Visualising Facebook

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Introduction

This book has three main aims which are surprising only in terms of how little has been done previously to fulfil them. In 2011 Miller published a book called *Tales From Facebook*. As the title suggests, that book consisted mainly of stories about how people, as it happens people in Trinidad, used Facebook, and the consequences of Facebook for their lives.

In retrospect there were (at least) two glaring omissions from that book. The first is that there was not one single visual image – *Tales from Facebook* contained relatively few examples of postings and these were all textual. Yet it was already evident that in places such as Trinidad the dominant form of posting on Facebook is actually visual. The book was not alone in this omission. There are several journals devoted to internet studies, and increasingly these are focused upon social media. Yet one can browse through a whole issue about new media and society or about computer-mediated communication and not find one single illustration of a visual posting. We know of no precedent that even looks like this book.

The primary reason for this has been cost, with publishers either refusing to publish colour images or charging authors considerable amounts in order to do so. But today, as shown by this volume, this is no longer the case and it is important that academics seize this new opportunity. It is surely ‘about time’ that a book is produced which is not only dedicated to the acknowledgement and discussion of such visuals, but also based on the reproduction of those same images that make up so much of what is posted online. Indeed one of the core arguments of our wider ‘Why We Post’ comparative project is that social media has transformed human communication precisely by making images as much a part of human communication as text or speech. The second omission was that while *Tales From Facebook* was written about Trinidad, it did not claim that Trinidad was in and of itself any more important or interesting than any other place. Trinidad was used merely to demonstrate
through a case study that Facebook is culturally specific, and is always
countered with respect to some particular population. This was a
deliberate provocation in the face of hundreds of journal articles whose
premise seems to be that there is a single thing called Facebook, and
that if one conducts an experiment on some aspect of how people post
among, for example, American college students, an academic paper can
then extrapolate from that to a thing called ‘Facebook’ in general. Many
of these same journals use methods which aim to emulate the natural
sciences in the way they generalise from a case study to the universal,
which makes cultural diversity something of an inconvenience.

Popular criticism of Tales From Facebook, including reviews on web-
sites such as Amazon, indicated that the book made people uncomfortable.
They suggested that a book ‘about Trinidad’ was quite unsuitable for the
purpose of exemplifying this thing called Facebook. Yet had that book been
about the use of Facebook in the US or the UK, hardly anyone would have
worried about the claims being made. Our second aim is to take this point
further. The argument that one simply cannot ignore such cultural diversity
becomes much stronger if, instead of a single case study, we make a direct
comparison between two different populations. Again what is strange is
how rare such an obvious strategy seems to be.

A third aim comes more from a specific curiosity of anthropology.
We wanted to know whether we could write something akin to an eth-
nography – that is, a portrait of a place and its population composed
through the broad brushstrokes of observable and generalised cultural
norms. In this instance, critically, the ethnography would be based
largely upon the images people post on Facebook. This differs from
our usual mode of general participation and observation which, while
including online behaviour, emphasises the importance of the wider
offline context required to account for this online activity. If such an eth-
nography were possible, how would the result compare to the kinds of
writing that emerge from more conventional versions?

It is perhaps not an entirely fair comparison since we have pre-
viously written such ethnographies. In the case of Trinidad, Sinanan
is completing an individual volume about social media in El Mirador
as part of the ‘Why We Post’ series, based on her ethnographic field
work in Trinidad. Miller has published a general ethnography about the
island too, and both authors have also written together a book called
Webcam which is based on the same field site as this book, referred to as
El Mirador. Miller also recently published a book about The Glades, his
English village field site, though the focus is on social media rather than
a general ethnography. The nearest equivalent in terms of an attempt
generally to characterise Englishness is probably Kate Fox’s *Watching the English*; based on areas such as Oxfordshire, it also broadly represents southeast England.

Although our perspective comes from anthropology, we would hope that these three aims are of interest to pretty much anyone. Who wouldn’t want to know more about the consequences of this rise in the use of images within communication, the implications of cultural diversity and whether we can understand more about a population based largely upon its visual culture? The third task has some precedent in art history, but the difference is the sheer quantity of images being shared on social media and the fact that a very significant proportion of the population participates in creating them.

Given this level of general interest, we feel it would be a great pity if this book was read only by people studying a single discipline for purposes such as an academic examination. So we have tried to write in a generally clear and accessible style, wherever possible using colloquial language. There is a brief discussion of the academic foundations at the end of this chapter, while what we regard as essential references appear in endnotes elsewhere in the book. We have tried to keep these to a minimum, however, and to concentrate on our own original findings and the evidence behind our arguments. In the section on methodology, we explain how we employed quantitative as well as qualitative methods and examined over 20,000 images to try and ensure that the requisite level of scholarship underlies our arguments and conclusions.

**The Glades and El Mirador**

All images reproduced in this volume come from the social media postings of people who live in one of two locations: The Glades in southeast England and El Mirador in East Trinidad. Both of these names are pseudonyms. During 2012–14 Sinanan lived for 15 months in El Mirador for this particular study, while Miller spent 18 months working in The Glades on an almost daily basis. Sinanan and to a lesser extent Miller had also spent many months in El Mirador on previous projects, including the field work that led to the joint publication *Webcam*.

The two villages that make up The Glades consist of Leeglade, with around 11,000 inhabitants, and Highglade with around 6,500. Once an entirely rural site, its proximity to London led to the development of local industry in the nineteenth century. Most of this has now disappeared apart from a small commercial estate. Today the population includes
commuters, who take advantage of train links that reach central London in less than an hour. More people are involved in the building trades, for instance as plumbers and electricians; they also benefit from the good road links. But although The Glades thereby represent a new kind of suburban ideal, enabling people to live in a village surrounded by fields but also have access to metropolitan London. Yet the people who live there would insist that these are villages.

Despite the proximity to one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world, Leeglade and Highglade are homogeneously white English. The entire Afro-Caribbean, African, mixed and Asian populations only amount to two per cent of the total, and the presence of Eastern European migrants is also very slight. It is also homogeneously middle class, though the presence of social housing and low income villagers is discussed in Chapter 4. Highglade in particular is fairly affluent and almost crime-free – characteristic of what in England is called ‘the home counties’. So although this had not been the original intention, Miller soon realised that this was an unusual opportunity to study an iconic version of ‘Englishness’. As a result this is a very specific kind of English society which despite its proximity to London has actually very little in common with the metropolitan region. We would thus not wish to generalise from this particular study to other areas of England such as London or rural areas in the North and West.

El Mirador is a small town in Trinidad, the larger island of the state of Trinidad and Tobago. Trinidad and Tobago is a Caribbean country just off the coast of northeast Venezuela with a population of around 1,200,000. Just over one-third of these are the descendants of enslaved Africans. A similar proportion are descendants from indentured East Indians from South Asia. The rest would be mixed and ‘other’. El Mirador itself has around 18,000 inhabitants, perhaps 25,000 if one includes squatters on the periphery, and is located in the poorest region of the island.

Though today El Mirador is reasonably well equipped with a hospital, schools and government facilities, it is still regarded by most Trinidadians as something of a backwater. The people who live there look to the capital city of Port of Spain as their metropolitan centre, which can be reached within a couple of hours. By contrast, for the smaller villages in the hinterland El Mirador represents a local centre. It attracts them because of its bustling market, high street shopping and modest degree of entertainment – mainly consisting of bars and some live music. Of critical importance is that El Mirador has a Kentucky Fried Chicken (and local rivals), which in Trinidad is what differentiates a proper town from any other settlement.
Methodology and ethics

The primary method employed was ethnography. Some people dismiss qualitative work as merely ‘anecdotal’, but one can collect anecdotes in a couple of weeks. By contrast we spent 15 months in El Mirador and 18 months in The Glades, trying to ensure that we could speak with some confidence in general terms about these populations. The discussions reported in this book are about people who in almost every case we know – as a result, we also know more about them than appears in their photos. We are simultaneously writing more general books about their use of social media and indeed about these societies. So the online material can always be considered in the light of our offline knowledge. Knowing about people’s friends, beliefs, families and other interests is essential to understanding why they post particular images. However in this book, in addition, we look for patterns that emerge around the study of images in their own right.

With respect to identifying larger patterns of posting, our main approach was simply to stare at thousands of visual postings and try and identify repetition and genres. Every image produced here is a claim to some kind of typicality, unless it is noted as exceptional. To demonstrate this claim to being representative, we also undertook a quantitative analysis whose details and results are found in the Appendix. This included a survey of the last 300 images posted by each of 100 informants; 50 from each site, as well as a study of their 20 most recent postings and a more specific study of both their profile pictures and their selfies. Results from this Appendix are discussed throughout the book. In particular, these surveys indicate in which areas postings in El Mirador and The Glades seem similar in content and quantity and those in which we can identify clear contrasts.

The survey, and indeed virtually all the content of this book, is limited to Facebook. This would be a reasonable strategy for El Mirador since at the time of research Sinanan was following 271 informants on Facebook, but found very little usage of Twitter and only some initial interest in Instagram. By contrast, Miller followed 130 informants on Facebook, 80 on Twitter and 55 on Instagram, since younger people in The Glades made considerable use of these other platforms. Since the purpose of this volume is direct comparison, however, we decided to discuss mainly Facebook here. A discussion of both Twitter and Instagram postings has been published elsewhere. This inevitably creates a degree of distortion, since some of what people in El Mirador do on Facebook, young people in The Glades now do on Instagram and Twitter. By the
time of our field work Facebook was becoming considered uncool by young people in The Glades, but they all used it and retained images from a time when it was their primary platform.

Terms such as ‘qualitative’ and ‘quantitative’ are not simple distinctions. A category of image analysis such as ‘are they smiling?’ or ‘are they trying to look hot?’ or even ‘is this a selfie?’ implies that a qualitative judgement underlies the quantitative count. Unless it is taken in front of a mirror, you simply can’t be sure this is a selfie (a self-taken image) even if the subject’s arm is outstretched in front of him or her. This is also why we have one chapter, Chapter 8, that stands out from the others. We are concerned not to claim any simple objectivity to our interpretations of these visual images. Nor do we assume this should be based solely on the photographer’s intention, because this does not determine the consequence of an image for the viewer. In Chapter 8 we examine how 10 different people respond to the same set of images, precisely in order to demonstrate how radically these may differ from that intention and from each other, and to explore how easily people change their opinions about what they are seeing.

Then again, who are these ‘people’? There is no homogeneous group called ‘the people of El Mirador’. The meaning of images may be interpreted differently by those from different classes or genders. By the same token, The Glades is not England and El Mirador is not Trinidad. Technically, every time we use the term ‘English’ you should assume the caveat: ‘English – only as represented by the specific case of The Glades and in turn subject to every level of differentiation down to the diversity of each individual that lives in The Glades.’ But having noted this here, it would be very tedious to repeat it throughout. Furthermore, comparing genres between the two sites shows why it is also important to acknowledge generalities and typicality.

Finally the reader will note that the images included in this text represent a spectrum from those that remain unaltered to those that are somewhat blurred to those that are heavily disguised, which may be sometimes distracting. We apologise for this, a reflection of ethical issues in the reproduction of other people’s photographs. In general, where we have clear consent from the individual to post the original image this remains unaltered. Where people appear as background, or we do not know who these people are, then we have blurred the image so that other people will not recognise them. Where the image has been criticised by others, as in Chapter 8, or where we feel there is any possibility that harm could arise from recognition, which is our primary ethical concern, then we have replaced the individuals in the photos with illustrations which depict the same poses but with altered facial features, to such an extent
that even the subjects would not recognise themselves. Differences in blurring also reflect cultural differences. We found English people to have very strong concerns over particular kinds of privacy that are different from those encountered in Trinidad. For example, the blurring of babies’ faces so they cannot be identified. The result is inevitably a rather messy mix of our own concern to anonymise in order not to cause harm and our informants’ quite variable sensibilities around this issue.

**Academic studies**

If this were a book about conventional photography then it would be reasonable to expect an extended discussion of past academic writings on that subject. Many iconic figures, such as Benjamin, Barthes and Sontag, among others, have written brilliantly on the historical impact of photography in relation to topics such as memory and history, representation and truth. Anthropologists and other social scientists have, since the time of Bateson and Mead in the 1930s, experimented with the interplay between photography and text in presenting ethnography and discussed the problematic relationship between the two. There certainly are volumes that are replete with photographic images.

While this book is about photographs, however, it is only concerned with images posted on social media – images that may be widely circulated memes as well as personal photographs. As a result, it is not at all obvious how the content of this book might be related to those prior discussions. We have not assumed that images on social media are the same kind of material as traditional genres of photography. Yet neither have we assumed that there is such a radical break between traditional analogue photographs and these images that the former have become irrelevant or incommensurate with the latter.

Actually photography has always been dynamic, reinventing itself in various respects over the decades. As a result there are bound to be a mixture of breaks and continuities. Some of these established debates clearly pertain more to historical precedents than to the material discussed here. Social media photography is a long way from an earlier connection between photography and high art. The trajectory from elite usage through to what Bourdieu called a middle-brow profession has now ended in an ubiquitous presence available to low income populations. There has, however, always been an ambiguous area between photography as a profession and a hobby, and today an interest in Flickr or even Instagram can indicate the degree to which a person feels serious about their photography.
There are many debates about the relationship between analogue and digital photography. For example, a recent claim by Sarvas and Frohlich for digital photography expresses the view ‘that communication has surpassed memory as the primary function of domestic photography, and that identity is now fighting for second place.’ This has been recently contested by Keightley and Pickering, however, who want to lay stress on continuities. Other accounts try to determine how far digital photography remains a form of social memory comparable with the prior use of analogue photography. Anthropologists have also become engaged with many aspects of the new digital photography. Such discussions are of considerable interest and importance. They are not part of the brief for this particular book simply because the topic is not really an attempt to understand the nature of social media photography per se, but rather to employ this material as a new medium for the study and expression of cultural difference.

We start with the acknowledgement that there have always been a multitude of different ‘photographies’. So this book might hint that older female Trinidadians relate to the genre of Carnival photographs in ways that correspond to their traditional offline engagement, or that elderly people from The Glades make holiday photos into albums for Facebook much as they did in the past. We may recognise that genres of photography such as wedding albums in both sites go back to the 1880s, so historical factors may still influence their incorporation within social media. Mostly, however, this book is a lesson in why we need to be cautious when talking about a generalised object called ‘photography’. Rather the emphasis is on difference, revealing how a genre of photography, even a new one such as the selfie, may be quite different in England compared with Trinidad, or exploring the significant differences between the use of a genre of photographs by young people reported in Chapters 2 and 3 and that by older adults as reported in other chapters. So an important context to this study is not so much the history of photography. It is rather the particular histories of photography in England and Trinidad – whether, for example, there was an established tradition of wedding or holiday or school graduation photography.

There is no direct precedent to social media as a form of photography, although Rose uses the term ‘visual economy’, taken from Poole, to describe the circulation of images that has typically taken place at the domestic level, for example within families. As Slater and others have noted, these domestic photographs, which were also the best previous examples of mass photography, contain their own continuities. At least one of the major theorists within anthropology, Bourdieu, applied his
ideas to the study of domestic photography in France. Long before social media, traditional photography clearly included sub-genres connected to social sharing such as wedding photography and holiday snaps. Yet even these were mainly circulated only among family and very close friends. Photography within social media represents a more generalised sharing and an even greater volume.

The emphasis in this book will not be on the relationship between our findings and these academic debates. Instead we try and balance the generalised interpretations of the genres that seem to emerge from the sheer bulk of these postings through the discussion in Chapter 8, which shows that interpretation is highly variable even among the people we study, not only between academics. But the key difference is that the critical judgement of our informants helps us to understand the social mechanism that keeps the range of photos in check and characteristic of that region. Fear of these criticisms and social denigration is the very reason why postings tend closely to conform to local genres and expectations.

The primary focus in this book is to document the main genres of images that we find in both sites in order to compare them, while reserving analysis of the actual usage of social media in each field site for the nine monographs in the ‘Why We Post’ series. These other books provide the wider ethnography of people’s offline and online lives, and so the interested reader might turn to those volumes for a more detailed account of the uses and consequences of images on Facebook.

This book also represents an example of anthropology of photography. However, its main points of reference are rather different from the primary concerns of prior anthropological work on photography that has been more concerned with topics such as colonialism, history and representation. By contrast, social media photographs are far more involved in areas such as communication and tend to be more transient, which lends them to different conclusions than those directed to traditional analogue photography. Further, the prime concern of this book – that is, direct comparison between different ethnographic settings – is surprisingly rare in earlier anthropological studies, even though the discipline often defines itself as comparative. Even the literature within anthropology that focuses upon the use of visual materials in conducting ethnography, which is one of the aims of this book, has in the past been more focused on methodological issues and the problems of representation. A book that is perhaps a little closer to the way we have undertaken our task was Goffman’s study of Gender Advertisements, although we have tried to be less selective and more systematic by including quantitative checks.
This book is an acknowledgement that today social media has become almost synonymous with the practice of contemporary photography, the destination to which virtually all contemporary photography is posted.\textsuperscript{27} Figures vary hugely in online sources, but typical estimates examined over the course of 2014 suggested that around 350 million photos were posted every day on Facebook, 55 million on Instagram and 600 million on WhatsApp, while 750 million photographs were shared daily on Snapchat. It seems very likely then that photos shared on social media represent the bulk of photographs taken today. Even more are no doubt taken with social media in mind, but then rejected. Our aim is explicitly to acknowledge this and examine the consequences. The next chapter starts with a discussion of the kinds of photographs that in previous eras would never have been shown to others because their quality is so poor. So while we certainly acknowledge that many of the writers mentioned, such as Sarvis and Frohlich or Van Dijck, give a helpful sense of some of the transitions from analogue to digital photography, these may be taken still further in this latest iteration of mass photography.\textsuperscript{28}

We also want clearly to acknowledge that even if our focus is just on images on Facebook, these are not limited to photography. On Facebook, personal photographs blend almost seamlessly with a second major class of visual postings: memes.\textsuperscript{29} For memes, there is no comparable literature. While we can draw analogies with previous visual forms, memes do not have a comparable historical precedent in the way that digital photography does. Shifman (2013) has a decent go at defining social media memes and their origins\textsuperscript{30} – which again is not a task we would attempt. But almost all our informants will share posts that are usually humorous and most commonly employ short text combined with striking visual images which they themselves would now refer to as memes. If we were to be overly oriented in our study to prior academic writing, the problem is that we would then almost inevitably operate a dualist perception that would treat the meme as a new piece of frippery – partly because it has no associated literature – and we would consider the photograph as an authentic craft, linking us to art history partly because it is saturated with such literature. Instead, we feel as anthropologists that our task is to engage equally with whatever our informants post. Such a standpoint requires us to view these two modes as fairly interchangeable components in the way people express themselves, their values and often their relationships online.\textsuperscript{31}