Social Media in Trinidad

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Conclusion: social media through ethnography

This book opened with a quote from Bunji Garlin’s 2013 soca anthem ‘Savage’— ‘anti-stush. Dem call we anti-stush’. The phrase implies something to the effect that ‘they call us the opposite of posh, sophisticated and pretentious’. Garlin himself has strong ties to El Mirador, and this perhaps explains why the sentiments of his song have such resonance for this research. Indeed, ‘anti-stush’ might best describe the ethos of the town. The underdeveloped region has increasingly become home to expanding squatter settlements, but at the same time El Mirador has seen the emergence of a significant middle class, one which takes pride in the identity of an uncomplicated country people with good values. They embrace education and wealth, and are internationally oriented. Yet they also want to ‘live good with people’ – that is, they still understand the virtues of being Aesop’s country mice, rather than their urban counterparts.

The final story in Chapter 6 illustrated how posting around humour serves as a socially inclusive mechanism, in that the individual is not seen to take his or her own views too seriously so as to elevate themselves above others. Being perceived as unpretentious is important to those living in a small town such as El Mirador. In the context of Trinidad, the place is regarded as being of no real significance. It is not a special destination to visit, although plenty pass through the town on their way to the region’s beaches and resorts. Those living there understand that such visitors would regard the town as stagnant and its inhabitants as uncouth country people who might live out their entire lives there, attending local schools and then working in the town, visiting other parts of the country only infrequently. Yet there are also many others, whether born there or more recent migrants, for whom El Mirador might be a place where they eat, sleep and reside, but whose work and
social lives are elsewhere: they do not really live in El Mirador. An ethnographic study of social media, as documented in this book, reveals these truths about the town. It is an ‘in between’ place that is the country when compared to the city, and which may or may not be home to those who live in and around it.

In turn, then, what does an ethnographic study of El Mirador contribute to our understanding of social media? This question can be answered in part through comparison and conversation with the other volumes published in the Why We Post series. None of the authors began their projects out of a particular fascination with digital technologies per se (Nicolescu and Spyer were employed in media and communications, however, and Miller has written several volumes on digital media). Although the object of inquiry was social media, as anthropologists none of the researchers could be described as having fetishised technologies. None started from an entirely optimistic viewpoint about the future orientation of the possibilities of social media. Nor were they entirely pessimistic that social media would detract from or corrode a sense of authenticity, meaningful communication or even fundamental humanity. Anthropologists study social media in the context of relationships. In each of the research sites social media presented the perfect lens through which to begin to paint a portrait of the place and its people more broadly, exploring beyond what they do ‘online’. In many cases social media became the gateway or entry point for analysing themes that have long held interest for anthropologists. In other cases it was gaining insight into the character of a place and how its residents develop a sense of identity from where they live that helped us to appreciate what they post on social media and why. For this reason our topics were driven primarily by our research participants’ actions, rather than the presumed object of the study, ‘social media’.

Accordingly, the main aim of this chapter is to consolidate an argument around how theorising social media as social visibility provides an alternative to the dominant view appearing consistently in journalistic accounts – namely that social media makes individuals more narcissistic or somehow more individualistic. An anthropological approach to social media instead takes into account the context in which individuals are embedded. It also considers that the norms around what a given individual makes visible are driven by culture and society itself. Such a holistic approach differs from a psychological perspective which might claim that what we witness from a person’s surface, including what they post on social media, is the product of individual drives or the ego.
Take, for example, the concept of the selfie, which appears frequently in popular media. Selfies are often framed in the aforementioned accounts as the latest indication that human society is shifting from a community-oriented sociality to a more fragmented, individualistic one. In developed Western nations conversations concerning neoliberalism abound, with the selfie reflecting an emblem of neoliberalism as the normalised commodification and performance of the self. Yet in their own local cultural context Trinidadian participants in this study did not express any particular concern about selfies as some expression of superficiality or self-absorption. Rather, selfies for them seemed to be a quite reasonable additional function of media, considering the significance of visuality within their society.

From the wider standpoint of our global, anthropological study of social media, different genres of selfie were also apparent, refuting the idea that they are simply indicators of individual ‘narcissism’. For example, in Chile ‘footies’ – more humble and unpretentious images of one’s feet in everyday settings – were almost equally popular as classic, face-based selfies. And in the English field site teenagers were found to take nearly five times as many selfies with friends as they did by themselves. In Trinidad selfies are taken and posted by people of different ages, not only by teenagers. The wider context for the comparatively larger number of photos posted in the Trinidadian field site, meanwhile, is that visibility is central to personhood, and so how one appears in public also indicates membership of specific social groups. Visibility in Trinidad is a social phenomenon, not an individually driven one, and as such does not fit neatly into the popular psychological discourse of vanity and narcissism.

**A study of social media in the Caribbean?**

This idea of visibility underpins every chapter of this book. It has been used to show that visibility is not simply related to showing-off, but also to displaying unpretentiousness or being ‘anti-stush’ in a town that prides itself on retaining community values. Through a study of El Mirador, each of the various sections of this volume have contributed to understanding social media in different ways. Chapter 1 established that in addition to being a place ‘in between’, El Mirador is characterised by an intense, small-town environment in which individuals at least know one another’s families. This in turn shapes residents’ social relations and what they disclose over social
media. Previous modes of communication, and the relationship of social media as ‘new’ media to these ‘old’ media, formed the focus of Chapter 2. For example, in the Alleyne family the television is very much ‘social’ media, as it is enjoyed more when watched together. An assessment of the media landscape in the town considered not only internet availability, infrastructure and the patterns of ownership of different devices, but also the idea of how networks of people are socially and culturally embedded. Information is not simply ‘information’. Rather, it is always intertwined with the world views of those who circulate it, and its circulation as content posted to platforms such as Facebook becomes subject to the same social mechanisms that existed prior to social media. Among these in Trinidad are ‘maco’ and ‘bacchanal’, which continue to function as modes of keeping people in check, ensuring that expressing or documenting oneself controversially results in public scrutiny and gossip.

Chapter 3 most clearly conveyed how images posted to Facebook are not only intended to make others envious, but also to show belonging to different groups and to acknowledge these relationships. Cassandra, for example, may post numerous selfies, but such pictures do not dominate her profile as compared to the other photos she posts with friends and family. In fact, individuality as an ideal on social media appeared to migrate physically to the entirely separate platform of Instagram, due to Facebook’s shift to being a more group-oriented platform.

Chapter 4 highlighted how in Trinidad family is a collective noun as well as a set of relationships between individuals who happen to be related to one another. While posts on Facebook might serve to document milestones of bonding, they also portray the ideals of family relationships which, in turn, family members must seek to live up to. Here the concept of polymedia was employed to emphasise the role of choice in communicating through different forms of media. Communication over WhatsApp, for example, can highlight not only the great richness but also the complexities of tight-knit relationships among extended families. Abundant sharing can lead to revealing too much, or to generating conflicts which then need to be resolved.

In Chapter 5 social visibility was explored in relation to creating cultural capital. As was detailed, people tend to curate their appearance (and thereby their identities) either as global and cosmopolitan or as that of a ‘simple’ country person. Social media thus becomes emblematic of the associated values. For the youth involved with Rotaract and the Amway IBOs, using social media signified being internationally oriented. Meanwhile, among others such as Trevor and his peers, for whom
the market is the centre of social life, digital resistance was an equally strong statement of a locally based sense of identity.

The tension between asserting individual views and trying to maintain good relationships came into sharpest focus in Chapter 6. With the example of political expression, it became clear that serious belief or engagement in this realm is rarely displayed in order to avoid unfavourable public scrutiny and attention. Instead social visibility in El Mirador helps to explain why residents in the town see themselves as explicitly non-activist and demur from engaging with politics on Facebook. Activism is perceived by those in the town as a performative mode of visibility that effectively elevates one’s views above others’, while the core values of the town instead remain centred around the everyday. Rather than controversial discussion on Facebook, the most common genres of post in El Mirador are humour, banter and sentimental or moral memes: content which reinforces a sense of community and of preserving relationships with those living in the same place.

Social media as visibility thereby contributes to a wider understanding of contemporary society. The dualism reflected in Trinidad, where individuals both embrace a sense of freedom and maintain a strong orientation toward family and community, is also a characteristic of other Anglo-Caribbean societies. The concept of visibility that has been employed throughout this volume is in fact a tacit one, well understood not only in Caribbean societies, but also among other ‘island’ and ‘post-colonial’ cultures. ‘Correct’ forms of self-presentation as moral reflections of an individual have been an important aspect of personhood in the histories of these societies. Subsequently the ‘visibility’ discussed throughout this text is now part of a wider global consciousness, as social media has become a key tool through which people worldwide materialise themselves.

**Social media and society: visibility and normativity**

As outlined in the introduction, this volume sits in close conversation with two other books that investigate the relationship between social visibility and normativity in the Why We Post series: Nicolescu’s *Social Media in Southeast Italy* and Haynes’ *Social Media in Northern Chile*. Both texts argue for an understanding of social media as a space to express a place-based sense of identity. While Nicolescu’s study explores how on their Facebook profiles individuals curate themselves as consistent with their day-to-day persona, including by embracing a shared
sense of Italian style, Haynes explores how the people of Alto Hospicio remain intentionally unstylish. Countering assertions that social media is primarily used for individual self-expression, Haynes finds that Hospiceños suppress multiple forms of individuality in favour of a collective identity and shared sense of local community. As in the case of El Mirador, Haynes’ field site is regarded as a backwater where the population responds with their own local incarnation of ‘anti-stush’.

In the Trinidadian context, visibility is a central manifestation of normativity – that is, the everyday views and values which prevail and are considered natural in a particular place. This includes views on what is correct or incorrect, appropriate or inappropriate, fair or unfair, right or wrong, and what makes sense in the world or what does not.8 Social visibility meanwhile implies that there are norms around what individuals make visible to others and what they should conceal or obscure. This is also a key element in Spyer’s volume on Brazil, where the norms around what to make visible are analysed in terms of a similar analogy of ‘lights on’ and ‘lights off’. It is evident that there is a social process by which norms develop around the appropriate ways to create visibility. Social media is an invaluable means for understanding that process and how individuals navigate, comply with, challenge or subvert the associated norms. Consequently this volume has not simply been about the uses of social media in Trinidad, but has also explored how social media in Trinidad contributes to theories of visibility.

As the example of Carnival illustrates, people can visibly express individuality, but within set parameters and within a designated time and space. Although freedom and self-expression are particularly important to Trinidadians, exercising a certain degree of autonomy is not necessarily a common experience for those living in small towns. For example, 86 per cent of participants who responded to the second survey reported that they consult friends before accepting a friend request on Facebook, just to make sure that the person befriending them is somehow connected to their networks. Often decisions by an individual are likewise made with consideration towards, or consultation of, family members. The concept of polymedia discussed in Chapters 2 and 4 illustrates how relationships with different family members, as well as the family unit itself, shape the use of different platforms for navigating these obligations.

Yet even as an aspiration, social visibility is not without its dangers. Throughout the field work there were several instances on mainstream news of attacks against women, the most notable being the assassination of a high-profile lawyer in a drug trafficking trial. Beyond the incident
itself, the enduring repercussions were that young, university-educated women were deterred from (or at least thought twice about) entering professions that involve being in the public eye, especially those involved with the law, activism and governance issues. Ayanna, who was introduced in Chapter 6, was particularly vocal about the incident through work with her own community-based organisation, which encourages young girls in the area to pursue multiple streams of education and skills development. She described how the more extreme incidents of violence against women that have received national attention are rooted in everyday views and values around how women should behave. In conversations in the town it is common to hear assumptions around ‘good girls’ as typically quiet, reserved and happy to remain in and around the home. Such assumptions are not new, and have been observed in previous ethnographies on kinship in the Caribbean. However, although such descriptions would emerge in conversation, in reality most young people have female friends who, for example, travel to and from Port of Spain into the late hours of the evening. They lime with male and female friends, and at least some parents seem genuinely enthusiastic about raising independent young women. Parents may caution their daughters against showing images of themselves of Facebook, yet they also seem to approve of them cultivating an attractive appearance. So too, dominant discourses around the ideals of womanhood are countered by the relative autonomy women have in relationships. Because of the more flexible nature of the family structure, it is not uncommon for women to have children with different baby-fathers, and extended families are generally supportive if a woman leaves a relationship due to abuse or neglect. This is typical of what we mean by social visibility: there are often contradictory pressures – in this case, to look both attractive and modest – with which everyone has to contend.

**Communities of competition, communities of sentiment**

This struggle between normativity and individuality is apparent throughout this book, and suggests a more ambivalent relationship to normativity than is found by Haynes among the Hospiceños of Chile. The Trinidadians in this field site ascribe to underlying norms that emerge through mundane actions and manifest in the way they perform social scripts. Yet Trinidadians have an equally deep desire to assert and express themselves as individuals, with the result that they tend to do both. As in many societies today, especially for young people,
the pressure to be a distinct individual is an actual social and normative pressure. Riggio observes that Trinidad Carnival has continuously been characterised by multiplicity and contradictory intentions – it is both fiercely competitive and hierarchical. As an intercultural festival, where various cultural practices share the same space, the differences between groups of people are placed boldly on display, rather than being obscured or minimised. Instead of ‘being different together’ – a feature which is more characteristic of a place such as Nicolescu’s Italian field site, Grano – the differences between individuals and neighbourhoods are brought to the fore and highlighted.

Through an anthropological perspective, social media shows us that what individuals post (even posts that appear as forms of self-expression) are in fact a product of society itself – the norms, aspirations, tensions and contradictions that exist simultaneously. One of the reasons why the Why We Post project deemed memes the ‘moral police’ of the internet is that they allow people to express their values and disparage those of others in a less direct and more acceptable way than was previously possible. Memes using humour are doubly effective, relying on an understanding of shared circumstances and a sense of inclusion in order to ‘get’ their meaning. The moral lessons that emerge through memes and the semiotics that appear in photos posted to social media are thus deeply reflective of the societies that produce them. Similarly, memes as moral lessons also reflect the contestation of values within a society, as was discussed in relation to changing norms of parenting in Chapter 6.

Trinidadian society has undergone rapid changes since independence in 1962. The oil boom of the early 1980s brought an influx of new consumer goods and increased wealth, although this new wealth was not distributed evenly across the island. As a consequence of the increase in imported commodities, homes, cars and clothes became strikingly important as means for expressing individual style and identity. Curating style through accessorising and furnishing home interiors and vehicles was soon as important as adornments to the individual body. Today, social media is yet another forum in this progression of technologies and capacities for making oneself socially visible – that is, visible in highly normative ways.

Benign (and sometimes not so benign) antagonism between categories of people has been the subject of much scholarship on Trinidadian society. Researchers have recognised that much of this division and antagonism is constituted by the projection of values; none of it is intrinsic to being female or Afro-Trinidadian or having a high income. Because of the country’s past, Trinidadians are certainly prone
to value judgements around the consequences of economic or technological change. It can be argued that social structures around class, gender and ethnicity have historically been especially potent sources of division given the hierarchies of labour imposed by colonial rule. ‘Stush’, for example, is clearly imbued with a distinct moral judgement. Accordingly, Chapters 3 and 6 contain parallel narratives of group identification with, and adherence to, community norms as a moral obligation incumbent upon each individual. The point for anthropologists then is to resist lapsing into judgements simply of whether certain technologies are positive or negative, though this is the intention of a good deal of cultural theory. Clearly our research participants are full of their own value judgements around the positive and negative aspects of social media – appraisals which we as anthropologists report and discuss, while at the same time attempting to refrain from imposing our judgements or eliding these with local views and values. One previous field work-based study by Miller was carried out at a time when Trinidad was experiencing rapid economic change from the aforementioned oil boom. During this period preceding the ubiquity of social media, he discovered that local aspirations were expressed through increased consumption around lifestyle. In a later study on slum communities in the Dominican Republic, Erin Taylor reflects on Miller’s ethnographies and what he describes as the ‘burden of self-creation’. As she elaborates:

We have more power than ever before to create our own identities and rewarding lives, but we are daunted by the magnitude of the task. Given the vast ranges of norms, values and options that exist today, it is difficult to judge how we are faring in comparison to other people. Am I wealthy or am I poor? What social class do I belong to? Not everyone will answer these questions with the same set of criteria.

This study of social media in El Mirador has revealed that in the face of rapid changes and shifting norms across social groups, there remains a desire for competition: to outdo your neighbour, to live in a bigger house or overseas, or to have a better education. Yet these in turn highlight countervailing pressures whereby individuals attempt to bring one another down, a dynamic which is also documented in one of the most influential ethnographic studies carried out in the Caribbean, Peter Wilson’s Crab Antics. The title of the text refers to the idea that you can leave a barrel containing crabs open, as since crabs always tend to bring each other down, none actually manages to escape to the top.
These social struggles (and others) have long been apparent to anthropologists working in the Caribbean. As contemporary researchers we are perhaps fortunate in that the rise of social media has rendered them all the more conspicuous. With people now embracing new media, the visual – and therefore the concept of social visibility – has become even more integral to the way we communicate. As such, this book has emphasised another core dualism to add to those previously explored. This dualism emerges in the way in which a social pressure to express oneself as a particular individual is matched by the desire to form a community of sentiment, where people imagine and feel things together and disdain any individual pretension towards superiority.