Before Facebook we all knew what a friend was. Really?

I still have in my possession the diaries I kept for three years of my school days when aged 14 to 16. It turns out that I kept a weekly friends list. I would carefully rank my friends, punishing them for slights, rewarding them for shared confidences, all in secret.¹ We did not have ‘besties’ or ‘BFF’ (Best Friends Forever), but there were precursors.

For adults, friends are not as often ranked as categorised.² Typically you consider as one group those people you speak to at the school gates about your children; another group may be those from whom you feel you can request help when you have run out of milk and the shops are shut. There are those people with whom you like to gossip, and those with whom you enjoy sharing memories of your own schooldays. There are also the friends you accrued because they were friends with your partner, dating from the time before you met. There are those who you trust a bit and those you trust a lot. Friends are also categorised by context, as school friends, work friends, Saturday night out friends, football or hobby friends. There are also those who simply do not have friends. There are people who live in a village like The Glades, not a city, and yet turn out to be lonely and isolated – in essence friendless.

In earlier times and in most anthropology the central idiom of relationships was family. The study of friendship often developed around that idiom, so anthropologists talked about fictive kin. Some readers may recall that as a child they were told to call everyone around them aunt or uncle, even though they were the friends of parents rather than actual relatives. Today the ethnographic evidence from The Glades suggests that this may be going into reverse. Instead of modelling friendship on
kinship, we model kinship on friendship. What a mother really wants to be is her daughter’s best friend. There are cousins who are close friends and cousins who are merely cousins. So friendship has increasingly become the core idiom of relationships and family is now beholden to it. In that sense the experience of family becoming friends on Facebook reflects a wider and deeper trend in English relationships.

It seems to be so common as to almost have become a rule that the invention of any new media will have one rather unfortunate consequence. The discussion of the relationship that people can now have online leads them to romanticise and simplify their previous experience of offline relationships. As Facebook spread it was met by a noisy chorus of claims that people on Facebook could not tell the difference between a Facebook friend and a ‘real’ friend, an accusation that still comes up frequently in The Glades. Yet, as we have just seen, this bland category of ‘real’ friend is a considerable oversimplification of the many different types of prior offline friendships. Similarly in the early years of the internet, when people could not decide if the various groups being created online represented ‘real’ communities, we were told that, by contrast, we had all been living in real ‘communities’ offline, which was not, of course, the case. With each new online development, people still tend to simplify and romanticise its offline precedent – a process rather frustrating for anthropology, which has spent a century trying to show how complex offline relationships such as friendship and community have always been.

Our starting point should be to refute these oversimplifications. Instead we acknowledge that we were previously just as concerned, sometimes obsessively concerned, with the issue of whether a friend was a ‘real’ friend, and we had strong feelings about what you could or could not trust him or her to do. Would the friend be ‘there’ for you in an emergency, and could you reveal something wicked you had done because you needed to share it? Such criteria are constantly applied, not just to friends, but also to relatives including siblings – the stuff of many novels and television series. Within the ethnography a good example of the complexity and diversity of offline friendship was found in our study of ‘toddler groups’.

Perhaps the key moment in the formation of friendships in The Glades comes with giving birth. New friendships begin with antenatal classes and are strengthened by subsequent baby and toddler groups – often essential contacts for new mothers taking time off work to be full-time parents. Traditionally women in this situation relied more on family and varied connections with other women, who usually had
children of different ages. Today most people are placed into this new version of the anthropological concept of an age-based cohort, where mothers are mainly involved with other mothers who have infants of much the same age. This leads to increased and informed support, but can also foster intense and direct comparison with what other babies or infants are doing at any given moment compared to one’s own.

This is the context within which many different levels of friendship may then develop. A mother attending a toddler group may bond with a group of women towards whom she immediately gravitated, potentially becoming friends for life. There may also have been a second level of mothers at the toddler group, with whom she might chat but in a more restrained fashion.

However, there is also much exclusion at such groups. When a mother walks in and sees a group who clearly already know each other very well, it seems impossible to break into that circle and feel welcome – she is already an outsider. So even in this setting, probably more accessible than most life experiences, friendship could still be anxious, difficult and ranked. Sheera seemed to have her revelation about her toddler group friendships through the act of talking with us, a process that tended to make things explicit. She was highly sociable and went to several toddler groups, having in particular a core group of 13 other mothers as friends. Their children went to each other’s parties and they sometimes went out as a group, for example to a restaurant at Christmas. The mothers supported each other and provided help if emergency childcare was needed. They understood that when people posted pictures of their kids on Facebook they needed to see ‘likes’, even more so than when they posted about themselves. Yet what Sheera realised in explaining all this to us was that, in all that time, they had only ever talked about the children.

This was incessant. If the sun was out the mothers would text each other and many would turn up at the park for the children to play together and for the adults to talk – about their children. If it was raining they needed to get the children together at a house to play or they would be bored – leaving the adults to talk about the children. Sheera thus knew all about these other children – but she realised on reflection that she knew almost nothing else about the mothers. Unlike her previous friendships with other women they never talked about relationships, and certainly never discussed ‘the bedroom department’. She gives an example of a conversation: ‘And I was like – how was your holiday? She was like “yeah alright”. I was like “what did you do?” “Oh, just the same old.” And it’s like I’m not asking for blood here. What did you get up to,
what were the hotels like, what did you eat? And she’s just like “Oh yeah, really good, I’d recommend you to go.” And it’s like “OK, what’s next?” But you throw us together and we will happily talk about kids and playgroups, common things, softplay areas, what we can do together. But in the nights out we’ll just talk about kids really. It is really, really weird.’

It would be quite surprising if such demarcations and the variegated nature of friendship offline did not also emerge after a while on social media. In this instance it was only because we were having a discussion focusing upon these interactions that Sheera came to see how strange they had been. But in an analogous manner it may be only when Facebook arrives and makes friendship so much more visible and in some ways explicit that we come to question what we mean by friendship and how it compares to the expectations of kinship as a relationship. Facebook serves to aggregate and expose the often quite haphazard way in which friendships have developed in the past. On the Facebook page there is some family, the cousins that are friends and not just cousins, but these are mixed with the only two people you are still in touch with from school, plus a rather more varied group of university friends, some of whom you would rather now discard. There are the work colleagues who helped you survive an oppressive employer alongside the people you felt especially enthusiastic about because they seemed to acknowledge you when you moved into a new neighbourhood. There are also often idiosyncratic alignments. A woman of 82 mainly has family on Facebook, but when she was younger her family hosted a Pakistani man whom she describes as very spiritual – someone from whom she has learned a good deal. He now lives in Pakistan, and she has found Facebook a good way to renew and maintain that contact. More commonly this applies to people encountered on holidays or when working abroad. Facebook exposes friendship as a bit of a mash-up.

In trying to characterise the way relationships operate in Melanesia (the region that includes New Guinea), the anthropologist Marilyn Strathern focuses on the events and actions that make relationships ‘visible’ to people. A core example is the way in which the birth of a child makes manifest the relationship between two other people as parents. She argues that among the people she studied it is this visibility that makes the relationship. In that regard social media, such as Facebook, has the effect of making us a bit more Melanesian, in that visibility becomes also for us a more active component in creating and maintaining relationships. Facebook quite literally makes relationships more visible – which may also make us both more conscious and more self-conscious about our relationships because other people can see them.
For traditionally taciturn and private English people this visibility can become a source of embarrassment and anxiety. Constance realised that she had just allowed her Facebook to grow ‘organically’ when at school. When she left home at 18 and came to The Glades, however, there was no longer that natural flow between online- and offline worlds. She thus became far more aware of who was present on Facebook. This became still more acute when her parents divorced after one of them had an affair. Suddenly there was so much about what one ex-partner might come across with respect to a new partner and so forth that Facebook shifted from being almost entirely thoughtless as a process to an arena of very careful consideration and manipulation. This was because for Constance the continued interaction with certain relatives had now become ‘inappropriate’ according to other relatives, who thought she should no longer be friends with them.

The brief history of the internet is already long enough for there to have been several distinct phases to this problem. Before the development of social media, the internet had been renowned as a place where people could create new communities around specific interests and hobbies, ranging from fandom of celebrities to extreme politics. These were often anonymous and revolved only around that particular interest. From this perspective social media is not a continuation of the previous internet, but almost its opposite. Where the earlier internet fostered discrete interest groups, Facebook has mixed together groups that would previously have been separated out into family, friends, work colleagues, shared hobbyists and so on. Where the earlier internet created concerns about the consequences of anonymity, we now have the opposite problem of worrying about the lack of privacy.

One solution to this problem has come from the findings of Chapter 2. The development of polymedia and a plethora of different platforms can be exploited to bring some order back to this confused space, making this a third phase within such a history. The internet created dispersed interest groups, while Facebook created a mash-up of everyone one knew. Now social media can be used to organise one’s relationships. Within the more formal interviews we often asked people about their use of each media sequentially, and it became quite natural for people to talk about their ‘email friends’ as opposed to ‘phone call friends’. Each group were characterised by what had become their ‘natural’ mode of communication. This was especially clear for WhatsApp. Individuals were now often part of a family WhatsApp group, a single-sex football or gossip-focused group, and a mixed group who plan their Saturday nights together. One informant discussed the development of
a WhatsApp group of new mothers on a new housing estate explicitly called 'Wine Women and WhatsApp';\(^5\) they needed this group to organise the occasions when they would share their experiences and enjoy some wine. Facebook could then shift from being the place where groups are mixed together to a place where one could park some relationships and move others elsewhere.

Katie used these developments to signal her own growing maturity. Previously she had accumulated 2,000 friends on Facebook, which she attributes to her experience of partying in London. Part of having a good night out was meeting some new people and getting on well enough that one decided to become Facebook friends. There was no particular thought to any consequence, to actually looking at them on Facebook: it was the friending that mattered. Rather than de-friending them or re-ordering things, however, she just left her Facebook in abeyance; when she moved on from her London party days she migrated her active social media life to WhatsApp groups. The more mature Katie was defined as someone who now cared about friends, not merely the activity of friending.

In Chapter 2 polymedia was introduced as the complementary relationship between different platforms. However, we can now also see that this can be mapped onto a gradation of different classes of friendship. This was especially clear in the study of the school pupils as one came to look at exactly who was being connected by each of the main social media they used. At the time of the ethnography it was very clear that the most intimate social media platform, despite – or perhaps because of – the fact that it is derided by others, was Snapchat. Most pupils have only around ten people with whom they regularly share their Snapchat images. This is because a primary function of Snapchat is the creation and maintenance of trust as represented by one of its most common genres, the *uglies.*\(^6\) Sharing an image where you look pretty awful is a test of whether people keep this to themselves. In practice this is more nuanced. It is almost expected that some uglies will be screen captured and shared among other friends. This is OK as long as it is fun. Yet pupils are also well aware that in the first phase of Snapchat very private intimate shots were inappropriately shared, revealing just how much is potentially at stake in this arena of trust and friendship. By the age of 16 they have a very well-considered sense of trust and betrayal, already honed over many years. Snapchat thus works well for the close bonding of trusted friends.

One level up from Snapchat are WhatsApp groups, which as previously noted mostly include both single- and mixed-sex groups. There
were similar groups and interplay between more or less private conversations on BBM. The next level up was Twitter. Although hardly any school pupils set their Twitter accounts to private, in effect Twitter was more private than, for example, Facebook because it was rare for adults and others to follow their children on Twitter. Twitter had thus become the primary site for semi-public group banter and generally being silly. Facebook in turn had shifted from peer group banter to become the place where one could safely incorporate other groups, such as family and work friends, as young people moved into part-time and then full-time jobs. Finally there were platforms where people not only did not mind, but actually wanted strangers to be present – mainly Instagram, but also, for some, Tumblr. This was because it was more impressive to have a perfect stranger ‘like’ and admire the aesthetics of one’s posting or collections. Taken as a whole, therefore, we can visualise polymedia as a centripetal force spinning relationships into a series of concentric levels of greater or lesser intimacy; each orbiting around a platform appropriate to that distance. This also provides a clear illustration of the concept of scalable sociality in a series that goes from most to least private and from small to larger groups.

Scalable sociality does not always have to map onto platforms. boyd has pointed out that on social media young people find a situation of context collapse, as audiences they would once have kept apart share the same social media space. Yet teenagers have many ways of coding their messages online, such that only certain groups understand what is being said and others are excluded. As a result, even though it appears that everyone is equally on the same platform, users are in effect able also to create a form of scalable sociality, with different levels of privacy and differentiated groups.

As we move from the school pupils to adults, Facebook is of particular interest because it has now become increasingly important to older people. It is an irony that Facebook was invented by male geeks and originally spread through them. Because when we use the term ‘social media’, then at least for the English the people who are seen as the natural social mediators are in fact older women – who have traditionally, among other domestic chores, assumed prime responsibility for maintaining family and friendship communications. The long-term future of Facebook is likely to be within this traditional frame of social mediators as a platform dominated by older females.

For example, Jenny has three children aged 26, 31 and 34 who all live in the north of England. She sees postings from them nearly every day: ‘S... was posting something this morning, saw her post a couple
of photos. That’s my middle daughter K. . ., she had challenged me for a movie pop quiz or something.’ Jenny notes that she will post on Facebook if her partner (whom she met through Friends Reunited) has done something interesting with the garden. He will also tag his daughter, and ‘if we take a picture of the dog we tag her’.

It tends to replace the telephone to a large extent doesn’t it, I think. I mean my father when he was alive and he went onto Facebook. He was logged on at 4 p.m. in the afternoon. He was nearly 95 when he passed away. And that was just again a means to keep in communication. He was very with it, as you can probably gather, had his webcam up there as well. He could see the posts of the garden and so on.

Facebook also works well for Jenny because of all the step-dads and step-mums and ex-partners involved. Everyone is in touch, but not too much and they are not too close. ‘It’s saved me a fortune on flippin’ phone calls.’ The family is core, but actually Jenny has over 2,000 friends on Facebook: ‘most of them I know quite well. They are friends or family. If I put up something, someone might be interested in this, I’ll put it up there.’ They belong to a gardening group and her partner spends quite a bit of time advising people in a ‘hip replacement group’, reassuring them on the basis of his experience of having had this operation. Jenny is also trying to get the local retirement home to pay more attention to the internet. Her activities, then, give an example of social media being employed by some very social mediators.

**Englishness and the ‘Goldilocks Strategy’**

The penny did not really drop until I was writing this chapter and started to realise that, given that this is the English who we are talking about, the proper starting point might be to realise that social media was always going to be as important for keeping people at a distance as it was for coming closer to them. At which point it seemed that Goldilocks, who rejects both the ‘too hot’ and the ‘too cold’ porridge in favour of the in-between, ‘just right’ bowl, in effect represents a perfect English fairy story. For most people in The Glades life is all about avoiding things that are too hot or too cold. What they want are ‘nice’ relationships. To people from other lands the English nice might seem a rather tepid or a lukewarm version of warm. Social media thus emerges as an ideal way
of gauging the precise temperature at which English people like to keep their relationships. In fact the word nice as the most common English expression for this balance comes up frequently in discussion:

That’s it. A lot of people I have on there, it’s really nice to be in touch with, but I don’t necessarily want to meet up with them again. There’s some I’d like to meet up with again, hope I will stay friends from school, which, again we don’t message each other, but we’ll comment on the same things about school. It would be nice to see them, nice to see what they are doing. If I bumped into them it would be lovely, but I’d never arrange to meet them. It’s nice. They’re people that were a big part of my life at some point. But don’t have to be a big part of my life now. And like I say, you only share as much as you want to share, and they share as much as they want to share.

This is the ‘Goldilocks Strategy’ on sociality in action. Social media both keeps people in contact and keeps them at a distance, which is nice.

This is harder for the school pupils, whose relations in any case lurch between someone being on one day best-friends-forever and next day worst-enemies-for-life. Yet Twitter can provide a way to deal with the people in class you dislike but still really want to know what they are doing, while bitchy people are indeed quite entertaining. For example:

Yeah. I guess people that are interesting to like. My friend I mentioned Tracy, ideally I wouldn’t follow her on Twitter. She does annoy me, but it’s really useful to know what she’s going on about all the time. It’s quite amusing to us. All I’d do is look at her tweets, I guess like laugh or think ‘why is she saying this?’ So at the moment a group of my friends are going to Bristol with Tracy who they used to be friends with her, but now they’re not friends with her any more. She’s just a really horrible person basically. Like she makes up stuff all the time, says she doesn’t like any of us. Accused us of bullying her and took us to the head of year . . . And when we don’t talk to her, that’s not really bullying. So we kind of, we put up with her, she sits with us and we’ll be polite with her but not particularly friendly with her. So she’s tweeting all the time how she’s so excited, really looking forward to it, can’t wait to go. But behind the scenes she texts my friends being like ‘Oh you’re going to ruin my holiday, I’m dreading going, we’re just going to argue.’ Knowing her Twitter is quite useful to think – well hang on,
she’s saying all this. Knowing that, I’d be looking at her Twitter all the time.

After a few years of this kind of intense reflection on one’s precise relationships, it is perhaps not surprising that people end up with an aspiration for things to be merely ‘nice’. A person who uses that word a great deal is Lucy. Although she is not yet 18 it is clear how far she has moved from this earlier teenage phase. She is very clear that ‘nice’ is about how social media helped her to achieve what she sees as a decent balance between being connected and being autonomous. This applies both to major and minor relationships. The starting point is her father; he is separated from her mother and she only sees him on alternate weekends. However, he has become quite a presence on her Facebook, ‘liking’ almost all her posts. She is well aware that he could become too obtrusive, for example in trying to friend her friends, which would cause her a problem both with him and Facebook. As things stand, though, her silly banter is now on Twitter, so she regards it as ‘sweet’ and appropriate for an absent parent to demonstrate closeness in absentia through Facebook. The platform provides them with a more constant communication than just the bi-weekly visit.

This is just one example of what is ‘nice’ about Facebook for Lucy. Without it she would have had virtually no communication with her aunt, uncle and their children who live in France, which would have been a pity. When her sister went to university they needed to renegotiate their relationship. Lucy is pleased to know what is going on with her sister in some detail, not least because it gives her some guidance for when it will be her turn to go to university. However, she does not want to be seen as too interested or interfering – so passive observation through Facebook, without ever ‘liking’ or responding to her sister’s postings, seems about right. It’s also ‘nice’ when you get things right in any given act of communication, for example working out how to Skype a toddler nephew aged two and a half, who wants to tell you what he has been doing – although after too long this can get a bit tedious and he gets rather overwhelmed. Half an hour of this, however, is described by Lucy as ‘nice’.

Tumblr is in the same sense a ‘nice’ platform, used by many young people precisely because it does not normally mean active friendship between people even if they are interested in each other’s blogs. One girl thinks that it is a bit too distant, so actually ‘You can have conversations. There is a little message that most people don’t use, but it’s nice when you find someone who’s got similar interests, that maybe you’ve
met once at a party, that you can follow them and you can find out that they’ve got similar interests, even if they live in Scotland’. Tumblr is also nice for getting to know boys who live abroad, enabling the relationship to be kept at a distance, without awkwardness and ambiguity.

This desire to find a niche that is neither too hot nor too cold seems to apply to all ages, partly because it is just as relevant to family relationships as it is to friendship. An older woman notes:

I’ve got a couple of cousins, one is in Wales, one is in Blackpool. They have just recently come back into my life ’cos my mum died and they came to the funeral. And we just keep in touch ’cos it’s just so easy to put something on Facebook. But I probably wouldn’t pick up the phone and talk to them, probably haven’t got that much in common to sit and talk for half an hour. But a comment on their Facebook or a text is so much easier. I can now see her daughter, her daughter’s children and her other daughter, she’s got pictures of my family. We write comments occasionally to each other on Facebook. But I don’t think I’d pick up the phone and talk to her. I think as you get older you have less and less family and you grab hold to what you have got. ’Cos she hasn’t got parents. Got one brother. And I’m her only cousin. We’ve all of a sudden, she’s got like a friend.

Here again we can see that keeping at a distance can also mean allowing someone to be closer than they were. The balance is not necessarily about being unfriendly: it is rather about being appropriately friendly and, in a very English manner, politely friendly. For English people the best thing social media can do is to help resolve situations that otherwise could be intensely embarrassing, precisely because it is unclear as to just how close or distant it is appropriate to be. Several people noted social media as incredibly helpful in dealing with death for just that reason. A school pupil explained that when recently the mother of his friend died, many people responded on Facebook. These were people who would not have wanted or indeed expected to be part of the formal proceedings of funerals and wakes, but who might feel uncertain what to say in an informal playground setting. In this situation Facebook seemed to provide the right and appropriate distance between the formal and informal that worked well. A similar example had occurred some years earlier in the extremely upsetting circumstance of a pupil at school who was killed. The school ended up encouraging other pupils to see Facebook as the right place to post comments and condolences. It
was not too obtrusive, but people could make their feelings public and acknowledged – something the school recognised they needed to do.

For young adults the most excruciating moment of embarrassment is often the initiating of a cross-gender relationship, because they have an acute fear of being the person who makes the advance and then ends up being rejected, with all the subsequent damage to their self-esteem. Such experiences then make it difficult for them to repeat the same positive action on the next occasion. This is precisely why Tinder seems to be such a success. Tinder is a ‘dating app’, but more precisely it is a means to initiate cross-gender conversation – one that does not involve getting so drunk that you feel brave enough to make a move on someone, but in a condition which may lead to irresponsible consequences.

Instead people suggested that Tinder keeps this initial advance light and fun. Tinder consists basically of a few images which can give another person an idea of whether or not they want to make contact. Online Wikihow⁹ offers the following advice:

Avoid pictures of you with a person of the opposite sex, as this can give a bad impression to people looking at your profile. Try to have at least a few pictures of you, preferably from different angles. Use pictures to show off your interests, such as a hiking photo or a picture of you at a beach. A picture of you with a dog may prove to be very helpful, especially if the dog is cute! Smile and act natural!

I have no evidence for this paragraph, but on a speculative basis it appears that much of Tinder may not be interactive. These profiles are simply enough to create an imagined encounter. It allows one to spend time wondering what you might have said to that person, or what sex with them might have been like, which is how much of young people’s time is spent in any case. What people did say was simply that Tinder makes things easier. For many Tinder is basically a game. Because it is a game, however, it cuts through the razor wire, the barrier to initial contact. As a result it is very possible that Tinder, along with its various rivals and clones, are creating many new and successful relationships. People claimed that already they knew of cases where this led to marriage and other relationships with depth – even if one route towards those goals may remain casual sex initiated by the Tinder encounter, which is why the site is also considered sleazy. When, however, the main English alternative is drunkenness leading to casual sex as a mode of initial encounter, women in particular may see a good deal of merit in this method of overcoming embarrassment.
As people get older social media fits within the more general English sensibility of relationships kept close enough and distant enough. A somewhat unusual but perhaps instructive case concerned a whole section of road in Highglade. It started as a quite familiar story. When the residents there had young children, they were more in and out of each other’s homes. Later on much of the talk and gossip was conducted, literally, over the garden fence. Now people are older they are less bothered about meeting face to face, appearing instead to have found comfort in Facebook – rather as one might find comfort in an old armchair. Peggy’s next-door neighbour is not too well, for example, so it is easier to communicate through Facebook about some weeds that seem to be coming through into her garden, or to have an online chat about a car parked outside the day before which neither of them recognised. In any case since her neighbour does night work they would have difficulty in communicating directly, so Facebook seems ideal as a replacement. Currently there are eight people along Peggy’s street with whom she communicates in this way. She notes:

I think Facebook’s took over everything now, that’s taken over more than the phone. People used to use the house phone. I don’t use the phone. I’m more chatty on Facebook . . . I tap it in to him, he might not answer till the next morning or whatever and he’ll come back and say ‘Oh I was working’, I mean I know he works, it’s not a problem, but sometimes he’ll say to me I’ve got a parcel, but instead of coming round to tell me, he’ll tap me and ask me to take it. Little things like that.

She looks at Facebook before work. It is the first thing she looks at when at work and is a key part of her evening. ‘I think it’s good ’cos you’ll tap in to all your friends and you’ll be surprised how many friends have come out of the woodwork.’

As a string of neighbours they note who is doing what for the village carnival or who is playing in the local five-a-side football. At the same time Peggy is corresponding with people from her school with whom she had lost touch. Yet it is hugely important that Facebook can keep people at a distance. For example, when her husband was dying ‘We had neighbours in, a young couple across the road would come in. They were religious. They were trying to pressurise me and I don’t want that’. After he died there were plenty of visitors and condolences immediately after her bereavement, but all these seemed to dry up when really she still needed them. Peggy thus found sharing on Facebook with
others discussing their experience of bereavement was quite helpful. Living alone, she can watch television for entertainment, but finds she gets itchy fingers and wants to ‘tap’ away on Facebook. She is careful to explain that she is not addicted to Facebook, but she does wonder what the kids have been doing or if there is any news from her sister. She likes the fact that her brother scans and posts pictures he had found which were kept by their mother, enabling all the family to post about how awful everyone looked. She sees the postings of both her sons, and is not bothered if they are a bit daft on occasion. Knowing what her son is up to enables Peggy to predict when he is likely to come over with a bag of dirty washing, on his way to his girlfriend. Again she does not mind too much. Sometimes she goes a bit further. In fact she quite surprised herself when she posted asking if anyone knew how to put up a trellis for her garden – after all, there is no way she would have gone outside on the street and asked a stranger or even a neighbour that question. The posting brought results, and now a friend of her late husband is going to help her with it. However, she is a bit upset by some of the bad language and people venting in public, and by some quarrels reflected in ‘indirects’.

In effect, for Peggy, Facebook replaces the traditional raising of the net curtain – a leitmotif for the assumed behaviour of older women in such villages. But no one sees her raising the curtain and looking out – and actually there is a good deal more to be seen on the screen than out of the window. She can browse photographs, whether from her family or others, which she loves to do, and see what people are wearing and doing, and who seems to be friends with whom. As she suggests: ‘It may all be rubbish, but it’s friendly rubbish.’ She does not have a car and cannot go out much. Without young children, not being a drinker and unable to afford the local restaurants there is just no other way she could have found this particular combination of semi-detached relationships. These are exactly what she craves now that her husband has died and her children have left home. For some of the earlier examples, the right temperature of the porridge meant keeping people at a distance and preventing things from warming up. Yet for many elderly people life’s porridge had simply got colder and colder, and they were becoming increasingly lonely. Staring covertly through a net curtain was probably never what people of previous generations actually wanted their lives to become. Facebook can help to bring some warmth back to the porridge.

Furthermore, Peggy is well aware of the shallowness of traditional village friendships. People object that Facebook has too much trivia, but what did they think most conversations were about offline? Previously she would greet and chat to people she knows when shopping on the
High Street, as she still does, but such conversations impart very little actual information. Most were about the weather, and very limited compared to the details of other people’s lives that she can now encounter on Facebook. Even when it’s the same topic, such as a neighbour talking about the weekend he or she has just spent on the coast, there is much more sustained conversation on Facebook than within the High Street conversation, and on Facebook you can see all the photographs. It is not as nosy as being in someone’s house, but it is nosier than meeting them on the street. This group of users can also arrange practical things, for example to take in each other’s deliveries from the post office when they are out. For Peggy, that is ‘nice’.

As this example also shows, the ‘Goldilocks Strategy’ is equally adept at dealing not only with the mundane, trivial but sustained sociability that keeps everyday life active, but also with serious and complex issues of death, condolence and forming new relationships. This is particularly clear to Peggy with regard to her most difficult current relationship, which is with her four-year-old granddaughter. Her son is estranged from his wife, to the extent that Peggy has no direct contact at all with her granddaughter. The couple had separated even before his wife realised that she was pregnant. They tried getting back together, but the relationship ended even more acrimoniously and now he will never go round there. Just like Peggy, therefore, her son never actually sees the little girl at all. All his knowledge of his daughter comes through Facebook. Peggy is Facebook friends with her daughter-in-law, and every time a new photograph of her granddaughter appears she downloads it to show to her son. Her daughter-in-law knows perfectly well that this is going on and approves. On the one hand this is all pretty heart breaking for Peggy, but in the circumstances she feels it is the best she can do. For all concerned it provides an excellent example of social media’s amazing ability to keep people both connected and apart at the same time. Given the extent of divorce and the rise of ‘complex’ families in contemporary Britain, it is now a hugely significant facility.

For some users not as old as Peggy, keeping things apart is often at a premium for a very different reason. This is a period during which people are often working hard and for long hours. An increasing number of individuals in The Glades work at home and work all day on the computer. Since this is more isolated than traditional work locations they appreciate the ability to make social connections. However, these need to be controlled so that they do not interfere with work and can be done at times of convenience – often a ten-minute break from work tasks. For Freddie, who manages a company from his home computer, these breaks
take the form of reading and possibly replying to posts about some of his various hobbies. A big fan of Frank Zappa and Captain Beefheart, he is an anonymous member of a forum devoted to their music. Freddie also likes to discuss football. Right now, however, between the demands of the business and parenting a young child he hardly has time to meet up with anyone, nor does he really want to. Social media gives him sociality that can be turned on and off at the click of a mouse button.

Such 'middle distancing' is also a reflection of his decision to come and live in The Glades. One of the very few Jewish inhabitants, he sought out The Glades as sufficiently distant from traditional Jewish settlements in London and therefore keeps at bay the intensity of family life that he grew up with, along with endless arguments and debates about Middle East politics that he can follow online at a safe distance. He has thereby established a direct parallel between this choice of The Glades as a place to live, neither too close nor too distant from London, and his subsequent use of Facebook and forums. They are all part of his suburban solution to achieving what people call a 'life balance'.

Similarly Jo has a full-time job, and at the same time she is studying for a legal qualification. She therefore has virtually no time to keep up with people. As she notes when she is studying: 'I don't go out at all . . . I don't really interact with people as much as I did before, I just don't have the time.' Jo does not post at this phase in her life, but she is grateful for the fact that other people who are less busy do post their photographs, articles and other things, because at least 'you feel like you are part of something rather than being on the outside, and you can see what friends are doing without having to speak to them about it 'cos you don't have the time to talk to them'.

In addition there is a whole group of valuable uses of social media that are more specific to women. It allows them to develop and sustain a variety of relationships with men, without having to wonder whether or not these men are actually investing considerable time in friendly social banter to further the determined agenda of eventual seduction. Men readily admit (to other men) that they will groom women for years while never wavering from this clear ultimate purpose. Having social media relationships with men in another part of the country or men living abroad may provide women with quite a novel experience of asexual but deep cross-gender relationships.

At other times women also appreciate the way in which social media allows them to engage in relationships to others with shared concerns at a time when previously this was not possible. An example mentioned by many women was the issue of breastfeeding at night – generally an
immensely tiring necessity. So boring that many mothers use a breastfeeding phone app to remind themselves of which breast they have just fed the child with. At 2.00 am you cannot use the phone since that would disturb a sleeping partner. Today, however, you can cradle the baby in one arm and check who else is currently breastfeeding with a free hand; you can then make contact and at least have some company for the next hour or so. Sometimes, too, mothers may feel anxious about what the baby is or is not doing. Simply knowing that one can get advice or share experiences even at night is hugely reassuring. ‘Is green poo normal?’ ‘How come he wants to feed again when I only just put him down?’ ‘What exactly is colic?’ ‘You don’t want to disturb the doctor every two minutes.’

Social media usage can be adapted to fit the circumstance. Claudette was able to compare her experience with her first baby, born before social media was common, with her recent experience of having a second child. Her key observation was that the new ability to use social media aligned closely with another difference. Having a first child naturally leads to a huge desire for frequent contact with, and reassurance from, other mothers. In the case of a second child the greater experience of being a parent is to some extent offset by the reduced time available, since the first child also requires attention. For Claudette social media fits perfectly into the current regime where she is spending far less time in toddler groups and face to face meetings; this can be compensated for by interacting with other mothers of second or third children who are also now comfortable with making social media the key to their sustained communication.

Similarly those families who moved into The Glades and have many relatives in other parts of England are likely to be posting reams of baby photographs and anecdotes to keep them up to date – in a way that people with local families would not require. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that there is a natural geography to social media: that it is only used by people to overcome distance. A toddler group makes intense use of Facebook precisely because they all live near to each other and see each other often. Just as schoolchildren can now extend the playground into their home through social media, a degree of interaction can develop that has its own momentum which no one wants to interrupt. To conclude, it is not just that social media is used consistently either to distance people or to bring them closer; it is equally used to balance people’s offline life. As we have seen, it is supposed to make life warmer for those whose social connections have become attenuated, and to create distance from other people when social life has become too full.
Porridge is difficult to get right

This last section provides evidence for a specific conclusion, namely that the very definition of social media as something colonising a previously unoccupied position between private communication and public broadcast is particularly well suited to resolve many issues of English sociality. Such sociality is perceived, indeed defined, as a mode as much concerned to keep people at the requisite distance as to develop close friendships. The argument here sounds quite positive. Yet there is at least as much to be learnt from the equally numerous examples where those involved feel that social media has failed, or where social media is subject to the same concerns that prevented satisfactory relationships previously. The first example will illustrate the displacement of established sensitivity to the new media. Then we progress to claims that social media itself creates problematic conditions, something that almost always comes down to the new forms of visibility it creates. The third possibility is a combination of prior and unprecedented problems that we find in concepts such as ‘oversharing’.

The starting point is the way in which social media simply makes evident the exquisite sensibility of many English people to the exact state of their relationships, even as this has been transferred lock, stock and barrel to the new media:

So for instance there was a girl; one of my friends. She had fallen out with me and my husband and we’re the godparents of her son. So what I noticed was that she wouldn’t actually comment or like anything that we ever put on Facebook: our wedding anniversary, photos of Jerry, anything that was of importance to us. But she would do this with friends of ours, who she wasn’t even close friends with. So my father-in-law – she’s starting commenting on his statuses. He lives in Lincoln and she’s met him like twice. She’ll comment on all the people round us. But distinctly ignore anything that we’d put on. She’s put on like friends of mine she knew that I would be in touch with them. She would put on things like ‘Oh my lovely. It was so lovely to see you the other day. We must catch up soon.’ It was blatantly obvious that she was declining all of my messages and not taking any of my calls. But incredibly readily available to everybody else.

I was inviting people to a particular group or something and I included all the names and I missed her out by mistake. And then I can’t remember what happened but she was like ‘oh thanks for
including me’ and I was like ‘I’m so sorry’ and I think I texted her because I didn’t want it playing out on Facebook, but I texted her to say I’m so sorry . . . And when she put something on Facebook about how she’d had a really really rough week. My immediate instinct was to take her some flowers and my immediate thought was that she likes the big chrysanthemums. I’ll take her some of those, and then I thought no I’m not doing that, we’re not friends any more. And then I just thought you know what, I’m not going to be shrunk down ‘cos of this whole issue, I don’t see why I should change myself and actually not do things that are nice because of the conflict. I don’t want her to feel like it’s a power thing, and I’m not trying to force her into talking to me, because if I send her these flowers and she has to say thank you while she’s being rude. So I thought I’ll just take them over one evening and leave them on the doorstep, ‘cos you’ve had a rough week, so I’ve done what instinctively was the right thing, but I haven’t put her in a difficult position. Do you know what I mean? I didn’t want her to feel it was a manipulative thing.

The advent of the category ‘Facebook friend’ was bound both to pose new problems and also throw this general category of ‘friendship’ into relief. Facebook did not cause this anxiety over how to get things exactly right and to do exactly the right thing. The user would clearly in any case have been able to elaborate these contradictions at considerable length, simply because she is so sensitive to them. Several conversations with young mothers revealed their anxiety and uncertainty over such issues. One talked about whether it is OK to friend some of the other mothers she meets at school; they are much younger than her, and she wants to, but is not sure if they want her to. Another informant felt that she now knows the other mothers too well – the time when asking them to friend her on Facebook would seem natural has passed. In this instance, the ‘porridge’ is already too warm and it would seem too forced. The point made about Tinder above is that English people are highly sensitive to that precise moment at which a person makes the attempt at friendship in case they are rebuffed. However, there is no Tinder that makes Facebook friending light and fun for mothers. By contrast what works well is when ‘we joined the NCT and had our four lessons and after that swapped email addresses. And then we hooked up on Facebook and we all met up a lot’. Here the process seemed natural. The same women later joined an emerging group that now has 300–400 mothers in the Treedon area; they use the site to advertise
and exchange or sell baby goods, but also explicitly to welcome new mothers in the area. Being English may therefore imply an exquisite sensibility to the precise timing that determines whether a social interaction is appropriate or not.  

Field work in the village included countless conversations within which individuals were keen to discuss how and why they have friended certain people and unfriended others. In a relatively short time general norms can develop, of which by far the most widespread is the conclusion that a Facebook friend must be someone you have at some time or other actually met. This makes it very different from prior internet connections. In these anonymity was prized on the grounds that people could then share their most intimate secrets and get advice they could not possibly take from people they actually knew. There may also be norms as to the proper size of Facebook:

I used to have a friend who had a rule that she wouldn’t have any more than 150 friends on Facebook. Which I thought was a valid rule. I realised that out of the 305 people I’m connected to on Facebook, I don’t know 5 of them. As in I don’t know them personally. Everyone else I’ve either worked with them, or they’re a friend, or I’ve met them through a baby group. Or they’re a friend of a friend who I’ve met and then we sent each other Facebook connection requests. Of the 5 people . . . I know who they are, but I’ve never met them. One of them was through an Australian friend. And this was a couple of years ago. She became friends with this chap in Scotland. And then he sent me a friend request. And I thought well Sheila knows him, don’t want to be rude. And it turns out that he’s friends on Facebook with my friend’s cousin. Mutual friends. There’s another connection. I’ve met Sheila’s cousin Dennis. Dennis knows this chap. It’s a safe connection.

Such conversations may also reflect the remnants of the concern which emerged when Facebook first arose about whether these were ‘real’ friends. There were several versions of: ‘The problem with Facebook is that you cannot be proper friends with that amount of people.’ Similarly people explain in detail the logic of their unfriending:

I just did a big cull. People who do glamour selfies and stuff that just annoyed the hell out of me. I just took her off as a friend. Unfriended, annoying, a girl I went to school with 15 years ago. And I think everyone when they went on Facebook they went and
found all their old school friends, and it’s like well, we weren’t that close at school, we’ve had no contact since school, you haven’t private messaged me and I have to see pictures of your selfies every other day on my feed. So I took her off. ‘Cos I didn’t see any benefit. There were some lawyers I had on from Uni and I was like I can’t even remember, can’t put a face to that name, can’t think of anything about you, who you were, or why I would need to contact you in future. Some of them I’ve kept ‘cos it’s kind of handy to accumulate lawyers at times.

So once again people are creating an idea of what ‘temperature’ a relationship needs to be for Facebook friending to be appropriate. As the last example indicates, a key criterion is the actual behaviour of that person online. A term that developed early on with social media is that of oversharing. An older brother worries about his younger sister: ‘I have advised her in the past but again, I try and see myself in her shoes. She’s 18. When I was 18 I think I’d just got Facebook. I think that was around when it came out. I do advise my sister to not do it, but I remember I was young and have done the same thing. She’ll either learn from mistakes or realise that she doesn’t want to be sharing that much with 300 people at once.’ Another notes that you ‘can post something funny about kids like finding a flipflop in the microwave. But a girlfriend posting her husband asleep and not fully clothed seemed wrong, also embarrassing things about kids. I de-friended one who posted pouting selfies.’

One of the mothers shows her annoyance:

There’s also a degree of smug-married and smug-yummy-mummies. People who, you know, get married to the love of their lives. Have this perfect relationship, have perfect children who only ever do perfect things and they just plaster all of this. The girl who has 15,000 pictures on Facebook is very much like this. That’s the bit that really annoys me ‘cos I don’t believe your family is that perfect. I kind of feel when people post that amount of stuff – who are they trying to convince? Other people or themselves? I don’t need to put up a thousand pictures and have people telling me ‘Oh you’re so beautiful, your children are so beautiful, your life is perfect.’

Since the concept of oversharing is now well established people would often discuss it in regard to their own postings. Most parents were fully aware that endless postings of their children’s latest activities could
irritate and annoy some people, but usually argued that they needed to do this to keep family and friends updated. Other people did not have to look at the baby pictures if they did not want to. Sometimes there are deeper concerns:

Funnily enough I always get an instinct, when it’s the anniversary of my mum’s death. Because I don’t have wider family. It’s the kind of day that can go by without any reference to my mum ever having existed. It’s like, I always feel tempted to put something. Like it’s 8 years since my mum died. But you know when you think it’s such a public setting. There’s 136 people here. This is the kind of thing I’d talk to my friends about but I don’t necessarily want the world and his wife to know. It’s too precious to have it spread across 136 acquaintances who I haven’t seen for years and some of them that are just school friends.\(^\text{13}\)

One of the most common reasons for people to refuse Facebook altogether is that they want to avoid wasting their time on what they regard as trivia. In effect they are thereby judging social media as a kind of ‘news’ site, while those who do enjoy Facebook see it as more analogous to chatting, an activity that would in any case largely concern everyday trivia. Another woman who lives in a social housing area she calls ‘Jeremy Kyle street’ (after a daytime television programme shown in the UK and notoriously full of scandal) refuses to go on Facebook precisely because she feels she has enough gossip already. There is a common logic which was discussed in a story in Tales from Facebook.\(^\text{14}\) In effect if you feel isolated from gossip then Facebook can help add something that is missing, while if your offline life is already ‘overshared’ you have reasons to avoid an additional online burden. However, this logic is very partial. In the ethnography we encountered plenty of people who simply prefer to be equally private both offline and online, or equally public both offline and online.

Oversharing is an example of what turns out to be by far the most common problematic issue with social media such as Facebook, and which may account for much of the movement to alternatives such as WhatsApp groups. It is simply the level of public visibility – clearest when it is most extreme, perhaps because of what is being made visible or whom it is being made visible to:

I was on it, quite happily on it, but then had a lot of family issues last year, and there was a lot of bickering going on. Sort of doing
with my dad and my niece. My brother left my sister-in-law, went off with somebody else and my niece, his eldest daughter, was causing a lot of trouble. She's 20 now, was 19 at the time. It was all on Facebook, all really public. Kate was doing stupid things, she was the sort of catalyst, was doing stupid things. And it got to a point where I was just like – I can't be doing with this, 'cos I was saying – now can everyone just calm down. This is supposed to be a social site not an anti-social site. And it was really weird 'cos my nephew, her brother, came off exactly the same night, just lost it, lost the plot.

She was dissing the new girlfriend and slagging her off basically but nastily. None of us wanted, none of us were happy with the situation that he'd gone off with her. And then my dad got involved and started telling Kate off which is fair enough, but then it became a slagging match between them all. Then my youngest niece who is only 16 now, she got involved, and my nephew who is in the middle bless him, stayed quite calm. He tried to say to my dad – look you know the girls are really upset about this, we all did. Thing is we've got a lot of joint friends. Obviously we are all family and we have friends that are all the same. So even if I was to block them, it would still come back through. At the time I was just looking at it and getting more and more irate and in the end I just went – right I'm off, this night I'm off, and I deleted myself off.

There are other cases where the impact is simply and quite obviously problematic, for instance people discovering that a partner is having an affair: ‘It went to his wife's sister by mistake because they have the same name. And I won't say anything else, but it was one of those things where an accident with too much alcohol.’ Rather more common were the suspicions and jealousy to which social media gave rise. To put this in perspective, both were far less common in this field work than in my previous study of Trinidad.\(^{15}\) Having said that, such a conclusion would be disputed by a hairdresser who claimed that, based on her conversations with clients, The Glades is rampant with inappropriate relationships, jealousy and break up, all because of social media. Being more interview-based, my ethnography was also more shallow than my previous study in Trinidad, and I may have simply been less exposed to these more difficult private issues. It was clear, however, that in comparison to Trinidad there is far less gossip in The Glades and people are much more discreet.
Working in the Caribbean I had found that in Jamaica there was strong evidence that mobile phones made sexual infidelity that much easier and more common, whereas Facebook – being more public and eliciting tagged photographs – actually made it more difficult. The information in The Glades was insufficient to make such generalisations, but it is clear that both more traditional texting and the rise of WhatsApp meant that private assignations are now easier than ever to arrange. Yet also, as a group of men noted, it used to be that ‘what goes on tour stays on tour, the old saying, girls have the same saying. But that’s not true these days, is it? You’re sitting round a pool taking pictures. Everyone has Wi-Fi, uploading stuff straight away.’ In effect extramarital relations have had to become significantly more discreet or complications can swiftly arise: ‘but then she used my laptop in the afternoon to go on Facebook, and halfway through her using it, the battery went flat. So she was in bed. I was lodging there, so was in a different bed at the time, put my laptop on, and her Facebook was there, and there were messages between her and this other guy. Had been going on for about five months. And then safe to say it was pretty obvious what was going on. So that broke us up. Some guy she was at Uni with.’ The fact that stag and hen parties are now favoured occasions for posting photographs does not always sit well with the number of married males and females going abroad for such parties where things may happen.

A divorce lawyer noted that social media can be used in court as concrete evidence, which might be helpful. Far more often, however, she finds it an impediment to clients coming to terms with the divorce settlement: people can go back to something posted a year before which reignites their animosity. For this divorce lawyer Facebook is strongly associated with stalking, jealousy and obsessive concerns with someone about whom you have negative feelings – precisely because you can go back to Facebook and view the evidence again and again.

Perhaps the single most problematic consequence of visibility encountered during this ethnography concerns foster parenting in England. What was already a very difficult role has become far harder because of social media:

One incidence of Facebook was a young boy sees on Facebook that his birth mother has started slagging him off on Facebook. And to the fact of that she’s named another female that his father is having relationships with. The son, having all these emotional upheavals ‘cos he’s in the thing, promptly trashes the foster carer’s
house. Windows, doors, and just goes crazy. 'Cos he’s, he’s within the group of all these. There’s no privacy within the internet. For instance, one young lad had a smartphone, the parents said well where are you. Google map, Oh I’m here dad. Twenty minutes later the father is at the front door at the foster carer’s banging the heck out of the door saying give me the kid back.

More common were feelings of a kind of negated ‘Goldilocks Strategy’, where it seemed that Facebook made the wrong people either closer or more distant. Parents who are not on Twitter or Facebook, for example, find that a distant relative is; he or she thus knows all about what their own children are doing, but of which the parents are unaware. As a result the parents become beholden to this relative for keeping them informed – a situation some find deeply troubling, suggesting that it harms their direct relationship with the child. For others it was essential not to be on Facebook, as in the instance of a woman suffering from long-term postnatal depression who came to appreciate that Facebook was clearly impeding her recovery. In another case a woman’s relationship with her sister was deeply damaged through information on Facebook, which revealed that the sister had visited England but had failed to contact her.

An incidence of this unwanted visibility, though it came up only once during the ethnography, was the sense of Facebook as a ghost. A man felt very uncomfortable when a person who had died but still retained a Facebook profile would appear on his wall – even though he thought he had unfriended the deceased, which he felt was the most appropriate thing to do. ‘Didn’t know him well, I worked with him, he was one of my friends, younger than me so a bit of a shock. His face kept coming up and it just didn’t seem right.’

More common are cases in which it is harder to see the visibility of social media as causative; it rather feeds into a pre-existing issue of visibility. In the previous section there were several examples of how social media has assisted new parents in creating relationships. However, it was also noted that the offline movement towards antenatal and then toddler groups has changed parenting. The fact that everyone has children of very similar ages makes direct comparisons inescapable: ‘Some people, yeah. I’ve maybe got one friend who would kind of post it to the world that their child has just done something, to kind of shout and say “isn’t my child clever”’. This may continue into later stages when young people post their exam grades and say which school or university they have got into, though by that time most of the peer baiting is done by the
children themselves. For the new parent there was even much embar-
assment about the more positive uses, as this mother notes: ‘You know
I still kick myself about some early posts I did when Cressida came along,
saying ridiculous things, like help why does my child do this . . .? And
then you feel so stupid ‘cos it’s just a normal child thing, but at the time
it seems like such a big issue.’

Finally we also need to acknowledge cases where increased vis-
ibility does not have the consequences that one might have predicted.
Perhaps one of the most surprising findings of this research is how the
‘Goldilocks Strategy’ is achieved when the meeting point is between two
quite extreme polarities. Prior to social media grandparents and great-
greatparents tended to meet the very young in situations where the lat-
ter were expected to behave appropriately. One would have assumed
that the elderly might be quite distressed if exposed to the actual behav-
ior of a free-ranging modern teenager, complete with incessant swear-
ing and silliness. Social media is probably the first time for a long while
that this older generation has immediate access to the materials young
people are sharing with each other, rather than those intended for con-
sumption by an older generation. I conducted many interviews with
quite elderly people who had recently become exposed to this extreme
adolescent behaviour, and while they did show some concerns with the
level of swearing or the lack of any attempt by young people to protect
themselves from the consequence of sharing, they were on the whole
quite relaxed and unfazed by this encounter. This was one of the find-
ings that completely contradicted my own expectations. They may not
like all that they see, but at least in The Glades there was a general lib-
eralism among the elderly about accepting that ‘young people will be
young people’ – possibly combined with gratitude that they are not quite
as excluded from younger age cohorts as they used to be. In several cases
I was interviewing people in their nineties.

As an example, how does an elderly woman respond to her grand-
daughter’s cohort who happen to have a close relationship to death
metal bands?

Well the one thing that’s helped me is she’s 16, and she can go
from angel to Satan in about .5 of a second and I’ll tell you what
heartened me is seeing the others. They’re all just as confused and
immature and naive as she is. So in a perverse kind of way that’s
comforted me. It’s mostly bands and ‘I’m gonna die if I don’t see
them’ and ‘I feel like cutting my wrists today’. ‘Oh My God’ you
know. And they seem to have good days. If one of them is down
generally, one of them will pitch in. I’ve noticed that one girl in particular is often down and I think for Christ’s sake I want to slap her, pull yourself together. You can’t say that but actually my granddaughter did once. She told her to get a grip and I thought – good for you. I was so impressed, I was quite proud of her ‘cos it was going against the mainstream. Everyone was like ‘Oh I love you babes don’t do this, don’t do that.’ It is funny.

**Making and breaking relationships**

So far the discussion, apart from that of Tinder, has been mainly about family and friendships of a general kind. Yet social media is now often an integral part of the process which leads to intense relationships and long-term partnerships. This is hardly surprising in that people naturally use any evidence they can to discover who this person that they are developing a serious relationship with really is. There were many instances where social media seemed to be instrumental in both creating and breaking people’s key relationship. Perhaps the most publicised result is that now known as ‘revenge porn’. Revenge porn certainly happens among the school pupils, making things particularly difficult for the schools since it is usually the younger pupils who behave this badly – which means that it is technically illegal. However, teachers are well aware that such conduct is mainly symptomatic of immaturity, which means that these schoolchildren need a considered response rather than a heavy-handed legalistic response from the police. The police themselves are in a quandary in such situations since they appreciate this, but are legally bound to intervene if asked.

More commonly for adults, social media is simply an integral aspect of getting to know someone:

We used to work together. He was my point of contact at work, had to ring him on a daily basis and stuff, and we had this little banter about something, and he used to called me Keleeeeee. And one day we were just chit chatting and I was basically really foul with him over the phone. I was having my own relationship problems before I got with him. That evening he sent me a Facebook message saying what’s wrong. He’s always added me on Facebook to see what I would look like and thought – Oh yeah she’s whatever. I didn’t think that, he was just a work colleague, thought
I was never gonna ‘cos with me, pictures and real life is two different things to me. I didn't fancy him from his Facebook. I didn't even look into that, didn't bother. He sent me his friends request and I accepted it and just left it at that. That's it. Right now, you know if someone send me a Facebook message, obviously I'll stalk them first, but back in them days just accepted it. One evening he Facebooked me asking why was I so down at work and stuff like that. Next day, carry on with work, sent me a Facebook message how are you? And from then every day he sent me a Facebook message. 'Cos we didn't have each other's numbers. Private message was the only way to speak to each other. Then it led to every night before bed. Then sneaky texts. But with him it was like ding dong that picture was nice. Or like fiiiiiiit! Was very very flirty . . . One day he said he wanted to come and see me. This was by Facebook as well, I said Oh yeah that's fine.

Sadly this is the start of an extended story, which, in brief, is: meet, drink, sex, end of other relationships, move in together, have child, regret and finally acrimonious break up. The stories are rather shorter when there is no growing symmetry. For example, a male in a toddler group found it very uncomfortable when one of the mothers started flirting with him through WhatsApp, and therefore made the whole relationship to the group a bit more problematic.

While there is nothing to support the common idea that offline relationships are more real, the discrepancy between online and offline may still be significant. A relationship can become quite complex when people feel they are dating two people – one offline and one online. For example in a lesbian relationship Joyce was at first attracted because her new partner was shy and introverted when face to face. On Facebook, however, the same person seemed to reveal a different and more communicative side to herself which made her more interesting. Yet the very same factor led to the couple breaking up because after a while the sheer openness of the online self, with its political venting and strident opinions, became an aspect of this woman that Joyce eventually found quite unattractive. She had hoped that her partner was using Facebook to give herself a public confidence that would then emerge in her private personality, but came to realise that the opposite was true. The more extrovert she became online, the more introverted she was offline.

Couples may or may not feel that their screen lives need to be similar in order to be compatible. One woman may be just fine with the fact that she can get on with stuff for hours while her partner is on World
of Warcraft, but in another case the fact that a man’s partner is always on her phone when they are in company is given as the reason why he decides to break up with her. Finally a common and highly problematic consequence of social media’s visibility occurs when a relationship break up is played out on that media. This experience is quite common for school pupils, though these are usually quite transient. As people get older the issue may become more serious:

I think social networks are absolute poison to relationships. They just don’t help any situation, people get involved, write nasty indirects. Was going out at Uni, didn’t work out, he broke up with me. But when things turned sour, we’re going out for 10 months. Indirect tweets, you just know it’s about people. It’s just immature isn’t it . . . Yeah, a lot of my friends got involved with things, they go out on nights out, pictures get uploaded which could cause tension, just all of those things.

How Facebook became discretely English

Writing a chapter on personal relationships is always frustrating for an anthropologist. We know that a good novelist can write several hundred pages and still only partially present the nuances and contradictions of a single relationship. To try to generalise about a whole population and every type of family and friend-based relationship feels ludicrous. As already noted, certain key topics such as humour and modesty were missed out entirely, as they will be discussed elsewhere. Instead examples were chosen in order to try to make a few points in detail, rather than try to be comprehensive.

This chapter is also the point at which certain themes are emerging which have been alluded to and which will provide the foundations for the wider conclusions of this volume. One is that the rise of social media has allowed commentators radically to simplify the discourse around offline relationships – is a Facebook friend a real friend? The reality is that, if anything, social media has made an already incredibly messy area of sociality (how do you tell if someone is a real friend offline?) even messier. The solution analytically was to turn this around and instead use observations of relationships on social media to remind ourselves of the complexity of relationships more generally.
From here the discussion moved to observations that are less
generic and point to a more specific alignment between social media
and English sensibility. Such a perception gives rise to the coincidence
noted at the start of this book. The definition of social media as scalable
sociality between the private and the public just happens precisely to fit
a definition of Englishness as an embarrassment with everything that
muddies a clean distinction between the private and the public, creating
a desire to keep the middle area under tight control. This led to what has
been presented as the ‘Goldilocks Strategy’, marking how people cali-
brate relationships on this ‘temperature’ scale to get the exact degree
of warmth with which they feel comfortable. A section showing some
of the ways in which social media facilitates this task was followed by
another showing some of the ways in which it makes this task more dif-
cult or problematic. It was noticeable that the latter section, but not
the former, focused above all on the consequences of increased visibil-
ity. This is because the traditional means through which English people
dealt with this potential for embarrassment and anxiety in relationships
was often by not making things explicit or evident. So the increased
visibility, especially in situations where ‘people’s dirty linen was being
washed on Facebook’, was always likely to cause new problems for an
English population.

However, not all social media has this effect. The particular plat-
form that was almost always cited for the way in which it increased vis-
ibility was Facebook – the same platform cited for the way in which it
mixes up different categories of relationships, for example workplace
colleagues and family, thus making social relationships more difficult
to order. This observation will be taken up at greater length in the
conclusion to this book. Why in so many cases did Facebook become a
problem – to which platforms such as WhatsApp then became a possible
solution? What can be learned from the trajectory of polymedia that has
emerged so far, brief though it may be? As it happens, elements of both
Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 serve to parallel the findings of this chapter. It
is therefore better to accumulate all this evidence before drawing some
more general conclusions in Chapter 7.