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Our method and approach

Succeeding in failing

If this project is ultimately regarded as at all successful, the main reason will paradoxically be because again and again our individual projects failed. Failure was a major component of many of our studies. Those failures represent the single best body of evidence to support the claim that there is an integrity and scholarship to what we do. In claiming that our projects failed, we simply mean that they were unable to realise certain intentions of the academics involved. We can start with four cases.

Costa had written a PhD about online journalism, digital media and foreign correspondents in Lebanon, and her prime interest was social media and politics. A comparative case in Turkey would clearly benefit her career. The field site she chose, Mardin, was not far from the Syrian border and in what had become an autonomous Kurdish zone. Mardin itself comprised a heterogeneous population of Arabs, Kurds, Syriac Christians and Turks. Surely this would be an ideal site for her study of politics? In the end Costa did write one detailed chapter about politics in her book.1 However, politics ultimately became an element – rather than the foundational focus – of her enquiry. She instead gave a more central role to the importance of gender and family relationships. This is partly because of the sheer gravity of any overt political engagement – an involvement which had previously caused the death of many of her participants’ relatives. This meant that they largely avoided discussion of politics on social media. The exception were supporters of the government, or some in opposition who used fake and anonymised accounts. Meanwhile the same adoption of multiple and fake accounts had facilitated a radical transformation in gender relations, especially
as interactions between young people, which actually became the big story. In her approach Costa followed the material she found, rather than the topic that she had initially thought to be of greatest importance and that may have best served her personal or career interests.

By contrast Wang chose her field site carefully because she wanted to study family relationships. She found a population that had just come from very close-knit families where everything was bound up in kinship. Now, however, they had travelled far to work in factory towns, thus becoming what people in China call a floating population of rural migrants. It therefore seemed certain that the main use of social media would be to retain links with their families and home villages, as users sought to repair the rupture of migration. Yet that is not at all what she found. Actually these migrants simply do not use social media that way and just do not seem to want to. A major reason for migration is to see the outside world, and the young generation of migrants from rural areas use social media to keep away from traditions of family control in order to gain autonomy as factory workers.

The situation was even worse for Venkatraman. He chose a field site in southern India that had until recently been a scattering of rural villages in a rural area. Then, as part of ambitious development plans, numerous IT companies and 200,000 IT workers were relocated there. This location seemed ideal, presenting a stark contrast between what might be regarded as the most modern population in India juxtaposed with the classic tradition of India’s vast rural hinterlands. His prime interest was social media and work. Surely the basis of his book would be the extreme contrast between these two populations? Everything was set up for this to be the case.

Yet in reading Venkatraman’s book this contrast is, to quite a remarkable extent, muted. Instead there is consistent emphasis on the specific features of traditional Indian society and the ways in which they have impacted upon the local use of social media, involving factors such as gender, caste, inequality and the extended family. Taken as a whole, these factors actually unite the IT workers and the villagers: what social media reveals is that almost everyone remains characteristically south ‘Indian’, bounded by these issues of kinship and caste notwithstanding the extreme differences in their circumstances. Certainly this juxtaposition highlights the issue of social hierarchy, but then for anthropologists this principle has always been seen as central to the organisation of South Asian society. So once again, to a remarkable extent, the initial plan could not be followed through because the evidence spoke to a different conclusion.
Perhaps the most abject failure was that of Haynes. She accepted a position at the Interdisciplinary Center for Intercultural and Indigenous Studies, housed at the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile in Santiago and funded by a Chilean government grant specifically to study the indigenous populations. Since her PhD focused on urban indigenous people in La Paz, Bolivia, it was natural for her to gravitate towards northern Chile, which includes significant Aymara and Quechua populations. For the study of social media we did not want a very small village, however, and the demographics of Alto Hospicio seemed to suggest it was of an appropriate size with a reasonable percentage of people who identified as indigenous, at least for census purposes (about 18 per cent). The problem was that her study of social media showed very clearly that most people of indigenous origin did not actively identify as such. Only quite late on in her study did some of her close friends happen to reveal their indigenous ancestry. Ultimately her book is extremely informative as to why this should be the case for the population in this town, being consistent with a similar suppression of a whole series of other potential points of differentiated identity. Nevertheless indigenous identity simply could not be the primary focus of her study of social media, even though that was the source of her funding.

Not everything went wrong. McDonald chose a site in a rural Chinese hinterland, close to the birthplace of Confucius, and then actually encountered the degree of tradition that might have been anticipated. Sinanan had already worked in El Mirador in Trinidad where she has relatives, so things were less of a surprise.

So what is so great about failure? Most of these anthropologists would have benefitted personally if their studies had gone to plan, since the sites were often selected with regard to their particular academic interests. They would certainly have experienced fewer sleepless nights. However, this is where anthropology differs from many studies. Anthropologists get rather frustrated when writing grant proposals that expect clear predictions of the results of their proposal. The reality is that often the very reason anthropologists like ourselves carry out research is because we simply do not know what we will encounter; the discrepancy between what we plan to learn and what we subsequently discover is, by definition, a major part of our original findings. Failure for us is at least the guarantor of the integrity of our project. It is the main reason we believe that by the end of 15 months of field work each researcher had allowed himself or herself to be re-oriented to the actual use and consequences of social media. So while for us failure may be disappointing, its silver lining is that it suggests the quality and
success of our scholarship. This does mean, however, that you cannot read our evidence as a reflection of our opinions. When we argue that social media has this or that impact, it does not mean we either approve or disapprove.

Is ethnography a method or an end?

In some disciplines the word ethnography has come to mean any direct observation of what people do in their ‘natural’ habitat – rather than, for example, what they say in response to a questionnaire or a test. However, within the discipline of anthropology a central tenet of ethnography is time. A person must be present in the field site for an extended period, typically more than one year. All of our researchers were present in their field sites for at least 15 months of field work. The anthropologist should have sufficient proficiency in the local language so that they can understand conversations between other people, not just conversation directed at them. Anthropological ethnography is often described as ‘participant observation’. Rather than observing from a distance with a clipboard, anthropologists get involved: they help look after children, serve drinks, sell in a mobile phone shop and make genuine friendships. When Miller undertook his earlier ethnography of shopping some readers were shocked to find that he often gave advice to his informants about what to buy. His point was that when people go shopping with friends they expect those friends to have opinions about how their figure looks in a dress or whether they have heard something tastes good. It is the failure to engage as a participant that makes the work artificial, not the engagement.

There is an additional way to define ethnography which does not focus upon the way we behave, but rather on the ends that it is supposed to achieve. The crux of anthropology is perhaps better described as a commitment to ‘holistic contextualisation’. While we start with an object of study – in this case social media – our premise is that we simply do not know what factor in people’s lives will be influenced by this object. It might be gender, religion, work or family. Furthermore none of these can be isolated to make statistical correlations, because in real life they are not isolated. A real person on any day in their life confronts these, and a multitude of other factors, simultaneously. An individual might be a woman, a Hindu, a mother, a factory worker, an introvert, a lover of soap opera and a devotee of Bollywood film stars on Facebook – all at the same time. It is not that we anthropologists are
trying to be complicated and difficult; it is just that we believe this is a more truthful description of how people actually experience the world. No one lives inside a topic of research. Holistic contextualisation means that everything people do is the context for everything else they do. As a method ethnography cannot really get at every aspect of a person’s life, but in trying to achieve this we at least gain a broader sense of what these aspects may be.

So, armed with the requisite language skills and sufficient time, the commitment is made to live among a range of different people within the field site, so that one can participate and observe as fully as possible. The specific aim is to gain enough understanding of all these factors – gender, religion, work, leisure and family – that we feel we can make an argument as to which seem more or less important in understanding how and why people use social media in the manner we observe. In sciences, which deal with universals, a negative case can disprove a hypothesis. In a society, however, there may be nothing that every single person does the same way or for the same reason. A negative case is just one more case. The method is not anecdotal, because we are seeking typical behaviour that is constantly repeated. Yet anecdotes, that is, individual stories, are used to convey our results. We often provide an extended example so that one can see how many factors and contextual features were relevant for one specific individual. We then often add other shorter stories, though, which show that there are many variants – to the extent that no individual stands for all members of that society.

What we did

Why these nine sites? Why no sites from Africa or the ex-Soviet bloc or Southeast Asia? We call this a global study, meaning that we include sites from all around the world, but clearly that does not mean it is a comprehensive study. There was an initial desire to include the biggest populations and emergent economies such as Brazil, China and India. We never intended to work in North America, simply because that area is already hugely overrepresented in the study of social media. Beyond that, however, much of the selection had to depend on whether there were suitable people available to carry out this research. We could only employ people trained in anthropology who could also make a commitment to this time frame. The initial proposal included a study in Africa, for example, but the designated person was not available. So logistics
ultimately determined the specific nine sites. Another important factor was funding. Through the generosity of a government-funded research centre in Santiago and the Wenner-Gren Foundation, we were able to include two additional team members beyond the original generous ERC funding, providing the project with one study in Chile and a second study in China.

Each anthropologist was responsible for the selection of the actual field site, so this generally reflected a particular interest that they wanted to pursue – for instance Costa on politics or Wang on migration. Once committed to a field site this implied working with the entire population and not just a selected element: wealthier and poorer, religious and secular, young and old, male and female. Fortunately most of these field sites have a strong tradition of open social life, so Nicolescu could hang out in the town square as Italians expect to do and Haynes could frequent the market or children’s afterschool activities as her neighbours would. When there are divided communities the field workers had to make separate groups of friends and networks, as Costa did with Arabs and Kurds in Mardin. Even that was not enough, however. Because there are no ‘typical’ Kurds, Costa had to make sure she included friendships with well educated and sophisticated Kurdish families where the men worked in the public sector, as well as with poorly educated, unsophisticated Kurdish families who had recently migrated from farms into the city. Wang had to make sure she maintained a good relationship with factory owners while studying the workers, which meant being discreet and cautious. On a number of occasions female researchers employed local male research assistants and male researchers employed female research assistants in order to ensure better access.

Perhaps the most difficult field site was in England, because English people may not be especially friendly to strangers, or even know the names of their neighbours. Many people in the village commute to work elsewhere and do not attend local social events. If one simply attended the ‘community’ events one would meet only the fraction of local people who are community minded. For the first six months Miller thus walked door-to-door, striving to persuade people to let him into their homes. Only that way could he be sure of including people who are anti-social or lonely, as well as others who may not be community-minded. He also worked with schools, since everyone goes to school; and with a hospice, since everyone equally will die.

Participation generally means just that. Visiting McDonald in the field, it was evident that children would shout with glee the moment
he appeared, but adults smiled just as broadly. He really did seem to be everyone’s best friend, but that was partly because he lived in extremely ordinary quarters, sharing an outside toilet with other families and struggling with irregular water and electric supplies in the same way that they did. For an academic such as Wang to spend 15 months with factory workers whose primary interests, after a hard day’s work, consisted of playing endlessly repetitive games, and who were often too tired to say anything particularly sensible, was (to be honest) extremely tedious. In the village where Spyer lived gossip seemed untrammeled, and had in effect become the major form of entertainment. Not surprisingly this included speculation as to who this intruder might ‘really’ be. Rumours spread that he was working for the CIA. This was not too problematic at first, but when people started suggesting that he was investigating local drug lords he began to worry, since many people in the town had been killed because of the drug trade. The situation grew more serious still when personal threats started to appear. Fortunately the arrival of his wife seemed to allay local people’s fears.

Haynes experienced a turning point in her research when an earthquake measuring 8.3 on the Richter scale devastated buildings in Alto Hospicio. There was no water or electricity for over a week and the highway that connects with the larger town of Iquique was fractured by the earthquake, so that the city was cut off. This created quite a bit of community cohesion, allowing Haynes a new sense of being part of the social fabric of the town, as well as providing bonding moments even a year later. In her last week of field work, even with two new acquaintances, when the earthquake came up in conversation all three admitted with a laugh that they thought they were going to die at the moment it struck, and a deeper friendship was born.

An important component to participant observation is learning about what behaviour is considered appropriate. A gradual adaptation to the ways people in each particular site make friends is thus integral to this method. In Trinidad making and staying friends with one group of people requires constant partying; for a different group living in the same area, one becomes friends by constantly attending religious services and life cycle ceremonies. An ethnographer has to be a chameleon, able to change his or her manner, appearance and language for each of the different groups, with the aim of making everyone equally comfortable in his or her presence.

One important area in which we commonly fail, and thereby learn, is our own appearance. Venkatraman may be an Indian from the region where he undertook his field work, but he still had lessons
to learn. When he started his field work in south India he wore a T-shirt and jeans (Fig. 3.1). Practically no one would speak to him. When he tried to go to the other extreme and conduct field work wearing a formal shirt and trousers, he found that most people thought he was trying to sell them something because he looked like a businessman. In one case, after patiently explaining to a school the nature of our project and the research he would like to conduct, the school teacher apologised but said firmly that the school was not really interested in purchasing this ‘anthropology’. Eventually Venkatraman took further measures. He pierced both his ears and started wearing traditional Indian hand-spun kurtas, supposedly ‘intellectual-wear’, to clearly position himself as an academic. After this the field work went just fine.

Spyer found his field site to be a split between evangelical Christians and others interested in some very non-Christian activities. He thus needed to look neither like a ‘person of God’ nor a ‘person of the world’. Instead he went for a European style that managed to be a neutral ‘gringo’ look, enabling him to talk with people from both sides. Sinanan, by contrast, had to take off most of her clothes and adopt Carnival costume (Fig. 3.2) in order to gain a rapport with people who worked on the creation of a Carnival camp. Costa found that she had to shave her legs and underarms more carefully than usual since in this

Fig. 3.1 Venkatraman dressed inappropriately
part of Turkey even to show a single hair where the legs or arms are not covered could be seen as shameful. She also found that she had to keep the house immaculately clean and sometimes wear a veil (Fig. 3.3).

Even when we had questionnaires or an agreement to study a particular question, it is often simply too artificial to put this question directly. Wang’s factory workers were quite suspicious of formal questions; they would only talk with her if she was a friend helping them to deal with the emotional aspects of their relationships. For example, these were three formal survey questions:-

- Do you have your partner’s social media password and, if so, could you tell me why and how did you get it?
- Will you remove your ex-partner’s photographs on your social media profile? If so, why? And why do you think some people keep their ex-partner’s photographs on social media?
- How do you deal with your partner’s ex-partner’s photographs on social media?
In practice the conversations through which she obtained answers would be more like:-

- ‘Oh gosh, how come? That’s totally outrageous, I just can’t believe it. But…hey you are great, how can you know his password? My boyfriend never told me his!’
- ‘Relax, you are strong, and I hope he will learn a lesson. By the way, did you give him any warning or at least a hint about this?’
- ‘Really?! So…which means he knew you looked at these photos? I do not get it, what’s wrong with men? Why do they think we can accept those ex-bitches…with a big smile?! I just do not get it!’

The point is that people should feel comfortable with, and ideally enjoy their engagement with, the anthropologist. Otherwise they will not give us their time. In addition all the field workers included formal recorded interviews, made mostly after researchers had built trusted relationships. These allow us to include the exact words of our informants in our books.
It is impossible to name a definite sample size of participants – a question we are often asked. Sometimes it was just a casual conversation over a drink, and sometimes it was people we saw every day for months. Not surprisingly, ethnographers tend to draw most heavily from the close friends they make after ten to 15 months. Such friends may admit that the things they said at first were intended to impress or disguise. Eventually they then provide much richer insights into what they really think is going on around them. Anthropologists are constantly making judgements about the validity of what they hear, being open but also sceptical about gossip. Rather like a detective we constantly try to check on our sources, always looking for further or better evidence.

In one respect this study had a distinct advantage over most such ethnographic encounters, which came from our topic of social media. Prior to starting the ethnography we agreed that all field workers should aim for around 150 people whom they would follow online ideally for the entire course of the field work. However integrated he or she feels in a community, an anthropologist will worry about the extent to which people’s behaviour has been altered by his or her presence. But it seemed clear that just being one more person on Facebook or QQ along with hundreds of others was not likely to impact upon people’s online behaviour, and in that sense posting online seems an ideal example of the possibilities of direct participant observation with regard to the topic of our project. For this purpose each field worker created a unique account on the major social media platforms. There was some discussion as to whether our presence online should be passive or active. Sinanan found very quickly that people were only comfortable if the anthropologist was at least as active as a typical ‘friend’ would be, making occasional ‘likes’ and postings of their own.

The other component of field work was our more systematic questionnaires, which are discussed in Chapter 4. As noted there, our first questionnaire was intended as an exploratory effort which some of us used to try and ensure that we engaged with the entire spectrum of the population, since this was organised according to estimates of the income range of participants or in some cases caste or education or religion. The second questionnaire was carried out towards the end of field work and is more reliably comparative, which is why it forms the basis of that chapter. It certainly helped that Venkatraman is a professional statistician as he was able to organise and process much of our material. We have a good deal of material derived from simply counting what people do on social media sites, or in one case calculating with whom they most
interacted and then finding out through discussion who these people actually were, but this material has not yet been analysed.  

During this first year of field work we realised that, although we invested a great deal of time in sharing monthly reports, when someone could actually visit another person’s field site so much more would become evident. This was a problem since unfortunately you – the readers – cannot visit all the field sites. So we decided that in addition to writing, everyone would commit to making ten short videos. One would be about their field site and one about how the work was done, with the remainder being stories or cases that illustrate the researcher’s findings. Several of these, such as those in south India and north Chile, were made by others who generously agreed to collaborate with us. These films are all on YouTube and our Why We Post website. We suggest that if you want to appreciate our evidence fully it is a good idea also to ‘visit’ the sites through these films.

This discussion remains brief as a description of ethnography as method. To give a more detailed account would compromise the intention of this publication also to reach non-academic readers. Fortunately a recent book gives an excellent introduction to this topic in terms of planning and carrying out field work and all the different considerations from ethics to data storage that are involved. Although it is directed to studies online, which makes the context rather different in some ways from our own approach to holistic contextualisation as described above, the discussion of ethnography itself – in terms of topics such as research design, observation and interviews – would stand for both approaches.

**Comparative and collaborative work**

The vast majority of anthropological and ethnographic work is highly individualistic, with a single person isolated in their field site. So this project is unusual, even within anthropology, in its commitment to both collaborative and comparative work. This is also perhaps unprecedented because it is only recently that cheap digital communications have made it much easier to stay in touch while conducting field work. Most of the team assembled as a group by September 2012. Following our preparations we all went to our field sites in April 2013 (except Haynes, who started later). Each month of field work we all worked on the same topic and then circulated 5000 words on that subject, which we then discussed via video conferencing. At first this followed an initial plan: the first month describing our field sites, the second talking about the social
media landscape. As time went on we adapted to unexpected findings. For example, we had intended to work more on death and memorialisation, but most sites had relatively few older people on social media, making it less useful to spend a month observing and writing about this topic. On the other hand other subjects, such as education, which we had not originally planned to focus upon, were clearly becoming important across all the sites, and so we included a month on this. From the beginning we agreed that everyone would also have an individual topic, because obviously there could be issues of considerable importance to one site but not others. For example, Spyer would work on social mobility and Sinanan on the visual.

It might seem that all of us working on the same topic would lead to similar results and repetition, but in fact we found the opposite. It constantly kept us aware during field work of how distinct each site was. Normally, in conducting an ethnography, at first everything seems very strange and in need of explanation. After a few months, however, there is a danger that we take things for granted and they become obvious to us, so we forget that we need to write about them and explain them to others. For this project, constantly reading each other’s work reminded us of the differences that need to be explained. Sometimes there were regional comparisons: the dualism of Pentecostalism against the underworld in Spyer’s field site seems like an extreme version of the dualism of Carnival values against Christmas values in Trinidad – possibly because both sites include some common history, such as slavery and religious conversion. McDonald’s site was always expected to show both similarities to and differences from Wang’s. His site represented the long-term stability of values and residence, while hers represented the rupture of moving to factories. There were, however, still surprises – for example, the extreme difference in the attitudes towards education, which was of significant importance in the rural site and of very little importance in the industrial site.

Again and again we learned how we could not generalise from any one site. Sinanan found the concept of ‘Facebook Fame’ of considerable importance in her Trinidad site where people would do all sorts of things in the hope that they might go viral (e.g. schoolchildren fighting), but Haynes found that in her site in north Chile people did not have the slightest desire for that kind of fame; they would have been embarrassed by such attention. This degree of variation is most clearly expressed in our list of discoveries on the Why We Post website (www.ucl.ac.uk/why-we-post). In each case our main generalisation or question is tempered
by nine comments from each of our field sites. If you read these you will see that almost inevitably at least one of the field sites will completely disagree with any particular generalisation. Such an outcome is also evident in our answers to the ten questions that constitute most of this book. For example, we shall find that in most cases social media does not represent the rise of individualism; but in a few field sites that is exactly what it does represent.

Mostly we could see more similarities if we looked at genres such as memes, selfies, indirects\textsuperscript{10} and so forth, but then we saw more differences if we asked what exactly terms such as privacy, friendship or selfies meant for people in each site. The common language of English may exaggerate the degree of similarity. For example, even though the word friend is used throughout this book, it does of course stand for different terms with different meanings. In the Brazilian field site locals used the term ‘\textit{colegas}’ to describe relations between peers of the same age and socioeconomic background; \textit{colegas} implies a level of competitiveness among the young people that does not fit the idea of solidarity carried by the Western definition of ‘friend’. So the problem of the meaning of the word ‘friend’ did not start with Facebook; it started with the Tower of Babel.

After completing one year of field work the team spent May 2014 in London, consolidating and planning. They then returned to the field for the final three months, which ended in September 2014 (other than Haynes, who started and finished a bit later). We then decided to continue explicit comparison by writing individual books that contained the same chapter headings for all but Chapter 5, which represents each person’s individual topic. In addition we noted how often works on social media are bereft of visual illustration, so each book contains a Chapter 3 that is largely devoted to directly illustrating and analysing what people post.

Most academic books within social science are expected to be in large measure a dialogue with other academics. However, the problem is that this is usually of very little interest to anyone who is not an academic or is from a different discipline. Other subjects such as history often keep these debates with other academics within footnotes and endnotes in order to retain a clear narrative for readers. We followed their example. In our nine monographs we have left our main text free to be as clear a description and analysis of our 15 months’ ethnographic field work as possible. In order to achieve this, most of our citations and discussion of other academics are in our endnotes, or will be in future journal papers. Several of us also plan to write second monographs. We have always seen our topic
as a telescope. We can use our ethnography to focus in on the nature of social media. We can also use social media to expand the focus outward to an enhanced and expanded ethnography. The books published so far represent the first strategy. Subsequent books will emerge from the second.

**Ethical issues**

There were two strong ethical commitments regarding the dissemination of this research. One was that we should make our material available in the languages of the countries in which we worked. Another was that people with low incomes in these countries should not be prevented from reading them by reasons of cost. We chose to work with the newly established UCL Press because it was set up with a commitment to offer free digital copies under Open Access with a Creative Commons Licence, as well as print copies for sale at cost. We were also delighted to be given an opportunity to create a free online lecture course (known in jargon as a MOOC) on the FutureLearn platform, developed by the UK Open University, as well as a website (ucl.ac.uk/why-we-post) containing our audio-visual material. These are also the places where we hope to develop an active social media presence, providing further avenues for discussion and for viewing our findings. Here you can comment and contribute to this project. Through the combination of these disparate forms and levels of publication we have also tried to develop a holistic vision of research dissemination to match the holistic nature of ethnographic research.

Other ethical issues raised by this project have led to a mix of formal procedures and informal considerations. As stipulated by the original grant from the ERC, our research proposal had first to be approved by the ethics committee of University College London, and then by ethics committees in all the countries in which we worked, before being signed off by the ERC itself. This includes the need for written or oral consent from participants. That is the bureaucracy of ethics. In practice our main concern has been to ensure that we explain clearly to all those who took part the nature of our project and how any information we obtain from them might be used. Ultimately our basic ethical rule is quite simple: nothing we do should cause harm to the people who took part.

Actually the vast majority of material we obtained is unproblematic and most people have no reason to be concerned if other people know that they posted a meme or discussed what they had for lunch. In fact, our informants overwhelmingly preferred to be identified. However,
we feel that informants may not always be aware of potential misuse of their personal details, and so we collectively have agreed to reject that preference, other than for film work where identification is likely. All of our books are instead based on anonymised material. That means we feel free to change details about an individual, such as the work they do or where they were born, but only as long as these alterations are in no way relevant to the particular point being made. In the case where the field site is a larger town such as Mardin or Alto Hospicio, we use the real name. In the case of smaller field sites we have used pseudonyms.

In the current age of Google and online searching it is entirely possible for a reader to find out the real name of our field sites, even though we would not confirm that identification; but clearly the only reason for anonymity is the protection of informants, so we cannot see why anyone would do this for other than malicious reasons. In any case we have introduced additional levels of anonymity at the personal level. The more we believe the actual information published could potentially cause harm to an individual, the more stringent we have been in our anonymisation. This includes both our concerns and those of our informants. For example, English people feel there is a risk in showing a picture of a baby, so all English babies in the Visualising Facebook text have been partially masked to ally such fears. People in other field sites had no such concerns.

Most writing about ethics is concerned with protecting participants from negative consequences. As a result few people seem to mention the other side to this coin. What are the positive benefits of research? The primary goal of this work is education, to disseminate knowledge about the use and consequences of social media around the world. As it happens, even at the level of field work, our experience is that almost inevitably people enjoy the opportunity to talk and spend time with visiting anthropologists; the informal nature of such relationships means that people feel free to ask questions of the anthropologist as much as to answer them. Sometimes, simply because we are not their family (or teachers or state bureaucrats), people feel able to talk cathartically at a deeper level about things they really care about, in a way that may not be possible with people they actually ‘know’.

We all passionately believe in the positive benefits of anthropology itself. In a world where most people have little opportunity to find out about and appreciate the diversity of the world we live in, we tend to assume that other people are more like us than they actually are, and have little idea how odd we may appear to them. We hope that by
reading this volume, and all the other books in the series, readers will gain a better understanding of social media and what it has now become through its differential usage around the world. Above all, however, we hope that in reading these books people from around the world are able to gain a better and more empathetic understanding of other people, and that positive imperative is the core to our ethics and those of anthropology itself.