How the World Changed Social Media

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Perhaps the main reason anthropologists are wary of being involved in making predictions is that in studying the present we also see the fate of past predictions. More than that: we understand why they are so rarely of value. Daily life as observed in ethnography with its holistic contextualisation is so much more complex than a laboratory, in which one is able to control the variables. We also appreciate that prediction is often highly motivated. Given the nature of modern share markets, there are many people who make money out of getting the future right.

Yet fear of adding to such frenzy should not prevent us from exploring other concerns with the future. We may still write policy documents for a hospice suggesting how they might use social media in the future, or plan to refine our methods of study in anthropology to take the impact of new media into account. We quite reasonably take responsibility for helping people to consider the consequences of social media in ways that might in the future enhance rather than detract from their welfare, for example making advance provisions for what will happen to their online materials at death. So there are many good reasons for at least trying to use the evidence of the present for envisaging what might happen next.

The ‘theory of attainment’ that was developed prior to this project in order to theorise the impact of new media technologies on our understanding of humanity argues that typically new media are first used conservatively, to attain something already desired but more easily achieved with the help of this new media. For example, social media is used to repair the rupture sustained by separated transnational families or for overcoming previously frustrated desires to share photographs more easily. Soon, however, things move on to new realms. By 2016 the emphasis in using social media is no longer on repairing lost connections (as in Friends Reunited) or a fantasy of entirely new connections. Instead what we see today reveals something closer to
refinement. Considered in the light of our theory of scalable sociality, the small groups of WhatsApp are now being used to balance the larger groups of Facebook. The intimacy of Snapchat balances the contact with strangers on Twitter and Instagram. Online gaming consoles such as Xbox and Playstation, along with social media games that followed from Farmville, now balance the previous isolation of single-person gaming with more social possibilities. Scalable sociality is not only an observation of a pattern developing across social media, but also a prediction that new platforms will colonise other spaces along these scales.

New media constantly attains new possibilities. With respect to time, there are greater opportunities for both simultaneity in communication and also various versions of asynchronous conversation. With respect to space, we see the ‘death of distance’ enriched by the new possibilities of a ‘sort of’ co-presence, for example couples living in different countries who ‘sort of’ live together online; such possibilities are explored more fully in the study of webcam. Digital devices also change our sense of collective memory, creating a new form or combination of internal and external faculties for retaining information. We do not just make jokes about online being a second brain. We see a radical expansion not only in photography and visual communication, but also, perhaps more dramatically, in our capacity to share. Scalable sociality is therefore just one of many ways in which our project recognises that social media expands our capacity but, we insist, does not change our essential humanity. The point of the theory of attainment is that none of this should be seen either as a loss of humanity or as evidence that we are becoming ‘post-human’.

Four trends

Within the vast field of consequences of new social media, as anthropologists our research selectively focuses upon their implications for sociality. Within this narrower remit, this section will examine four trends. The first is already evident as scalable sociality, in which an increasing number of social media platforms can be aligned with the diversity of the social groups to which we might want to relate. There seems to be an acceleration in the development of new platforms – probably because, as seems to have been the case with WhatsApp, the costs of developing new start-up platforms has fallen, while the time it takes for them to become established has shrunk. As a result there is even less impediment to new devices and platforms taking up any little niche that still waits to
be exploited. Fine-tuning this balance between private and public communications is becoming crucial to the way people in our Brazilian and our Italian field sites, for instance, experience social media.

In Chapter 1 it was suggested that scalable sociality should also include prior media, for example dyadic telephone calls and public broadcasting. It is possible that as this spectrum is more fully covered, it will be harder to designate any particular group along this spectrum which could be isolated as the ‘social media’. In short, one consequence of this prediction is that the very idea of ‘social media’ might gradually disappear; instead we simply have an increasingly diverse set of media and increasingly sophisticated exploitation of the possibilities these media have created, including other trends such as obtaining information, sharing information or making communication more visual. All media was always social, and the separation of a group called social media within the overall spectrum may become less useful over time.

The prediction that social media’s successful conclusion may result in its demise as a separate sphere also points to another important technological development: the smartphone. However powerful and important the advent of social media in some of our field sites has become, it would be hard to place this ahead of the impact and significance of smartphones, within which social media platforms may often be seen as just another kind of app. Furthermore it is smartphones that facilitate social media’s importance as a mix of polymedia, making clear the range of media possibilities as they lie side by side within one easily accessible device. People can not only choose the scale of the group they want to communicate with, but also the mix of textual, visual and auditory components as appropriate to the situation. As we can see with Snapchat or the use of Facebook by illiterate populations in south India, it is possible that a ‘conversation’ can now be almost entirely visual. As smartphones become smarter, they may well accelerate the dissolving of social media into this wider array of communicative possibilities. This fluid mix of communicative forms suits the way users flow between activities such as talking, gaming, texting, masturbating, learning and purchasing.

With an increased emphasis on the smartphone it is not just social media that may become more integrated, but also the individual platforms themselves. At the moment we typically discuss social media in terms of QQ or Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. Yet until recently instant messaging would also have been understood in terms of platforms such as AIM, MSN or BBM. Today, however, a text message may equally come through WhatsApp, WeChat, the smartphone’s own messaging facility, a private Facebook message or an app such as Viber. People are becoming
increasingly unconcerned as to which this is. The trend is therefore towards content transcending the platform by which it is communicated, and this may well continue. Moreover the evidence from this project suggests that these platforms are not just technical facilities: we also have a relationship to them as a ‘kind-of’ friend. QQ has been around for a longer time than most other social media platforms; where once it was regarded as new and exciting, many now feel it to be a bit like a comforting but older relative. Judging by its loss of cool among young people in England, Facebook may have started going the same way. Young people looking for new experiences and spaces may create a dynamic in social media that has nothing to do with functionality and everything to do with fashion and their own peer relationships. Perhaps we may continue to use platforms as trade names to stand for that facility, just as British people did with Hoover (vacuum cleaners), Biro (ballpoint pens) or Sellotape (sticky tape). We might still talk about tweeting even when Twitter no longer exists. One clear conclusion of this project is that platforms matter much less than we once thought.

Both of these trends are closely linked to a third, very straightforward prediction – the movement towards ubiquity. An excellent book on the rise of new media is entitled The Great Indian Phone Book. Although not particularly concerned with social media it gives a well-researched overview of what seems to be happening as the vast population of India are becoming phone owners. Carla Wallis has a comparable book with respect to China. Between them these regions represent half the world’s population. These books demonstrate that we will not have to wait until the elimination of poverty in order to see the possible ubiquity of phone-based social media. This is partly because the prices of such devices continue to fall as a result of the Chinese mass production of high-quality, domestically produced smartphones. But equally it is due to the prioritisation of these devices by the relatively poor. Of the informants in the Chinese factory town, 91 per cent now access the internet through such smartphones.

The fastest growing global population is in Africa. Here Kenya and South Africa already lead the way, while experts predict extremely rapid growth in smartphone possession more generally. Overall The Economist predicts that 80 per cent of the world’s adult population will have decently connected smartphones by 2020, noting that already the ten biggest messaging apps represent three billion users. Nor is this just a case of possession; people spend several hours of each day on these devices. This could be represented as the end of the digital divide. Yet, while most people in the world will have access to some relevant
technology, our chapter on inequality suggests that equality of access to devices may have very little impact on wider inequality in society. Also, as Mark Graham who works on African media argues, the presence of considerable African usage of the internet does not necessarily mean African concerns are suddenly going to be more present on Wikipedia or Google.\(^\text{14}\)

One of the driving forces behind our project is that previous academic study has largely failed to follow the global expansion of social media. While in the future devices may be more ubiquitous in all corners of the globe, inequality will therefore remain in terms of the services available in certain locations and the lack of attention paid to the needs and desires of certain populations. At the same time, recognising that this may not necessarily impact on any other aspect of inequality should not prevent us from recognising that there is in one aspect an increasing and significant equality: merely having a smartphone provides a significant change with respect to the capacities of its owner.

In a similar movement to ubiquity, social media are not only becoming indispensable to geographically dispersed populations, but also to a more dispersed age range. Conservatism with regard to social media has until recently been mostly associated with age. When our project began, long ago in the mists of 2012, many people assumed that social media possessed some kind of natural affinity with the young, mainly because reaching the young had been the priority of virtually all the commercial forces which created social media platforms. In some ways, however, there is an inverse relationship between these commercial forces and what anthropologists have previously observed in many countries—the fact that social communication as an activity is most commonly associated with older women, not with young males. It is most often older women who do the collective work of maintaining community and social norms through what may disparagingly be considered ‘gossip’. In most of our field sites there remains something of a generational divide, with as yet very limited use by older people in the major populations of rural Brazil, China and India. This is eroding, however, and seems much less true of the spread of smartphones than of social media platforms. As noted, the increasing ubiquity of the smartphone is the catalyst for more general usage of social media. Older people in some of our field sites seemed to take easily to visual media such as Skype or Facetime and to tablets such as iPads. To the degree that social media remains associated with core genres of social communication such as gossip, the future of social media may well rest more with older women than younger men – think landlines.
Juxtaposing these three separate trends within the context of our field results lead to a fourth prediction which is much less intuitively obvious, but which emerges from our ethnographic evidence. As this volume’s chapters concerning gender, politics and inequality suggest, social media has its most profound impacts upon populations that were traditionally the most constrained. While social media is neither wholly good nor bad for any population, it does seem to have emancipatory effects for many marginalised populations. Perhaps the single best example of radical transformation is Costa’s work among women in Mardin who use social media to overcome severe constraints in their freedom to communicate with others; such practice also echoes findings elsewhere in the Middle East on the impact of social media in countries such as Saudi Arabia. The point is really rather simple. The more individuals live within culturally imposed constraints on communication, the more a new technology may mean that what was previously forbidden now becomes possible. Costa’s study shows that the impact radically changes the social relations between women and men – and, potentially, women’s overall position within the society. None of this is gainsaid by the evidence that social media is equally and in the same society far more conservative than we had previously appreciated.

Both – simultaneously

While some of these trends may rest upon current and future technical developments, as all of the field sites of this project reveal, the precise selection of social media within an environment of polymedia is based less upon technological affordances and more on local genres of social interaction or cultural significance. Older people in England would be very well served by the technological affordances offered by the spread of Facebook. However, if young people stop posting on Facebook and older people remain keen on keeping connected to the young they may then be forced to follow the young onto a less suitable platform: the social connection is more important than how well a platform meets their needs.

Similarly in China the pattern of differential usage of platforms tends to reflect emerging class consciousness and the pre-existing urban–rural divide, rather than simply show what a platform is good at doing. When the Chinese factory workers become competent in one platform such as QQ, they may look to newer sites that help them remain modern in comparison with others. In the rural China site McDonald
notes how migration to urban areas for short periods of work and study often resulted in people starting to use WeChat to communicate with new contacts in these places.

The desire to emulate more metropolitan regions is strong in some areas which regard themselves as peripheral, for example in our south Italian site where people of lower cultural and educational capital try and emulate those with more. As always in our project there are exceptions, however, where people do not use social media to express social distinctions in this way. Central to Haynes’s analysis of her Chile site is her considerable evidence that the town creates its identity precisely through refusing to emulate, or even to respect, the metropolitan region represented by Chile’s capital Santiago. People in Alto Hospicio often refer to the area as ‘Santi-asco’ – ‘asco’ being the Spanish word for ‘disgust’.

So while we can generalise about the continued importance of social status and emulation in determining which media people use, as opposed to merely technical affordances, we cannot simply predict any particular outcome of this. While some might expect that there will be a long-term movement towards greater or more efficient alignment though social media between affordances and needs, this is actually unlikely if factors such as fashion and emulation continue to prove more powerful than functionality.

After all not everything moves over time to become more functional or efficient. We would not say that most clothing or food is more efficient today than several centuries ago: rather they have increased in diversity for reasons related to fashion and social differentiation. Indeed functional clothing, as also healthy eating, are both mostly encountered as examples of lifestyle. We are thus merely suggesting that social media may be more like clothing and food than we had realised. What our studies find to be relatively robust and enduring are not the social media platforms that people use, but rather the culturally informed genres of behaviour enacted on and through these sites. The way Chinese people socialise around food, English people around the pub, Trinidadians around partying, Indians around the extended family or Italians around public space are almost always reproduced on social media. Here, as in so many areas, social media represents a change in the place where things happen rather than a change in what is happening.

For these reasons anthropologists would expect that future developments on these platforms would also include an increasing accommodation to, and affinity with, local cultural genres. As noted in the discussion of work and commerce in Chapter 5, financial matters are
seen as opposed to intimate and personal life in Europe, but as an expression of intimacy in China. As a result Amazon represents a further de-socialising of commerce as compared to offline shopping – we have even less connection with real people in making transactions. However Taobao, the Chinese shopping equivalent, represents a re-socialising of economic life as a place where people make personal connections. McDonald notes that in his rural Chinese town, at least, using social media for commercial purposes is viewed as an integral part of family life; it is a moral activity in and of itself. While in the North Atlantic regions it is mainly companies such as Facebook that further commerce, in our Chilean field site an increasing amount of commerce is conducted through individuals on Facebook. They create groups such as ‘Buy and Sell Everything’, which work as an online forum both for posting items for sale and for requesting those desired. It would be misleading just to regard this as a form of commerce, however. In such groups, as in our Italian site, commerce is used to expand a window onto public life as much as to earn money.

The study of technical affordances has perhaps greater potential to assist prediction when seen as potential alignments with cultural preferences. Brazil was dominated by Orkut, for example, which connected individuals not only to everyone they already knew, but also to those with whom they already had much in common, but who were not previously part of their social networks. This aligned with a Brazilian sensibility that social media should be a place where ‘everyone is’. While similar to Facebook in many ways, Orkut was separated from any messenger service. Given this expansion to include new friends who had been strangers, however, people wanted to have the security of private conversation. This led first to a shift to Facebook and then in turn to WhatsApp, which seemed more Brazilian, because they incorporate such features. In a way, therefore, social media helps Brazilians to become even more Brazilian than they were able to be in the past. As in our theory of attainment, a study of prior social life would reveal a latent desire to be connected to others in this complex manner which includes both a private and public dimension. Such a desire is attained more fully thanks to social media. Similarly social media allows these Brazilians to feel more modern, repudiating their sense that they were merely backward and rural, but achieving this without having to break their contacts with their families and places of origin. We are thus not arguing here for some general movements towards more effective functionality, but rather an exploitation of those potentials in social media which fit a local, culturally attuned pattern of socialising.
These predictions also explain why a common answer to many of the questions tackled by this volume is ‘neither “X” nor “Y” but both simultaneously’. Theories of culture, as opposed to popular discussion, tend not to emphasise trends in any one direction, but rather to acknowledge contradictions.17 We have shown that social media makes the world both more globally homogeneous and more locally heterogeneous, more individual and more social, more equal and more unequal, more liberal and more conservative, increasing both commodification and decommodification. The future is usually more of both. For example, in Trinidad the rise of individual mobile phones may well have facilitated secret sexual relationships, since direct contact was much easier than previously – but being tagged on Facebook photographs with the wrong partner made hiding an affair much more difficult. WhatsApp provides more scope for privacy, but most people would be shocked to see their daily wanderings faithfully recorded on Google locational history. We see more threats to privacy, as highlighted by Edward Snowden and WikiLeaks, but also more capacity for privacy and anonymity – as in Costa’s account of intimate relations in Mardin and some people’s first experiences of personal privacy in China. So the best response to most questions about the future impact of social media on social behaviour is ‘both simultaneously’, where this corresponds to the expansion of contradictory trends18.

Imagining the future

One of the things that may have changed during the course of our field work between 2013 and 2014 is the relationship between social media and the conceptualisation of the future. New technology does not just change the manner in which people go about their everyday lives: it also facilitates our imagination of the future. There is often an implicit connection between discourses of the future and notions of technology, so that if we see a television programme with a title such as Tomorrow’s World we expect that the topic will be technology.

While not part of our study, we recognise that the development of social media as new technology is dependent upon people who spend a great deal of time thinking and wondering about the future, and how they can devise technology to help bring it about. Malaby has surveyed the various forms of often utopian techno-liberationist ideals19 important in the development of some digital platforms such as Second Life. These include the more anarchistic ideals found by
Coleman in her study of hacker communities, or the study by Kelty of idealists who take as their model for the future public domain the development of Open Source coding. While these groups are relatively small and specific, larger populations also take part indirectly through activities such as Crowdsourcing and Kickstarter campaigns or the spread of Open Access publishing. These all speak to a new, imagined future that strives towards idealism. While none of these impinged upon our study, this book has many examples of how social media has stood as a sign of aspiration and modernity, explaining the shift from QQ to WeChat in China or the decline in the status of Facebook for young people.

For populations in the West over many years an apparently authentic vision of an ever-extending future was manifested by the incremental development of hardware such as the PC and software such as Windows Office. For more than a decade, every year seemed to bring new models and improvements. Yet it turned out that this was not an infinite process; once a certain level was achieved, having a still better PC or version of Office shifted from something of intense excitement to a subject creating almost no interest at all. Windows has just announced that its operating system is not going to advance beyond the number ten. Instead attention shifts to something else, such as the latest tablet. For people in lower income countries the equivalent to this has been the annual release of new smartphones, as well as their anticipation of, and encounter with, social media itself. It may have briefly seemed as if social media had completed its evolution with the ubiquity of Facebook and QQ. However, the last two years have shown a new movement towards polymedia and platforms such as Tinder or Snapchat or WeChat have grown in popularity, all of which helps us to retain this link between new social media and the anticipation of future developments.

Yet just as the idea that the latest computer expressed the future has now diminished, it is likely that the role of social media as symbolic of the future may already be in decline. Instead, as with all new digital technologies and as argued by Miller and Horst, the single most astonishing point about these technologies is that they can move from being emblematic of an almost unreachable future to becoming so taken for granted that it feels like a personal slight when they do not work. This process can take only a matter of months or even weeks. Perhaps the primary examples of this during the period of field work were WhatsApp and WeChat. One of our very first blogposts for this project was a note that in Trinidad people were taking up WhatsApp at a time when it was barely known in England. Fifteen months later, when our fieldwork
had ended, WhatsApp had clearly become established as another of those globally ubiquitous platforms; now entirely taken for granted, we can hardly imagine they did not previously exist.

The way technology in and of itself becomes a symbol of being modern is one of the reasons it becomes expressive of, rather than distinct from, cultural values. However, this too depends on the specific sense of becoming modern pertinent to each of our sites. As argued in the volume on industrial China, a ‘humiliating’ history – representing a comparative lack of technological development in modern China during much of the twentieth century – is what led the entire country, from elites to rural peasants, coming to view new technology as a symbol of national revival. This led to considerable government investment, and actually much of the population shares the government’s focus upon this endeavour. As a result one is less likely to find in China the kind of digital resistance noted by Sinanan for her site in Trinidad, where refusal to take up new media technology can be a kind of affectation, though there are some equivalents in the rural China site. This also led to a leapfrog effect. In China, for example, people were already storing all their digital content online before the development of cloud computing in the West; they had not been part of the previous stage of development and so had none of the conservatism that comes from previous attachments.

**Conclusion**

It is obviously going to be hard to predict the future for something as dynamic as social media. The only confident prediction is that much of our future forecasting will turn out to be wrong. More important to this volume, however, is the recognition that in some ways just as difficult as forecasting the future is knowing the present. The purpose of this study has been, above all, an argument about how many of our assumptions about what we think we already know are in fact suspect. Once we appreciate that knowing social media is not an exercise in delineating the properties of a set of platforms, but rather of acknowledging what the world has already turned these into, by way of content, the immensity of the problem is revealed. How can we know what social media has already become for oil workers in Alaska, tribal people in Amazonia and the *nouveau riche* of Moscow?

Of course we cannot know what social media actually is, set against this ideal of comprehensive knowledge, but we can at least face up to our
ignorance. By giving equal weight to nine sites around the world, we hope that in this volume we have also helped to clarify what forms of understanding are still possible. We can give a sense of the creativity of wider populations as well as of geeks in producing the social media we actually use. We can show how the task of understanding social media has in turn gifted us intimate portraits of our contemporaries' lives. We have shown how anthropology complements the many other disciplines that study social media, each of which adds its own perspective. Finally we have tried to show how comparative anthropology creates particular varieties of knowledge of both breadth and depth. What makes these essential within the context of our complex modern world, however, is that these are forms of understanding based on empathy.