How the World Changed Social Media

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9 Inequality

As one might expect, there is a considerable interest in the capacity of the internet and social media to produce large-scale social change. Yet the question as to whether internet access and social media have improved the plight of the world’s most disadvantaged populations or have rather exacerbated inequalities continues and is far from resolved. As previous chapters have pointed out, social media has had an important impact on education, work and gender relations, all of which are major components of this wider question. Several of our field sites represent low income and disadvantaged populations. Here we examine the ways in which social media may impact on people who do not have easy access to digital resources, and how their use may be a mode of change – or, conversely, how it may sustain their current social positions.

The number of people using digital communication has increased dramatically since the launch of commercial access to the internet in the mid-1990s. And it is not just the rich, cosmopolitan and educated; the current combination of mobile technology and social media has created a strong interest among various socially underprivileged populations, including illiterate or semi-literate people, low-wage manual migrant workers and migrants in places such as China, India and Brazil.¹

As with all the chapters of this book the evidence will be presented from our long-term ethnographic engagement with nine different populations. We see that in each place inequality exists and is expressed in different ways, depending upon historical processes and current political and social structures. Drawing comparisons, therefore, is not always straightforward. In every site the disparities of income and wealth, as well as of social status, are associated with other forms of social difference including gender, age, education, religion and racial inequalities. Groups in every field site have a perception of their own social position that is largely relative to others in the same society, rather than set against some abstract scale.
What is inequality?

If we contend that inequality exists in a variety of forms, what exactly do we mean when we ask if social media affects inequality? Certainly one form of inequality is wealth distribution and poverty. We often think of the most disadvantaged people as living in slums, with no possibilities of work and without hope for a brighter future. Yet economic inequalities are often co-constituted with phenomena such as racism, lack of political representation and poor access both to physical resources, such as drinkable water or electricity, and more abstract resources such as education. In some of our field sites people are not necessarily impoverished, but lack political power. In others a cursory perusal of their belongings, which might include flat screen televisions and new Samsung mobile phones, obscures the fact that they at times cannot pay their electricity bill. In other instances inequalities simply mean that certain parts of the population are discriminated against in terms of accessing resources, based on characteristics such as race or religion.

Bourdieu outlined three different types of inequality corresponding to different types of ‘capital’. Economic capital generally refers to access to money. Social capital describes the social relationships and institutionalised networks of which an individual is a part. Cultural capital includes knowledge or skills gained through education, cultural goods and qualifications. Each of these types of capital is influenced by the others, and Bourdieu’s main concern is how they are used by elite groups to reproduce privilege.

Related to inequality is the concept of social mobility, which refers to the ability of an individual or group to improve their social position. Again this may take a number of forms, from better work opportunities to educational resources so that children will have better prospects in the future. Social mobility is not just about having more money, but about showing it in the right ways; in essence performing as part of a particular social class. This may mean buying the ‘right’ brands, owning the ‘right’ appliances, sending children to the ‘right’ schools or even dressing in a way that conforms to the norms of that social class. What is ‘right’ is upheld through discourses on taste and ‘distinction’, which are often given a moral value. This often requires either turning economic capital into social and cultural capital or indeed finding ways to acquire the latter in the absence of economic capital. Media technology has become one primary way in which some less privileged people may be able to access resources such as information previously only available.
to those with more privilege. It is thus no surprise that the internet may be posited as a tool for social mobility.

As a result facilitating access to new media is understood to have become basic to modern development and to helping people find a ‘voice’. People who do not have internet access miss out on possible resources that they could access online. Without the internet they may experience new and further barriers to improving their access to economic, social and cultural capital, while the rest of society is able to gain greater resources through its access to new technology. This lack of access therefore emerges as a force able to exacerbate and widen prior forms of inequality. Yet internet access does not automatically translate into greater access to information and resources. In fact our field sites have shown that prior discourses of distinction and difference continue to influence, to a large extent, the particular ways people use the internet and social media, often reflective of social class. Furthermore it is entirely possible that the extraordinary spread of smartphones and social media does in and of itself represent a form of greater equality, but without that necessarily having any impact on inequality offline.

Approaches to social media and inequality: the positive, the negative and the grounded

The relevant literature can largely be divided into two – almost entirely opposed – camps. The first argues that social media is bound to introduce greater inequality in society through concentrating educational and networking resources among those who are already privileged. Alternatively the ‘techno-utopian’ approach sees social media as a panacea for problems of inequality, giving disadvantaged people access to greater resources through the internet.

Literature falling within the category of ‘digital divide’ is often informed by notions that new ICTs exacerbate pre-existing inequalities in societies: poorer individuals are excluded, while wealthier persons are provided better access. Early studies, which focused on access to the internet itself rather than social media, were conducted largely in developed countries; they emphasised that, although the vast majority of people had internet access, an important minority either completely lacked or had sub-standard connections. Often the constraints that prevented people from benefiting from online communication were dictated by factors such as age, household income, educational achievement, English level, disability and rural/urban location.
As internet access has improved and social media and other online resources have become increasingly available, scholars are suggesting that other kinds of divides are emerging. Much depends on the different forms of access, and the specifics of local context, which impacted upon how people used these technologies.\textsuperscript{10} It has been proposed that the ‘network divide’ has a greater impact than the ‘digital divide’, and that the key distinction is now whether people are able to acquire the skills needed successfully to cultivate their social networks online.\textsuperscript{11} This transformation has been informed by an increasing stress on ‘digital literacies’ by some scholars, emphasising that mastering the use of these networks has become as important as merely being able to access them (as discussed in Chapter 5).\textsuperscript{12} Finally there are approaches that look more to systematic global inequalities. Even if individuals have both access and skills, there remain huge imbalances between the amount of content available in different languages or produced in areas of the world such as Latin America, Africa and India.\textsuperscript{13}

Notwithstanding these issues of inequalities of access mentioned above, techno-utopian discourses claim the internet represents egalitarianism, freedom of speech and democracy.\textsuperscript{14} These works portray social media as a tool that can be used to consolidate collective power against powerful institutions, often represented through the polarity of ‘individual against government’ or ‘consumer against corporation’. These discourses therefore suggest that social networking acts as a kind of empowerment, promoting civil protagonism that challenges systems that produce inequalities.\textsuperscript{15}

As demonstrated in the previous chapter on gender, early internet commentators wondered whether the online virtual communities that emerged during the 1990s would stimulate equality by allowing people free reign to create imaginative online identities that were independent from their own bodies. Such a concept equally has implications for inequalities based on other aspects of identity, for example age, race, wealth or class.\textsuperscript{16} An associated question is whether, given the potential for online anonymity, social relations could exist apart from differences based in the body or other ‘offline’ circumstances, instead appreciating the online domain as a new, independent space in which the mind may be allowed to roam free of these prior constraints.\textsuperscript{17} This question is a key component of the previous chapter on gender.

Less evident in both of these categories of literature, and of greater significance to our project, has been the way that inequality itself may mean different things to different people. A growing number of scholars have called for a move away from work that assumes social media
must have either a good or bad effect on inequality, calling instead for approaches that consider the complex, nuanced and often contradictory range of effects that social media has on the ‘messy reality’ of people’s lives. More grounded, ethnographic approaches to internet use by teens in the US suggest that many of the problems young people face online remain rooted in long-running social and racial inequalities. For instance, a study tracing the migration of educated, white, middle-class American teens from MySpace to Facebook compared the growing perception of Facebook as offering greater safety than MySpace to ‘white flight’ (a phenomenon in which affluent whites move to suburbs, away from the non-white population living in urban centres). Another study conducted in the US looks at how social media use may exacerbate class differences, as under-privileged parents exercise greater control over their children’s social media use to balance the risks that these young people face by living in less affluent neighbourhoods. Our own project has endeavoured alongside others to broaden the scope of these enquiries, and in particular to use comparison of the inequality found within each of our field sites with that found between these different field sites.

The diversity of difference

In our field sites in Brazil and rural China many individuals have high aspirations for social mobility connected to education. In our rural Chinese field site in particular, education is seen to be the key to future social mobility. Yet our work also acts as a caution in generalising this familiar observation about education in China, since evidence from our industrial Chinese site shows how the migration of similar rural workers into the factory sector has created a class of hundreds of millions who may now see education as of little value, recognising that they are destined to enter the factory workforce at a young age. Social media is, however, used for sharing self-help tips on QQ, particularly tips related to financial success, which were very frequently shared. In general social media was seen as a place for enhanced cooperation, providing a place to share information related to work opportunities or non-traditional education.

In Brazil low-paid manual workers have aspirations to use education as a foundation for social mobility, but the actual quality of local education available in the town was generally quite poor. These low income populations of young people use social media as a valuable alternative educational resource. Educational YouTube videos that taught job skills, such as Microsoft Word, were popular and often quite effective as
a resource for young people hoping to find jobs that would allow them to achieve their desired social mobility. Although it is not the main object of our enquiry, we found in several of our sites that it would be hard to exaggerate the increasing importance of YouTube, in particular, as a mode for informal education.

In Brazil and in both our Chinese field sites the ability to access these resources also gave people a sense of self-esteem, as this technology evoked a feeling of moving from a ‘backwards’ lifestyle towards ‘modernity’. In all three sites informants saw the digital domain as providing a degree of emancipation – not just allowing them to have the same smartphones as members of wealthier classes, but also giving them a degree of control over their self-presentations. Such control allowed them to craft an appearance more closely approximating to whom they now perceived themselves to be.

Yet opportunities for self-presentation are not always considered advantageous. In the Italian field site, where unemployment among all groups is high, we have seen in Chapter 6 how young people with degrees from prominent universities use social media to demonstrate skills that can help them obtain jobs. For young people from less affluent backgrounds, however, social media can often present unwelcome pressures to craft a public self-image. These young people often attend schools that focus on professional skills, for instance plumbing, mechanics or secretarial skills, and are encouraged to start working as soon as possible to contribute to the household income. For them being on social media can feel like a burden akin to a social obligation – for example going to a posh wedding where one has to dress up – thus making them more self-conscious of their lower social position. Here it is the parents who encourage their children to create Facebook accounts, since they worry that the lack of such a presence may expose their position of inequality. For these underprivileged Italians, therefore, being on social media is often an obligation they would prefer to avoid. Already, then, we can see quite profound differences among the basic relationships between social media and the aspiration for social mobility.

Making visible social mobility

The control over presentation that was important to Brazilians and Chinese factory workers reflects the sense that in modern life who one can be depends increasingly upon who one appears to be. For this one
needs a good knowledge of the prevailing attitudes to good taste, reflecting back to the earlier comment upon how people try to turn economic capital into social and cultural capital. In Brazil attaining social visibility for newly enhanced material wealth and other signs of achievement allowed those from disadvantaged groups to claim entrée into new communities. The implication is that social media has shifted social status still further in the direction of visibility; today it is simply easier and more common actually to see people, at least online.

Sandra’s wedding is an example of this process. Sandra, an Afro-descended Brazilian, was given up by her parents to work as a domestic servant when she was five years old. This practice of ‘dar os filhos’23 (‘giving their children’) was common among the poorer families in the region, particularly those of African descent.24 In doing so the parents ensure that the child will be fed, dressed and sometimes sent to school while they acquire working practice and skills, such as domestic expertise for girls. Unfortunately, as was common in such circumstances, Sandra and her sisters were exposed to physical, emotional and sexual abuse.25 However, Sandra regards one outcome of the experience as positive – her introduction to evangelical Christianity.

Christianity gave Sandra an incentive to learn to read, so that she could understand the Bible. Later through church connections she found a job as a part-time salesperson at the local Christian bookstore in the village. This informal job pays only half the minimum wage and does not include benefits, but she is able to use the store’s computer during quieter hours to play online games and watch Christian movies on YouTube. Sandra’s primary concern at this point, considering she feels she has done her share of hard work in life, is not for greater economic capital; rather she desires a form of cultural capital that has value within her specific church community.

When Sandra was planning her wedding, she saw it as an important way to gain full membership in the evangelical community. Evangelical Christians in the Brazilian field site are often among the most prosperous local families. With the financial help of friends and family, her ceremony included decorations equal to those seen on wedding programmes on television: flowers, fruits, colourful cloth and fancy illumination, a proper wedding dress and party food for over 300 guests. With such fanfare she successfully portrayed herself as a socially mobile individual and part of the evangelical community.

In addition her family asserted their own form of social mobility by selecting many of the official photographs of the wedding to be displayed on her sister’s Facebook account. This provided a week-long
opportunity for all guests to find themselves on the images and comment eloquently on how wonderful the event was. In essence both Sandra and her wedding guests were able to access a form of cultural capital through planning, attending and then reminiscing and representing the event through photographs on social media. Just as young people in the Brazilian field site would rather take a selfie at the gym or swimming pool than against a plain brick wall, Sandra and her guests knew that portraying themselves as socially mobile was just as important as actually being able to afford fancy wedding decorations or a gym membership. This is because of the way different forms of capital, such as economic resources, taste and social connections, work in conjunction, giving a natural appearance to the fact that some people have more privileges than others.

A key lesson from the example of Sandra is that we cannot assume the emphasis on visibility is to be interpreted as a new form of superficiality that comes with social media and its focus upon appearance. In this case the key driving force is the fundamental principles of Protestant Christianity, which centuries before social media argued that it was only through outward appearance that an individual could establish whether they were among the ‘saved’, which is the primary aspiration for this branch of Christianity.26 Such principles were also behind the drive for upward social mobility through hard work and wealth. Zuckerberg may have provided the means, but Calvin devised the cause.

The limits to social media’s impact on social mobility

While visually portraying upward mobility in the Brazilian field site is important, the mere photographic evidence of goods considered to be in good taste does not grant access to elite class membership in all contexts. Anthropologists encounter many strategies for social mobility that fail, while class differences are reproduced through everyday actions, often unknowingly.27 These same everyday discourses of taste are used to maintain inequality among groups with similar levels of wealth: certain tastes are denigrated as vulgar, kitsch or unsophisticated28 in strictures often associated with race, religion, region, urban/rural divides or even a sense of ‘old’ versus ‘new’ class identities (i.e. the new middle class vs. the old middle class). As much as people in Trinidad make more use of Facebook’s visibility to make claims to wealth others find creative and humorous ways to ridicule their attempts as simply vulgar and unsophisticated. Denigration of taste when going through

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other people’s Facebook accounts is a substantial part of Trinidadian entertainment today.

We can see these limits by returning to the case of Sandra. Her ability to use social media to create a new visual identity making clear what she has now achieved worked with respect to the main part of this field site that comprised the lower income population. However, there is also a new, gentrified part of the village, a touristic ocean front resort area, only about one kilometre away from the core of the village where low-paid manual workers such as Sandra live. Despite this proximity the daily contact between these two worlds happens almost exclusively as a consequence of labour relations: one group works for the other. Wealthier employers, both online and offline, tend to stay in contact only with those who share the same class background and thus sense of taste. They see their values as contrasting with those of the employed villagers, whom they describe as loud, uncultured and either overly sexualised or overly religious.

These social distances, which developed from centuries of slave-based work in that region, remain naturalised and unquestioned. Only recently have these wealthier residents even recognised that social media is equally popular among the low-paid families in the region, but they have no desire to friend the domestic workers they employ. Online these affluent locals may share among themselves progressive political and social views, but this rarely results in transcending the social boundaries between them and their less well-off neighbours. Instead they voice concerns about ecology, often complaining that problematic low income settlements negatively affect the environment or require heightened policing to prevent crime. Social media may therefore have changed the social position of Sandra relative to her peers, but it will have made no impact upon this wider social chasm between her part of the village and where the employers reside.

Similarly in Italy many elite social media users become involved in progressive political activism through Twitter or Facebook, demonstrating their sympathy for left-wing positions. As in Brazil, however, this rarely connects to any practical actions that would reduce inequality in their own village. In Italy ‘caring about the poor’ is a culture in and of itself that is easy to express on social media, but which may have very little to do with actual impoverished people in the local area. Their welfare is left to state organisations and the church.

In the same manner that ‘caring about the poor’ signals a certain class position in Italy and Brazil, portraying oneself as cosmopolitan or international achieves a similar goal in other field sites. In the south
Indian field site traditional social divisions were rigidly retained and policed online, particularly through the content that people shared. On Facebook wealthier locals share articles, often in English and produced by international media outlets such as The Guardian or The New York Times. Both the college-educated IT executives and the traditional villagers from lower castes have a keen interest in local cinema, politics and cricket. However, only the content related to cricket is equally likely to be found on the timelines of the more and less affluent. News about politics and cinema are differentiated according to caste and class, so that the affluent post about international art films and Hollywood while lower income people post clips of Tamil movies. The main impact of social media is the extended use of claims to cosmopolitanism which exacerbate prior social differences.

In the Trinidadian field site young female professionals in their early 20s with university degrees also share images on social media that display global influences. These images include fancy cuisine served in high-class restaurants and photographs of international holidays. Other references include the content of fashion bloggers and YouTube ‘vloggers’ based in the US, UK and Singapore. These online resources help them to forge a sense of cosmopolitanism based on exchanging references to global trends in beauty, consumption and lifestyle. Social media posts make still more visible the differential access that these individuals have to such international experiences. This same higher class tries to avoid online forums that discuss sexual relationships and romance, a key interest and practice for lower income Trinidadians. Instead they post material about being close to one’s family, sustaining a long-lasting marriage and the companionship that can be gained from a partner. Social boundaries are also made explicit by the online use of derogatory expressions, for example ‘ghetto’ refers to people who display attributes such as loudness, lack of taste and limited formal education, all associated with lower income Afro-Trinidadians. In the case of Trinidad, however, we also find considerable evidence for how lower income groups contest these attempts to maintain separation through the manipulation of taste. Many humorous and ironic phrases and gestures on social media are explicitly aimed at puncturing the pretensions and claims made by those who think they are more sophisticated.

Trinidad has always had a powerful undercurrent of egalitarian pressure, which has its own weapons in this fight. If social media favours a visibility that allows the wealthier to portray their sophistication, it has also become a key site for humour, memes and entertainment. One
of the most common versions of these is a vast array of fun material aimed at disparaging the pretentions of these same cosmopolitans and mocking the ‘arrogance’ of those who appear to ‘think they are better than everyone else’. This is the flip side to the previously mentioned entertainment that the elite gain from disparaging the vulgarity of their social inferiors.

The Chilean field site, situated in the north of the country, is characterised by a certain kind of inequality. The region is quite rich in mineral resources, which are translated into a great deal of wealth for elite classes in the country as a whole. However, most people in the specific city of the field site are low-paid manual labourers, who do not receive a great deal of financial benefits from the mines that extract the minerals. While steady work is readily available in the mines, and pays more than other work options, local people still regard themselves as marginalised and exploited by the international companies and the national government who extract most of the benefits.

This was another site where some people would display pictures on social media of luxury goods, brand name clothing or vacations in order to make visible their new wealth. Yet this disrupts the wider solidarity of the local region that is defined in relation to the country as a whole. As a result such people were portrayed as selfish for not sharing their wealth and foolish for spending their money unwisely – or even gossiped about for having possible connections to the drug trade. It was suggested that people who are too quick to display wealth would really be better off in a larger city, where those around them valued material goods over community mindedness. They could thereby become excluded through social boundaries constructed around an ideology of mutual benefit and solidarity.

A more successful use of social media than flaunting individual wealth is as a method of connecting with others through humour. From disenfranchisement in politics to frustrations with not being able to pay one’s phone bill or buy a special meal such as sushi, memes, photographs and text on Facebook often fall into the genre of ‘it’s funny how poor I am’. Even the relatively well-off residents of Alto Hospicio post this genre of comic memes and texts about how funny it is to be poor, recognising this wider solidarity based on the idea that no one is privileged in the grand scheme of things. This in turn means cultivating a certain type of pride in their collective marginality.

Though these complaints are usually aimed simply at making the local audience laugh, in April 2014 an earthquake of 8.2 Richter magnitude struck the region and the intended audience changed.
During the weeks and even months that followed the earthquake, social media – primarily Facebook and Instagram – became spaces to draw attention to the plight of those affected and highlight the lack of assistance offered by the national government. In particular more than 4000 families were left without homes; they lived in tents for almost two months before the governmental natural disaster relief agency provided them with temporary housing. During this time social media posts turned outward from the usual in-community form of sociality in order to draw attention to the victims’ plight, and thus pressure the national government to provide resources.

Conclusion

As shown in our review of the literature, we have to be careful about what we mean by inequality and how it is generalised. We also have to differentiate two potential consequences of access to social media: the equality that this represents in its own right and its potential subsequent impact on wider forms of inequality. In one sense our evidence is that social media has created a form of equality. The possession of a smartphone and access to social media by a vast population of low income people in places such as Brazil, China and India does represent a profound change in their lives. They now have devices of extraordinary sophistication, often identical to those used by the wealthy. There are many examples described throughout this book which show how they are thereby enabled to do much that was not previously possible. So it would be quite wrong to deny or ignore this form of equality. Yet the main concern of this chapter has been a more difficult question: what is the consequence of this online equality for offline inequality? What most of the examples have shown is that possession of a smartphone and access or even skill with social media is absolutely no guarantee of any change at all in inequality offline; it may lessen, but equally may increase.

This is one of the chapters that most clearly justifies our choice of title for this volume. Instead of just considering the way in which social media changes the world, our emphasis has been on the way the world has diversified social media. As it has become increasingly embedded in our lives, it comes to reflect the cultural diversity of our world. More specifically we see that the relationship between social media and social mobility is extremely different when viewed across all nine field sites.
This more fully reflects the prior literature on this topic, which was also found to contain a huge variety of positions from extremely optimistic to highly pessimistic. So in a way our conclusion is to support this broad range within the literature, but to then suggest that rather than encountering it as a fight between global generalisations as to an assumed overall impact, it would be better to recognise that most of these stances on the impact of social media on equality may be appropriate, but to different regions and populations.

One of the simplest examples of how the world changed social media occurs in the case of south India. Here highly rigid and hierarchical social structures that have developed over many centuries in turn colonised these new media and made them reflect such distinctions. Social media has an impact mainly though laying greater emphasis on differential claims to cosmopolitanism, which can be supported by acts of sharing international materials found online. This increased emphasis upon cosmopolitanism is found in most of our field sites, where it generally exacerbates prior inequalities. A similar problem develops in our Italian field site. Here social media is perceived as an oppressive obligation to take part in something that is bound to make one still more conscious of one’s lower position in society. In all of these cases social media makes inequality more visible and entrenched.

However, when we turned to the relations between social media, education and social mobility we found some extremely different cases. As noted in Chapter 5, the attention to the role of social media with respect to a high commitment to formal education in rural China is very different from the use of social media in informal education. This may be because people do not care much about formal education, which is the case in industrial China, or because they cannot get access to a decent quality of formal education, as in the Brazilian site. The use of social media as a resource within informal education is probably the most important additional component noted in the first section, which helps people to struggle against inequality.

Over much of the chapter we saw a tension between two of the most commonly observed properties of social media. The first of these is the increase in visibility that it accords, but the second, arguably equally important, is the use of social media as a site for humour and ironic disparagement. In the case of Sandra and Brazil we found that visibility can change one’s social position by demonstrating one’s respectability, and thus be an instrument of social mobility. Yet equally we discovered the limits to this process, since neither of these goals are achieved with respect to a larger social distinction that includes employers as well as
employees. Indeed the use of social media to express concern about the poor is found to be one of the key boundaries that separate the wealthy from the poor.

In both Trinidad and Chile we saw people’s use of visibility to try and portray cosmopolitanism and wealth countered by the use of humour to prick these bubbles of pretentiousness and advance a more egalitarian agenda. However, in the final case of Chile we also saw that, as previously in our Brazilian case, much depends on whether one’s focus zooms into, or takes a wide-angle perspective on, the larger landscape. When the people of this locality consider themselves in respect to the larger country, as they were forced to do by an earthquake, internal divisions become less important than their bigger relationship to the nation or to the international contexts in which they all live.

To conclude, this chapter has shown the difficulty in making claims respecting the impact of social media on inequality. We clearly do not wish to add to such inequality by failing to respect the different ways in which people in each site understand and experience social difference. At the same time there is another equally important sensitivity that consists of not conflating equality of access with any assumed consequences, since one of our most general observations is that the vast increase in access to social media is no guarantee in and of itself of any change in other forms of social inequality.