basolect."

Elisabetta Costa (e.costa@ucl.ac.uk)

I would like to thank Brett and Richard for their interesting and useful feedback.

Here is my brief response. I do think that private and secret flirting and romances are linked with public ideologies of love and marriage. There is not a simple and direct relationship, but they do influence each other. In the town of my research social media have spread along with the hegemony of the conservative 'Islamic' party AKP that has been at the government of Turkey since 2002. This

government has shaped ideas of morality, family and marriage. In this context, the flourishing of (semi-)secret online communication is also partly a reaction to the religious constraints of public life. Here the parallelism with languages suggested by Richard can be very useful. I wonder if previous studies have shown cases where individual informal creativity has increased in the context of rigid formal registers.

Elisabetta Costa, Postdoctoral Research at the British Institute at Ankara
Honorary Research at UCL

Erkan Saka (sakaerka@gmail.com)

Hi there,

"My data show that the emergence of new online communication opportunities for women have not led to new forms of offline communications.

I believe there is at least the potential for a change. Elisabetta's fieldwork was in a site where the conservative Islamist hegemony was obvious. Even there, new covert online communications have the potential to shape some offline patterns. Under these strong hegemonic circumstances, individuals tend to justify their acts by using dominant terminology. That's what I regularly observe. A follow up work in future would be interesting.

scalable sociality is an exciting conceptualizing. Even for a particular service, let's say Facebook, scalability might change regularly as all these services transform and provide new levels of affordances. I am curious how Snapchat will evolve and offer new affordances.

Finally, In relation to content migration, the concept "transmedia" may be deployed again in the sense that content not only migrates but fragments of contents spread in different media are produced to offer a single narrative which is itself open ended due to transformation of media used...

Cordially,

Erkan

Tulay ATAY-AVSAR (atayavsar@gmail.com)

Dearest Elisabet and Dear All,

Very briefly, Elisabetta did a great job. Congrats to her.

As I shared with Elisabet, during my classes, I shared the work with my students of Kurdish descent from Mardin. They made amazing comments on her book. They enjoyed a lot. I am sharing this cause if a study attracts students' attention along with scholars then -for me- this study is the one.

Secondly, the change (polarisation + nationalism + fundamentalism) in Turkish society has not started since 2002. It started long before.

Thirdly Mardin can not reflect the whole Turkish society. The Society of the Republic of Turkey is

diverse

all the best,

Tulay

Veronica Barassi (v.barassi@gold.ac.uk)

Dear All,

The seminar is now closed. I would like to thank the Why We Post Team for the paper, Erin Taylor for her comments, and those of you who have found the time to contribute.

As always, we will let you know when the transcript will be available online.

all best

Veronica