How the World Changed Social Media

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Since so many individuals and companies have a vested interest in speculating on the future share values of social media companies, it is no surprise that journalism focusing on the use and potential of social media within commerce is often enthusiastically read, shared and commented upon. However, there is also a clear popular interest in questions such as whether social media is helping communication at work or just distracting workers, and whether it is worthwhile for companies to invest much time and money in social media marketing – as well as how far social media extends the ability of commerce to manipulate and entice customers.

Venkatraman's research in the south Indian field site specifically focused upon how social media impacts on the relationship between work and non-work. We follow this with four other topics. Our second section examines how individuals use social media for obtaining work. Our third section considers the social media companies themselves and the impact of social media advertising, an increasingly common strategy by which they seek to fund themselves. The fourth section concerns the potential of social media for the development of e-commerce, trade and small entrepreneurial activities. The final section contributes an anthropological analysis of the very categories of work and commerce, and explores the varied ideas people have about money and its relationship to the family and other values.

The relation between work and non-work

One of the most dramatic and significant consequences of the internet has been a radical transformation in the relationship between workplace and home. Ever since the beginning of the industrial revolution in
England those in control of work have sought to impose a strict dichotomy, trying to isolate the workplace entirely from social and personal considerations and contacts. An important breach in this wall was made by email and then mobile phones; more recently social media and smartphones have in many cases left this separation in ruins, though the degree of destruction varies by region and according to the type of industry. We tend to see commercial innovations as naturally aligned with the business interests that produced them, so it is important to acknowledge instances such as this where technology has dramatically undermined a previously hallowed principle of capitalism – the separation of work from non-work.

This is particularly important for an anthropological perspective, since the discipline has always been committed to understanding work within the wider context of people’s lives, and is thereby also opposed to such a strict dichotomy of work and non-work. Furthermore many anthropologists study parts of the world where such regimes of work are not as fully established. In India, for example, work such as weaving was traditionally delegated to families working from their own homes, while the factory system has a much shallower presence than in Europe. Even within factories, workers in India continued to try to exploit kinship links in recruitment and retain traditional associations with caste. However, in some sectors Western practices of separation between family and workplace were eventually established.

As in most other regions social media has broken through these barriers and facilitated non-work communication at the workplace relating to romance, hobbies and socialising. Office chat systems or WhatsApp were used between workers, their friends and partners to give reassurances of love, to chat about cycling, cricket and new films, and to organise essential family responsibilities. A husband might plan with his wife in another company who would pick up their daughter from school. A young working mother sent a WhatsApp voice message to her mother’s phone for playing to her infant at home.

In several of our field sites there were debates as to whether social media represents a distraction from work or something useful. In the Italian field site there was a pragmatic acceptance that certain jobs are just plain boring. For a shop assistant with no customers social media seemed a reasonable antidote to boredom, meaning that he or she was less likely to quit their job. Workers such as Spyer’s Brazilian informants found the survey question of whether social media was good or bad for work too simplistic: clearly both were true. It can be an efficient solution to share information about work opportunities and can also
be useful for fighting boredom – such as that of security guards working nightshifts – but it equally has a negative effect for work in terms of draining attention and time.

A similar ambivalence within work places was noted in the English field site. Workers in one medium-sized firm felt that it had now become too big for constant face to face encounters; it no longer felt like a ‘family’. They used Facebook to resurrect some of that earlier closeness; this gave them unprecedented access to fellow workers’ private lives. As a result the topics of football and television could now be supplemented with conversation about the family and home life. Although this afforded a greater degree of intimacy between workmates it could also become intrusive; for example, when a boss had access to more personal information than workers liked or employees were made uncomfortable by a colleague’s political opinions as expressed on social media.

Our most significant example of the re-integration of work and home life came from the Chilean field site. The city’s major industry is copper mining, which primarily employs men; they work week-long shifts, inhabiting dormitories at the mining site. During this time they use social media to maintain family communication, keeping workers integrated into domestic life; conversations range from planning children’s birthday parties to paying the electricity bill.

Social media also has a major impact on women’s relationship to their families where they have become a significant part of the workforce, raising issues of child care. In England women now form 47 per cent of the workforce, but in the English field site they commonly take extended maternity leave, often a period of intense social media use.

Our comparative survey included a question about whether social media is permitted in the workplace (Fig. 4.21), but the answers were quite specific, making generalisation difficult. For example, in Brazil use of social media is not permitted by managers for hotel workers – a major part of the village population. Nevertheless, as in most of the sites, even when social media use is officially not allowed most people find ways around such regulations.

Finding and getting work

The single most obvious connection between social media and obtaining work is the platform LinkedIn. With claims to 380 million users, this platform is primarily used in commerce and especially for work recruitment. In our English site it was never mentioned outside the commercial
sector, but for some working inside commerce it was by far their most important social media platform. One person always checked how active job applicants were on LinkedIn as a key criterion in deciding who to hire. People working in small-scale local business enterprises showed a strong collaborative rather than competitive ethos, often meeting face to face but also well aware of the role of LinkedIn. After the US the country with the largest LinkedIn user base is India, followed by Brazil. It was, however, never likely to impinge upon the kind of low income, poorly educated workers studied by Spyer, though it is certainly known to the Indian IT sector.

So LinkedIn is important in some sites (mainly the English site), but in fact people creatively appropriate other forms of social media in order to develop work opportunities. Nicolescu’s field site in south Italy proved a revelation in showing how social media can help people to find employment. Locals felt that formal education was of limited value in obtaining work. Traditionally people tended to find employment through family and social networks, partly since this area is famed for its more artisanal work, as in high-quality food and expensive tailoring. Such work is now in decline, however, and new forms of employment are less susceptible to influence by such family networking.

As it happens, social media such as Facebook favours visual rather than just textual modes of expression (see Chapter 11). On Facebook people learn to craft stylish and clever postings, echoing the role of style in more traditional artisanal work. With more than 200 different cultural organisations, 437 artisanal businesses and 116 bars and restaurants present in the south Italy field site there are many opportunities for visual promotion such as designing posters, alongside an expansion in related commercial sectors, including advertising and public relations. Inadvertently, therefore, Facebook has become a training ground and exhibition space for the skills that were becoming an increasingly important route to work. This suits people with high cultural or educational capital since, although poorly paid, these are reasonably prestigious occupations that highlight their more artistic skills. As Nicolescu shows, this has done nothing for people with less educational or cultural capital – but people with the right background can capitalise on social media in this shift from older artisanal skills to this new, more international world of online design.

In other areas the key to employability remains education. As noted in the previous chapter, Venkatraman found a clear distinction between the more privileged schools, which tended to forbid the use of social media, and schools serving lower-income pupils. The latter
encouraged social media use, partly in the hope that it would prepare low income school pupils for jobs in the IT sector. As such they become rather more liberal than the norm in more developed countries, although it is unclear whether using social media ultimately helped secure this kind of employment. More generally the Indian IT sector has in recent times tried to recruit more through apparent meritocracy, focusing upon educational credentials rather than family or caste connections. Yet even in this modernised sector Venkatraman found that WhatsApp played a significant role in returning the recruitment processes to these more customary avenues; existing employees passed information on vacancies or company details back to qualified friends and extended family members, often before the job was officially advertised.

Spyer uses the term ‘emergent class’ in his book title, since in Brazil employment is one aspect of the recent experience of more than half the population of increased social mobility, together with the aspiration to achieve a decent level of income and consumption and at least some educational and cultural capital. The term emergent could equally well apply to our China and Indian field sites, two regions that represent perhaps the majority of the population of the world today. In this context work is not just labour and a source of income: it connects people to a wider formal world including not only banking, regulation, timetables and the state, but also often literacy and mobility. For those in Brazil who manage to go to college, social media becomes the place for sharing work opportunities or tips for success in a job interview. Social media thereby becomes the mode of solidarity for this emergent class. It can also be used to link related work opportunities. Similarly to Brazil, a plumber in our English field site will use social media to connect with carpenters or house painters, since an opportunity for one can often be turned into work for them all.

The significance of the social media companies

Our project is not concerned with the social media companies themselves as employers. The numbers employed are small, and we would have been very surprised to have met a single such employee in any of our field sites. We were more interested to gauge how far users worried about the influence of these companies on their lives – for example, whether they were concerned with the potential use of the vast amount of personal information to which these companies now have access.
We found little evidence of such concern. When Miller pointed out that Facebook had lost its cool for the young, he argued that this was not because they cared about what Facebook as a company might do with their data, but because of what their parents might do with their data. The fact that Facebook as a company owns both Instagram and WhatsApp has not changed the public discourse. In our field sites people compare, contrast and differentially use Instagram, Facebook and WhatsApp as alternative or complementary platforms quite irrespective of their common ownership – a matter of which most people seem generally unaware and uninterested.

In determining the significance of the companies, it is worth reflecting back on their histories as described in Chapter 2. How much difference would it have made, for example, if Facebook had never been invented? In China it is not used anyway. In other major populations such as Brazil and India it was Orkut that popularised social media; the reason for the switch to Facebook was mainly emulation of metropolitan regions. If things had gone differentially and Orkut had wiped out Facebook and become the major global player, most people would hardly have noticed. At the same time the demise of Orkut (which was owned by Google) and the relative lack of success of Google+ also indicated the limits of corporate power. Even huge, cross-commercial ventures such as QR codes can fail. Our evidence is that users might care about adding a video component to communication, for example, but have much less concern as to whether this is achieved through Skype, FaceTime or Facebook, or whether a message is WhatsApp, Facebook or just their phone. Given the environment of polymedia, it is likely to be a cultural significance that has been allotted to the contrast between these options – something that matters far more to our informants in every region than a platform’s technical properties or its ownership. There is clearly an interest in Apple as against Android or Microsoft. However, this may again be for cultural purposes, such as showing off one’s new phone, rather than a concern about the companies themselves.

With regard to issues of surveillance or the power of companies, the sense of monopolistic control may be greatest in China given the dominance of the company Tencent (who own the two most popular platforms, QQ and WeChat). In China this control is also associated with a monopolistic state, which although separate from Tencent nonetheless does interfere in people’s social media use, most noticeably through preventing access to Facebook and Twitter. As Wang notes, much of the commercial development of the social media companies in China came about as a result of a government initiative in 1999 to expand this sector,
appreciating that China was many decades behind other countries in terms of communication technology. The promotion of ICT as one of four ‘modernisations’ was spectacularly successful. In 2003 China surpassed the US as the world’s largest telephone market, and in 2008 the country had the world’s largest number of internet users.

Furthermore the impact may be more pervasive. As McDonald shows, social media users in his rural Chinese field site were increasingly reliant on the Tencent News Centre, which delivers in-app new updates, as their main daily source of news. He failed to find a single user who had deactivated this function. His analysis also shows the difference between social media news compared to central state news networks. The former is dominated by crime, followed by general topics of romance, marriage and sex. Crime here includes many stories of corruption, thus while censorship is not challenged the critique of corrupt politicians remains significant. However, on social media this critique tended to centre on discussions of figures from other areas. By contrast people were more willing to talk about local concerns in informal face to face settings. Outside of China there is no parallel suggestion that, as yet, Facebook controls news content to this degree, while Twitter is seen more as a route to news than a content creator. Again if we turn to south-east Turkey the main issue for people is the state rather than the company, and the threat by the state to limit access to sites such as Twitter.

Another way in which commercial activity can impinge upon users is through social media advertising. In her study of the commercial usage of social media in both her factory town and Shanghai, Wang found relatively few people who claimed to have bought things directly because of social media advertising, but many who have been influenced in their purchases by the opinions of other people they know on social media (Fig. 4.16). Mostly this is indirect, such as people mentioning a restaurant where they liked the food. While earlier forms of advertising may have had less impact on social media, small businesses found new forms of advertising, for instance through collecting ‘likes’ on WeChat which they use to approach customers.

The topic of advertising highlights a major concern with surveillance by social media companies and how much the companies know about the individual. This was a common topic in the English field site, where the evidence suggests there may be a flaw in what many companies hope will be a sustainable business plan. For commerce there is now a huge stake in the increased use of targeted advertising, largely because social media companies, like most other digital companies, have singularly failed to find an alternative business model. The problem is
that while people in England may not have worried too much about the abstract idea of surveillance, or even the political issues arising from the exposures by WikiLeaks in 2010 and Edward Snowden in 2013, these concerns become very real when they personally experience targeted, sometimes quite inappropriate advertising that can only come from a source with a good deal of intimate information about them. Examples were advertising that showed the companies knew that they had cancer or had reached retirement age. It seems that companies may be ignoring evidence that such targeted advertising may well put people off rather than build a closer relationship to the company. Even if targeted advertising initially succeeds in occasionally persuading people to buy those goods, it is entirely possible that the negative side effects of this constant reminder of how much the company knows about you may be more detrimental. Certainly it was a complaint often voiced by informants.

**Entrepreneurship and networking**

In several field sites social media and e-commerce more generally are becoming seen as a promising instrument for developing small-scale local businesses. In our Chinese factory field site we meet A-mei, a female factory worker. She used her kinship networks and images from the commercial shopping site of Taobao to establish a make-up business on WeChat, only to find there were already too many people doing the same thing, partly because with social media there is such a low barrier to entry into commerce. By contrast a free-range chicken and egg business in the same area succeeded, but mainly because the customers were mostly friends, family and work colleagues. Mainly such ventures are set up by young women as a supplement to formal work rather than as a full-time occupation. More generally McDonald and Wang argue that personal recommendations have far more influence over what people buy in China compared to Western countries, and this is fuelling the growth of e-commerce on platforms such as WeChat. McDonald notes that the lack of dedicated business profiles on Chinese social media platforms makes it harder to establish a business presence, but even in his town people do use social media to promote businesses that rely on personal custom such as restaurants or a photocopying shop. For example, they might use the company name and shopfront photograph as their ID photo on their user account. However, the key to commercial usage in China is not the direct use of social media platforms. More important is the way in which the commercial platform
of Taobao has developed social characteristics distinct from equivalent non-Chinese sites such as Amazon. This is a case of a hybrid development, where e-commerce websites allow features of social media to be embedded within them. On Taobao buyers and sellers are enabled to chat directly together. Prices can be set individually for a specific customer, allowing for haggling. Even in McDonald’s rural town, at least one woman operated her own Taobao store selling clothing online. A bricks-and-mortar Taobao store had also opened in the town; it helped people with their online Taobao shopping by organising delivery, otherwise a significant barrier to e-commerce. This also could provide personal assistance to help people learn how to shop online, or for people without bank accounts.

Similarly there is a stronger development in China of online payment services (often referred to as ‘digital wallets’), which result in a more effective monetisation of social media platforms. Sometimes this means young people spending more directly on social media, unknown to their parents. All of the above suggests that rather than looking for an autonomous effect of social media on commerce, we should see social media as simply part of a new fusion of personal, commercial and communicative developments.

In a slightly different way, the same conclusion follows for our south Italian field site. Here entrepreneurs also represent the most overt examples of social media use. They seem to be always on the phone. They might have two smartphones and regularly update both their personal and business profiles on Facebook. Yet again it is not so much the direct use of social media, since the limited evidence suggests that even for business such as hairdressers Facebook advertising is not especially effective. Rather this heavy usage by business people has more to do with Italian expressivity and the desire for visibility and display. Generally people here are comfortable mixing business and personal use with a common sense of their style. This is partly because business has traditionally been based largely upon personal relations, but more because often the primary motivation behind business is not the profitability – rather the way it displays social position and facilitates socialising as an end in itself. It is also the way people represent themselves as good citizens and obtain local prestige. Particularly active are businesses that are trying to cultivate style and a sense of cool, such as bars and restaurants. By contrast the more abstract and distant uses of social media such as e-commerce are far less well developed.

The situation in Mardin in southeast Turkey helps us to refine this focus on personal connections. Costa argues that Facebook has had a
considerable impact on small businesses, for example shops, musicians, estate agents, cafes, restaurants and private schools. In some cases this particular form of business might not have been viable otherwise. For example, an estate agency used Facebook to create connections with people not living in Mardin, including its diaspora population, and helped civil servants elsewhere in Turkey to invest in property in the city. In addition to this national dimension, social media allowed local musicians and artists to get in touch with people in Europe, to ask for and buy musical instruments and technical equipment, or simply exchange impressions on the best way to play a song. The visual power of Instagram was starting to become important in fashion advertising. However, a caveat was that social media was making age an important factor—it was mainly people under 30 who saw these opportunities, and economic activities by older people were barely affected.

One of the remarkable things about our north Chilean site of Alto Hospicio is that, aside from a few supermarkets and one home construction store (owned by Home Depot), there are only small, family-owned shops. The feria (‘market’) probably makes up for more commerce than all of these formal businesses combined. It is where people buy new and used clothes, home goods, prepared foods, foods for cooking, pet supplies, electronics, auto parts, tools, appliances, etc. Nevertheless it is striking that one of our largest field sites, with 100,000 people, has almost the least amount of commercial activity. It is hard to even find an advertising billboard. By contrast to the lack of formal business, dozens of pages have popped up on Facebook with names such as ‘Buy and Sell Alto Hospicio’. This basically acts like the US site Craigslist, where people post pictures of whatever they want to sell (used goods such as clothing, appliances, cars, homes, houses for rent, tools, prepared food—sushi being the most popular, etc.).

Other people open up their own businesses entirely through Facebook, selling homemade food or imported clothing and shoes. Most people do not have credit cards and do not trust the mail system, so ordering things online is very rare. However, Facebook has opened up a whole new kind of online commerce that is entirely local. People say they trust social media more than other forms of e-commerce because they can see who is selling them something. This is consistent with the more general ethnographic observations about trust, personal connections and suspicion in this site.

As we move across the different field sites we can see that in all cases social media create new forms of entrepreneurship. However, the precise way in which this happens tends to depend upon local factors,
and especially on whether the personal side is seen as a good or bad aspect of commercial relations. For example, in Trinidad using social media for commercial use is quite specific. One example is a photographic firm whose main work is taking pictures at Trinidadian parties in order to post these on Facebook; the presence of these photographers has become one of the ways in which the firms that promote such parties attract the crowds. In addition a social market advertiser explained in an interview how during the course of the day the promotions on Facebook will reflect the time of day, relating to when people are having meals, for example, or when they might go to the gym. Similarly there were some businesses, such as bars and hairdressers or nightclubs, that depend upon personal relations and therefore make use of social media. For example, one bar in Trinidad that was trying to market their business to a more media-savvy crowd updated their events and news regularly.

More generally, however, Trinidad and England were the two sites that revealed clear limitations in the commercial use of social media in areas of business less dependent upon personal connections. Many of the shops and other commercial outlets in our English village site had tried using social media such as Facebook, but one can see how many of these online sites were abandoned as just not worth the time they took. Once again, unless there was a strong personal element, most local commercial interests saw little benefit in using social media. This was also true in Trinidad, but the reasons are diametrically opposite. In the case of Trinidad people still prefer face to face communication or gossip as their means to obtain information about the quality of goods or services within the town itself. In their quiet country community they may have known the shop keepers all their lives. By contrast, in the English village field site this may be true of the baker or the butcher, but otherwise shops and services that merely sell goods are judged by price and efficiency rather than personal relations; they are often run by minority ethnic groups who are kept at a distance. Here it is the desire to keep money and social relationships separate that makes social media ineffective in commercial transactions.

Finally in south India Venkatraman found WhatsApp being used to turn personal networks into a mode for coordinating entrepreneurial activities. A few educated young mothers (aged 35 or below) previously with well-paying corporate careers now wanted to run part-time entrepreneurial activities from their homes. These could range from cooking freshly prepared snacks to producing colourful fancy jewellery or providing home-based tuition for children. These were mostly targeted
at other mothers with children. All of their advertising went through WhatsApp, preferred because it was cheap, almost synchronic and easily accessed through mobiles.

However, for independent entrepreneurs in service-oriented businesses who want to cultivate a more extensive project, Facebook acts as the platform of choice, providing in effect no-cost marketing. Usha is a professional paid storyteller in her late forties. Usha was clear in her aim to establish herself as the most sought-after storyteller, reviving the culture of storytelling from its roots as an informal tradition and making it available for educational purposes within the home. As a self-employed entrepreneur she saw technology as the key to both marketing and organising her day-to-day operations. In turn she used Yahoo groups, then Orkut and now Facebook.

Usha had recognised a potential because of the growth of nuclear families, often without grandparents. She therefore offered to coach parents on the skills of storytelling. She also could see that companies were placing an emphasis upon corporate executives becoming good storytellers, Usha then created a Facebook page for herself, separating out her personal profile from her public, work-related page. She posted stories, links to pages on storytelling and storytelling for sharing through Facebook. She then posted pictures of her storytelling sessions, where she appears in action with a variety of audiences. Usha felt that pictures of her in action created far more of an impact than any text. Overall she was happy that Facebook provided her with a no-cost advertising platform, enabling her to market herself as an independent entrepreneur.

The south Indian field site also demonstrated the particular issues facing certain consumers. Venkatraman found that several men from lower socio-economic castes used e-commerce websites such as Flipkart to shop for T-shirts, shoes, slippers and similar items, as they found it socially awkward to shop at bigger stores for branded goods. Workers in such stores may discriminate against men from lower socio-economic classes. Without credit or debit cards, they made use of the cash-on-delivery payment system that this portal permits. Furthermore they came to know about Flipkart only through its advertisements on Facebook, which they accessed through their smartphones.

These anecdotes from south India remind us that commerce is a huge and diverse practice; we can find stories reflecting an astonishing range of uses for social media across our nine field sites. It is possible, however, to proffer some generalisations. Overall there was little evidence from our research to support the massive drive within commerce itself to promote social media as the key to modern marketing. Apart
from LinkedIn, these platforms were largely devised, and are mainly used for, communication outside of commerce, consisting of small groups and personal connections. So not surprisingly we find social media has been mostly useful for those commercial enterprises that are themselves based on personal connections and small-scale sociality. As far as our informants are concerned, the impact for larger-scale business operations was much more limited. This is the area where people become anxious about the spread of targeted advertising as a sign of unwelcome intrusion into personal life. At the same time younger people in many regions are now quite adept at using online commercial outlets such as Amazon and Taobao, where the latter is gaining social media-like attributes.

**Wider values**

One of the core roles of anthropology is to question what we sometimes call ‘Western’ categories. We tend to see these as rational, scientific and natural, while by comparison when we read a description of Chinese people burning fake money at funerals we might find this relationship to money ‘weird’. Yet it is something that can be readily explained through the concept of differing cosmologies.

Underlying this examination of the relationship of social media to commerce, therefore, is a need to consider what people actually understand by things such as money, value and exchange. As an example we will examine first the contrast between ancient and traditional Chinese ideals, and then the beliefs of contemporary young people in places such as the UK and the US. An example to consider is the monetisation of WeChat through the ‘red envelope’. This is based on an ancient custom of giving money in red envelopes during festivals such as New Year and Weddings. However, in this case the money is digitised and, in a very Chinese fashion, an element of luck is introduced. ‘It is reported that from Chinese New Year’s Eve to 4pm on the first day of the Chinese new year (31 January 2014), more than 5 million users tried out the feature to deliver in excess of 75 million digital red envelopes’, all of which further tied users to WeChat itself. While traditional red envelopes were from the older to the younger generation, the WeChat version became more peer to peer oriented.

We need to appreciate that in the West the domain of the private and domestic life has traditionally been defined partly by its opposition to the realm of money and finance. Gifting money feels less personal
than other gifts. In China money and finance have always been seen as an integral aspect of, rather than an opposition to, intimate and domestic life. Money in many Asian societies is regarded as the proper and perhaps the best way for people to demonstrate love and care in families, and to show that their feelings are genuine. In some cases cash may be seen as more appropriate for presents between people who are close than a gift.

Furthermore it we turn instead to young people in the UK and the US we find an interesting parallel. Social media has facilitated a whole series of practices such as Kickstarting, Crowdsourcing and Couch Surfing that admittedly were almost entirely absent from our research project. While some of these are linked to the potential for making money, mostly these are quite the opposite. They rely on altruistic concerns, encouraging people to give both money and services without expecting any immediate return, and relate to other trends, such as Open Access and Open Source, which are important to the ethos of new digital practices. In this sense they are not like the de-commodification of music or entertainment, where pirating or getting things for free is clearly in the interests of the people involved. In some of these other new movements, narrow self-interest disappears into what anthropologists call ‘generalised exchange or generalised reciprocity’, where it is hoped that if we are all generous in the short term everyone benefits in the long term, including ourselves. In these new movements people invest in ideas and developments that might not otherwise be funded. Social media in this case has brought out forms of altruism in young people, based on shifting ideals about the public domain.

The point of ending with a consideration of the WeChat ‘red envelope’ on the one hand and Open Access or Couch Surfing on the other is that they represent quite significant uses of social media for purposes that relate to exchange, money, de-commodification and value. These are wider concerns, however, than traditional ideas of commerce. One of our conclusions is that for work and commerce, as with all the other topics we discuss, social media results in this wider contextualisation, with particular reference to the social relationships which are the principal content of social media.

A second conclusion is that if the primary determinant of social media usage in commerce had been formal economic rationality then we would have predicted relative homogeneity in the impact of social media between field sites – at least those at a similar level of economic development and with similar histories and forms of market capitalism. However, that was not the case. Rather in south Italy commerce
was seen as something that could positively expand social relationships and sociality: being involved in commerce was part of being social, public and visible. By contrast in England we found that people prefer abstract, impersonal e-commerce. Only very specific businesses utilise the personal element in their relationships with customers, while the main impact of new advertising is seen as an affront to a highly regarded privacy.

So the point of this final section is to remind ourselves that the way in which social media impacts upon commerce depends upon a wider set of values – for example, how money or business is understood in some places as integral, and in others opposed, to proper and intimate social relations. The generalisation that seems to survive this caveat and therefore our third conclusion is that by and large people associate social media with commerce mostly when that commerce is aligned with small-scale, personal and group communication.