



HOW THE

WORLD

CHANGED



SOCIAL
MEDIA

MILLER, COSTA, HAYNES, MCDONALD, NICOLESCU,
SINANAN, SPYER, VENKATRAMAN, WANG



UCLPRESS

How the World Changed Social Media

Daniel Miller

Elisabetta Costa

Nell Haynes

Tom McDonald

Razvan Nicolescu

Jolynna Sinanan

Juliano Spyer

Shriram Venkatraman

Xinyuan Wang

 **UCLPRESS**

First published in 2016 by
UCL Press
University College London
Gower Street
London WC1E 6BT

Available to download free: www.ucl.ac.uk/ucl-press

Text © Daniel Miller, Elisabetta Costa, Nell Haynes, Tom McDonald, Razvan Nicolescu, Jolynna Sinanan, Juliano Spyer and Shriram Venkatraman 2016
Images © Daniel Miller, Elisabetta Costa, Nell Haynes, Tom McDonald, Razvan Nicolescu, Jolynna Sinanan, Juliano Spyer and Shriram Venkatraman 2016

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from The British Library.

This book is published under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial Non-derivative 4.0 International license (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the work for personal and non-commercial use providing author and publisher attribution is clearly stated. Further details about CC BY licenses are available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

ISBN: 978-1-910634-47-9 (Hbk.)
ISBN: 978-1-910634-48-6 (Pbk.)
ISBN: 978-1-910634-49-3 (PDF)
ISBN: 978-1-910634-51-6 (epub)
ISBN: 978-1-910634-52-3 (mobi)
DOI: 10.14324/111.9781910634493

Contents

<i>Summary of contents</i>	x
<i>List of figures</i>	xix
<i>List of tables</i>	xxii
<i>List of contributors</i>	xxiii
Introductory chapters	
1. What is social media?	1
2. Academic studies of social media	9
3. Our method and approach	25
4. Our survey results	42
The ten key topics	
5. Education and young people	70
6. Work and commerce	85
7. Online and offline relationships	100
8. Gender	114
9. Inequality	128
10. Politics	142
11. Visual images	155
12. Individualism	181
13. Does social media make people happier?	193
14. The future	205
<i>Appendix – The nine ethnographies</i>	217
<i>Notes</i>	222
<i>References</i>	242
<i>Index</i>	253

What is social media?¹

Many previous studies of social media emphasise specific platforms, including books and papers devoted to just one particular platform such as Facebook or Twitter.² It is clearly important to understand Twitter, for example, as a platform: the company that owns it, the way it works and the very idea of social media based on messages that must remain below 140 characters. From an anthropological perspective, however, if we ask what Twitter actually *is* it makes more sense to think of the millions of tweets, the core genres, the regional differences and its social and emotional consequences for users. It is the *content* rather than the platform that is most significant when it comes to why social media matters.

As will be described in our individual ethnographies of social media around the world, genres of content happily migrate between quite different platforms, being seen one year on Orkut and the next on Facebook, one year on BBM and the next on Twitter. Platforms such as Facebook have themselves often changed functionality, developing and introducing new features. This research project is not therefore a study of platforms: it is a study of what people post and communicate through platforms, of why we post and the consequences of those postings. We have found this content to be very different across the nine field sites in which we worked. Content manifests and transforms local relationships and issues. Our study has thus turned out to be as much about how the world changed social media as about how social media changed the world.

Clearly this is not entirely a one-way process. These technologies have changed us. They have given us potential for communication and interaction that we did not previously possess. We need first clearly to establish what those potentials are and then to examine what the world subsequently did with those possibilities. It is easier to understand what social media is if we go back to a time before it existed. So wind back

though Snapchat and Tinder, past Facebook and QQ, through MySpace and Friendster to life before all that.

Prior to all these technologies, there were two main ways in which people communicated using media. The first was public broadcast media such as television, radio and newspapers. With such media anyone at all, providing that they can gain access to it, can be the audience. The broadcaster has no direct control over who makes up their audiences, though they may try and persuade people to join them. Also available for quite some time were media that facilitated private communication between two people as one-to-one conversations, for example a telephone conversation. This is also called 'dyadic' communication. People could meet in groups face to face, but it was uncommon to create group-based interactions within media such as the telephone.

With the development of the internet, this polarisation between public and private media started to change. An email could be sent to a group. There were bulletin boards, specialised forums, chat rooms and blogging, which appealed to wider audiences, as well as other group media such as CB radio. Nevertheless most everyday communication through media remained dominated by the two prior forms, public broadcasting and the private dyadic. The initial development of social networking sites was, in effect, a scaling-down of public broadcasting to become individuals posting to groups. Usually these groups included not more than a few hundred people. In addition the people who formed those groups would interact among themselves, for example commenting upon the comments of others.

At the same time the development of text messaging and internet services such as MSM and AOL took place. These developed further with the rise of the smartphone, in particular BlackBerry Messenger (BBM), the proprietary messaging platform for Blackberry phones; its global impact has generally been considerably underestimated and it was the precursor to WhatsApp. Such services took private messaging and moved it upwards in scale by including various group functions. This trend has been consolidated over the last three years with the remarkably rapid rise of platforms such as WhatsApp and WeChat. These tend to be used to form smaller, more private groups than QQ or Facebook, often around 20 people or less. They may not be centred upon any one individual. Generally all members can post equally; these are groups rather than the networks of any one person. They are particularly important since for young people such text-based communication has largely replaced voice-based use of the phone.³

Clearly to define what social media is based only on those that presently exist is limiting. For our definition and approach to be sustainable we also have to bear in mind the new social media platforms that are constantly being developed, and the likelihood that some will become very successful in the future. It helps that we are starting to see a pattern in the way new forms of social media emerge. Some of these platforms have scaled down from public broadcasting, while others have scaled up from private communication. With the addition of new platforms in the future, we are likely to end up with a result that in effect creates some scales between the private and the public, along which we can locate these platforms.

We can envisage two key scales. The first is the scale from the most private to the most public. The second is the scale from the smallest group to the largest groups. At one end of both of these scales we still see private dyadic conversation and at the other end we still see fully public broadcasting. What is it that is being scaled? The core to the study of social science is the way in which people associate with each other to form social relations and societies. This is called sociality. The best way to define what is popularly called social media but also includes prior media is thus to describe the new situation as increasingly ‘scalable sociality’.⁴

One of the clearest examples of how social media has created online scalable sociality emerged from the research on schoolchildren in the English village field site. Based on a survey of 2496 students, Miller

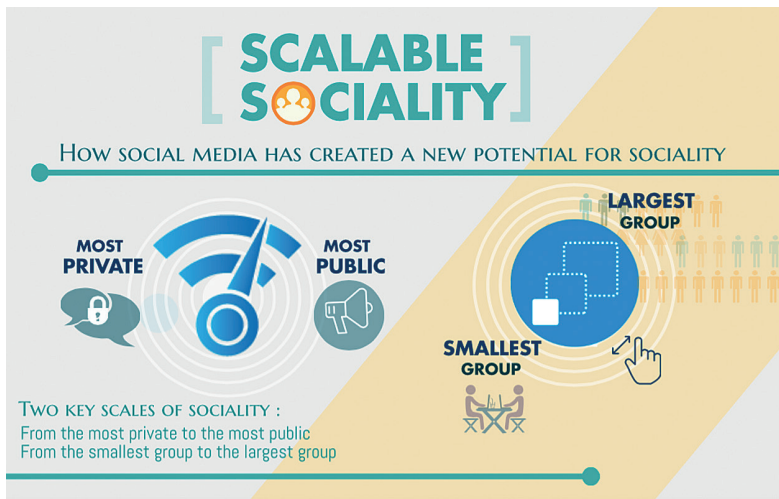


Fig. 1.1 Scalable sociality

found that most of them were using five or six different social media from a young age (Fig. 1.2).

In an earlier work, along with Madianou, Miller had developed an approach called ‘polymedia’,⁵ which recognises that none of these platforms can be properly understood if considered in isolation because the meaning and use of each one is relative to the others. Previously people might have assumed that cost or access explained why users chose one media or platform rather than another. Today, however, people seem increasingly free to choose between these platforms, and so may be judged on their choices. For example, children living abroad who want to tell their parents gently about something that will not please them, such as a new tattoo or a need for more money, might for that reason avoid a medium that includes a visual element or one that allows a person to respond immediately – perhaps, in such a case, in anger.

With polymedia people can also map different kinds of sociality onto the diversity of their social media platforms. In the case of these

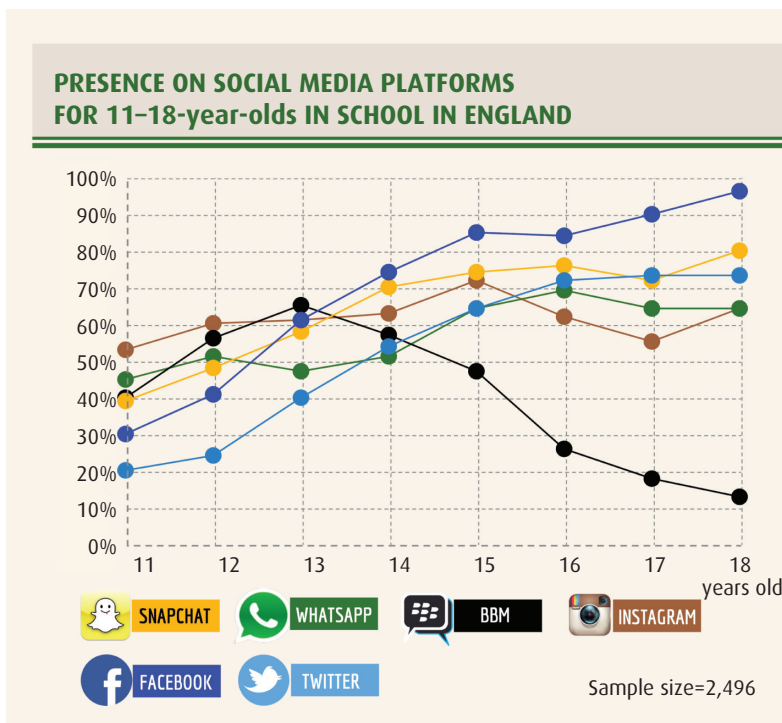


Fig. 1.2 Presence on social media platforms for 11–18-year-olds in schools in England

school pupils we can start with the continuity of dyadic communication, as they message or phone to chat in private to someone like their *Bestie* or *BFF* (Best Friend Forever). Next comes Snapchat which, because it often includes items such as a particularly ugly photograph of one's own face, relies on trust. Indeed it may be used to establish and maintain trust within a small group. The next size up consists of groups created in WhatsApp. Typically in a school class there will be one WhatsApp group that includes all the boys where they could talk about girls (or vice versa). There may be another that includes all the class. Reaching a still larger group are Tweets that reach all those who follow an individual on Twitter. This is the main site for school banter, and may include pupils from other classes in the year. Beyond the class is Facebook, mainly used by these school pupils as their link to family, neighbours and others beyond the school. Finally we have Instagram, where each pupil's social circle is often comprised of the same school pupils. However, it is also the only site where they actually welcome strangers – because the contact shows that someone who the children do not know has appreciated the aesthetic qualities of the image they have posted on Instagram (Fig. 1.3).

The use of social media by English schoolchildren demonstrates scalable sociality in that each of these platforms corresponds to a position of greater or lesser privacy and smaller or larger groups. There are no rules behind this. Groups and platforms may overlap, but mostly we find platforms become associated with specific genres of communication

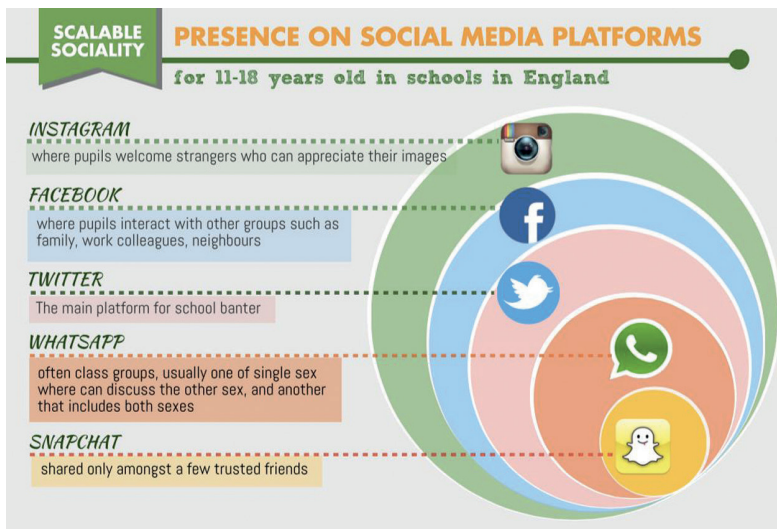


Fig. 1.3 The scales of social media use by English school pupils

which people see as appropriate for the group engaged with that particular platform.

In the schoolchildren's case the differences between platforms were used to illustrate this principle. However, scalable sociality can exist just as well within a single platform. A person may post a comment or image on their social media which will make sense only to the people to whom they are close, who understand what it refers to. Other people may be on the same site, but they will not get the significance – and are thereby excluded despite being present on this same platform.⁶

We have started with this example of scalable sociality in order to address the question of defining social media. While definitions may be useful, however, they are not the primary aim of this project. Through our ten key questions, each of which forms a chapter of this book, we investigate the very wide range of contexts within which social media now plays an important role: from the increasing importance of visual communication as opposed to textual communication to the impact of social media on education and whether equality online impacts upon inequality offline.

Platforms remain central to our analysis since these are the primary units through which we think about and use social media. Yet we should be careful in presuming that there are properties of the platforms that are responsible for, or in some sense cause, the associations that we observe with platforms. These same schoolchildren provide evidence for why we should not infer cause simply from association. Firstly the way they use Twitter, primarily for banter between themselves, contrasts sharply with the adult use of Twitter as mainly a source of information. Is the 'true' Twitter the one used for information or the one used for banter? Furthermore this school banter used to be on BBM; it then migrated to Facebook and is now almost entirely on Twitter. This suggests that a genre of interaction may remain quite stable despite migrating between supposedly very different platforms. Such an example, if sustained by others in our studies, would suggest that the platform is surprisingly irrelevant to finding explanations for why and how people use social media. It provides the place, but not the cause nor the explanation.

When all nine field sites are considered, it becomes apparent that in each region every new social media platform quickly becomes standardised around quite specific groups of users and implicitly understood appropriate and inappropriate usage, though these will continue to change. Again differentiation of groups may occur within the same platform or by exploiting a contrast between platforms. For example in

2014–15 there was a trend in several of our field sites to differentiate the more public-facing platforms such as Facebook or QQ from the more private-facing platforms such as WhatsApp/WeChat.

How new forms of social media map onto prior social groups, or indeed create new groups, varies considerably from one field site to another. In our south Indian field site, for example, the groups that associated around social media are mainly traditional social units such as the family or the caste. By contrast in our industrial Chinese site the floating population of migrant workers have largely lost their traditional forms of sociality, and in effect create social groups adapted to a new life spent mainly moving from city to city. Their more constant social life is actually on social media rather than offline. In some cases the more private platforms have radically changed people's lives, as in our site in southeast Turkey on which young women and men can more easily chat with each other. Meanwhile in our Chilean field site most people use public posting to patrol their own local community, whose values they regard as contrasting with the more metropolitan values of the capital city. More details for of all these claims will be found within this book.

Two other points should be already clear. When the study of the internet began people commonly talked about two worlds: the virtual and the real. By now it is very evident that there is no such distinction – the online is just as real as the offline. Social media has already become such an integral part of everyday life that it makes no sense to see it as separate. In the same way no one today would regard a telephone conversation as taking place in a separate world from 'real life'. It has also become apparent that research on social media is no longer the particular purview of either media or of communication. Our research provides considerable evidence that social media should be regarded rather as a place where many of us spend part of our lives. As a result the study of social media is as much one of sociality as of communication. Much of this book is not about media, nor about scalable sociality. It is about social media as another place in which people live, alongside their office life, home life and community life.

If we have defined here the term social media, what about 'the world'? Clearly we cannot study the world or the 'global' as a whole. But we can hope to study sufficient numbers of locations to be able to make statements about diversity and generality around the world. The contents of this book are based on the research of nine anthropologists, each of whom spent 15 months looking at the use and consequence of social media in one particular location. The unique character of this

book is that it is almost entirely comparative. A brief account of the nine field sites may be found in an appendix.⁷

Finally we would couch these questions in terms of an approach developed by Miller and Sinanan called a ‘theory of attainment’⁸. As we shall see in respect to the ten popular questions/topics considered in this volume, new technologies are often accompanied by a kind of moral panic, frequently fostered by journalism. These suggest that as a result of this new technology we have lost some essential element of our authentic humanity. For example, such panics incorporate the idea that face to face communication is richer or less mediated than communication employing digital technology, or that we are losing cognitive abilities such as long-term attention spans. These responses to technology have been common ever since Plato argued that the invention of writing would damage our capacity for memory. At the same time others have a utopian view that new technologies make us in some manner post-human.

Our theory of attainment argues that these technologies make no difference whatsoever to our essential humanity. The sociologist Goffman⁹ showed convincingly how all communication and sociality takes place within cultural genres, including face to face. There is no such thing as unmediated, pre- or non-cultural sociality or communication. Instead we should recognise that whatever we do with new technologies must be latent in our humanity, i.e. something that as human beings we have always had the potential to do and to be. Such a capacity is now attained as a result of the new technology. This theory does not claim to adjudicate on whether any new capacity to send memes or selfies through social media, for example, is either good or bad. It just acknowledges that this has now become simply part of what human beings can do, as has driving a car.

10

Politics

In academic discussion there is an entirely reasonable concern with the degree to which social media is transforming politics – understood as institutions of governance and debates and conflicts over those institutions. In an ethnographic study, however, we do not privilege this as a focus of research. Instead we try and demote politics merely to that which actually emerges from observations of the social media used by our informants. If you look for political debate you will find it, but that does not allow you to assess it fairly as an element of ordinary people's lives in particular locations. Indeed our opening case study reveals that in the field site most dominated by political conflict politics may, for that very reason, not dominate social media.

Mardin, in southeast Turkey, has had a long history of political conflict and violence. Close to the Syrian border, the various ethnic, linguistic and religious groups who live in the town have clashed on many occasions. For Costa, who had a particular interest in political engagement in the region, Mardin was an obvious choice of field site. However, she found that the people of Mardin refrained from discussing politics and other sensitive topics openly or in public spaces. They mainly spoke about politics in their private homes, with family and close friends who shared their opinions and values. On social media, and Facebook in particular, there were few references to politics, especially local politics. During the heated campaigns leading up to local elections in March 2014 some supporters did break their silence and joined public gatherings in solidarity with their political party. But even then on Facebook very few people shared posts on their own timelines. At the most a few followed the pages of local politicians and 'liked' some of their posts.

Facebook is primarily used for maintaining good relationships with friends and relatives, so public silence on local political issues is important for peaceful coexistence both online and offline. Such political

activity as there is on social media is usually at a national level and is conducted mainly by supporters of the current government, since people are aware of state surveillance online. These government supporters may express solidarity towards the ruling AKP and the prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. During the Gezi Park protests in the spring and summer of 2013 AKP supporters shared memes, videos and news that reproduced state propaganda and discredited activists, facilitated by the government's active engagement with social media. In September 2013 the AKP was allegedly able to recruit over 6000 social media users to influence public opinion.¹

Outside of local politics, the Kurdish population of Mardin do use Facebook to express solidarity towards Kurds in Syria and Iraq, especially in their struggles against the so-called Islamic State (IS). As long as the political issue was outside of Turkey they felt free to be extremely active on social media in support of Kurdish people living in these neighbouring countries. Many changed their profile image to the word *Rojava* ('West'), referring to the free Kurdish region in north Syria. When Islamic State (IS) occupied Sinjar in Kurdish Iraq, the Kurdish population in Mardin used Facebook to show support and organise a collection of funds, clothes and goods to distribute to the Yezidi refugees who had arrived in the town. Similarly when IS occupied Kobane in Rojava many Kurds in Mardin posted memes, images and news stories in solidarity with the population under siege. Although they found the Turkish state complicit in these advances, they again refrained from posting material directly condemning the state's role. In general, therefore, social media reinforces the prior conditions of politics in the town, including the absence of debate over local politics and the suppression of opposition views, but facilitates the expression of Kurdish solidarity with Kurds in other countries.

The immense literature available on the internet and politics, and more specifically on politics and social media, has changed over time. It began with a focus upon the role of the internet in new social movements in the 1990s,² and was followed by the problem of digital divides and e-governance,³ the role of Web 2.0 platforms and user-generated content.⁴ Most recent studies have considered the consequences of the affordances of WiFi and mobile media such as smartphones, particularly regarding their role in organising collective political activity.⁵ Chadwick and Howard present an excellent volume on the critical debates about the relationship between the internet, state politics and citizenship, while Postill concisely summarises key research in digital politics and the ways in which ethnographic inquiry contributes to understanding

the ecologies of protest movements.⁶ In the early 2000s there was a distinct sense of optimism around e-governance and e-government, and the potential they offered for bridging the digital divide.⁷ The internet and social networking sites were seen to be transforming ‘the public sphere’, a concept associated with social theorist Jurgen Habermas.⁸ More recently attention has been turned to the role of social media in organising political action, particularly in the various regional experiences of the Arab Spring.⁹ This was in a sense the turning point in such studies, prompted by Morozov’s work on the use of digital technologies for political repression during these events. Since then there has been a growing body of research critical of assumptions that the main role of digital technologies is to increase meaningful democratic participation.¹⁰ However, there is also considerable interest in the use of new media as the basis for alternative forms of collective action, for example research by the anthropologist Coleman on Anonymous and other online political activists.¹¹

As an anthropological study this chapter views politics as that which is regarded as ‘political’ by our informants across the nine sites, rather than applying any given definition in relation to the democratic process, civil society or governance.¹² The same would be true of political participation. Most researchers with an interest in politics are drawn to situations seen to be significant in political terms or with a high degree of political activity, especially that which may have resulted from the use of social media.¹³ By contrast, with the exception of Costa’s selection of Mardin, all of our field sites were chosen precisely because they were ‘ordinary’. As a result we could judge the degree of actual political activity outside of the bias created by the selection of sites for the express purpose of political study.

Our main finding has been the wide diversity in the way the various meanings of ‘politics’ are interwoven with social media across the nine sites, though in general our research shows social media as having less of an impact than would be inferred from the prior literature.¹⁴ However, we would argue that this is a highly significant finding, since it is just as important to ascertain the degree to which social media is involved in politics for ordinary people in more typical circumstances as it is to study the role of social media in more politically charged moments and places.

As we have noted in places such as Mardin, social media generally reflects the strategies of political debate and silence that were developed in the offline world. Commonly we worked in sites where most people’s engagement with politics is limited and often indirect. There are a

variety of reasons why offline political debate may not be reproduced online. These include feelings of indifference, disillusionment or apathy, or not wanting to be seen by others as ‘being political’. In addition people in our south Italian field site mainly expressed disenchantment towards the corruption of national politicians. In the English field site they mainly engaged with politics as a source of humour, while in the Trinidadian field site people were attracted to political issues mainly when they involved spectacle and scandal.

Notwithstanding this diversity in how people engage with politics over social media, our research did lead to a generalised conclusion that seems to apply across all of our nine sites. Political participation over social media in small, medium-sized and semi-urban towns is hugely influenced by social relations in these relatively small places. Informants were concerned with maintaining or strengthening relations with their social media contacts, and did not want to risk damaging friendships or relationships with extended family or work colleagues. Even in countries such as Turkey and China, where the state more explicitly and more systematically controls social media uses, it is not only this control *per se* that mainly influences political expression. Rather it is the way in which the state’s power is manifested through social norms that govern the relationships between individuals.¹⁵ As such this chapter identifies three issues: how social relationships impose norms that play out over social media; how state surveillance and national politics permeate discussion and in different ways come to include the way people express themselves on social media; and how, as a consequence of these two forces, political participation generally takes different forms on social media.

The concern with social relations makes social media a conservative place

In common with the arguments made in the previous chapter with respect to gender, personal political views in public (or semi-public) spaces such as Facebook are expressed in a manner that protects people’s social relationships and their personal reputations. The exceptions would be small minorities who identify with being political activists, for example militant university students or members of local political parties, but these represent a small minority in our sites. Otherwise social media is largely used in an attempt to increase one’s social status or popularity, affiliate with groups who are viewed as prestigious or simply maintain good relations with others. The same observation

could be made about offline daily interactions, as people tend to be wary of discussing politics with those who have radically different points of view, and of challenging those in their social circles with different political positions. Noelle-Neumann coined the term the 'spiral of silence' to describe this phenomenon, and people's fear that politics might lead to them becoming isolated or ostracised.¹⁶ This is especially clear on social media because of its enhanced visibility. Instead social media becomes a space for expressing shared ideas and values.

For example, in our field site in south Italy, although it is common to be friends with politicians from different political groups, individuals are extremely cautious about engaging with politics on such a visible space as Facebook. It would be highly unusual to 'like', comment on or share any political post regarding a local politician. It is the local politicians themselves who readily share any kind of positive publicity in the local media and construct long status updates to describe any achievements in the local council. Instead of engaging with these, other people use social media to direct criticism towards public figures that represent 'Europe', the 'state' and the 'region', or to refer to general issues upon which everybody they know agrees, such as unemployment, government inefficiency and corruption.

The situation is similar in the south Indian field site. Social media users rarely post serious content relating to local politics which would be viewed by their peers, and might in fact provoke a negative reaction from these same local politicians. Instead criticism about the state of local politics and governance takes place within private conversations. The only people who are politically active on social media are those who work for local political parties; their posts are clearly intended to gain support through highlighting some positive event or action. Such posts attract 'likes' and comments only from close friends and other party workers. Most of these activists belong to a lower socio-economic class or live in rural areas, and their posts would rarely be seen by the new middle and upper-middle classes in urban areas. Otherwise there was very little engagement with local politics on Facebook. Posts around politics at the national or state level, which were seen as expressing a more general political opinion, were more common.

In both the south Indian and the Brazilian field sites there is a genuine fear of direct negative consequences for oneself and one's family should members of rival parties feel antagonised. Along with this exists a commensurate concern to maintain good relationships with local political leaders and parties. Another factor might be situations where relatives were working for different politicians and parties, making

people concerned that posting about local political issues might have repercussions for those relatives. In August 2014, during the Brazilian electoral campaigns, publicity vehicles travelled through several villages, airing slogans and jingles of each politician over loudspeakers. Groups of people reacted to their presence with brief conversation, but there was no online political commentary other than to express support for or criticism of parties at the state or national level.

In rural China this trend takes a different form. The acceptable topic of politics is corruption, also the most pressing issue for residents in the area. Rather than expressing their opinions openly online, however, those affected attempt to remedy their own situations by discreetly approaching individuals who they believe may have more power and influence. If this avenue is unsuccessful, people might consider petitioning at a higher level, but they almost never air their grievances or express their frustrations on social media platforms. When the issue of corruption does appear online, it is about corruption in other towns or in other parts of the country.

All of this means that public-facing social media has generally become a highly conservative place, reflecting prevailing values and social norms that rule relations between people at the local level. If anything, politics online is exploited as a source of comedy for increasing popularity among friends or to create new, useful social connections. This is particularly evident in the English field site, where political discussion on social media largely takes the form of online banter between friends. Serious memes and comments are mainly found either among the highest income groups who favour green issues or among the lowest income groups who live in social housing and promote nationalist causes such as supporting the army or banning immigrants. Apart from these the predominant mode is humour at the expense of politicians. Politics on social media is mainly useful for the purposes of entertainment and bonding with friends.

Finally the field site in industrial China provides a variation on this theme of personal relationships. There are examples here of social media being used with the intention of strategically strengthening '*guanxi*' ('instrumental relationships'). Factory owners' WeChat profiles show that people choose not to post anything about politics to avoid placing themselves in potentially difficult situations. Instead they sometimes use social media to cultivate relationships with local government officials, in the hope that these friendships will help them to maintain good connections with the government for the potential benefit of their businesses.

State surveillance and national politics

Concern for social relations has prevented those living in most of our field sites from disagreeing over, discussing or expressing political opinions, especially with regard to local politics. This section considers another force that shapes political participation on social media, making these online spaces radically different from the Habermasian model of the 'public sphere' – a place where people can freely discuss common matters and interests with the aim of reaching common agreement.¹⁷ In China and Turkey the state exercises control over the uses of social media and the content that can be accessed over the internet. State surveillance is a powerful force that has influenced how the semi-public spaces of social media are used.

In the two Chinese field sites there was no evidence of an overall concern with state censorship of social media. The central government's control over the internet has been not only far-reaching but also remarkably precise and subtle, compared to the direct coercion of, and constraints placed upon, citizens. As a result of the history of local media and its position in respect to other parts of life, residents in the sites simply do not conceive of social media as an appropriate or potential place for discussing politics and criticising the central government. Instead they view social media platforms such as QQ and WeChat as places of entertainment for having fun, creating new relationships and strengthening old ones. These perceptions are common to both our industrial and rural Chinese sites.

This lack of critique towards the government or any other kind of political engagement online appears more significant when compared with people's strong interest in discussing political issues offline: intense debate often takes place over dinner or tea. The power of the Chinese state is also expressed in the usage of social media for propaganda purposes, through the delivery of news stories that often follow or reproduce the official party line on different issues. Both QQ and WeChat deliver three news reports a day, produced by the social media companies themselves. There is a general perception that this news is useful, although there is also a critical awareness of the news stories' bias towards the state. State propaganda also becomes embodied and reproduced by social media users, as seen in the abundance of nationalist postings such as those displaying anti-Japanese sentiment or admiration towards central party leaders.

As a result there is no need for specific acts of coercion. The researchers in China did not come across any instances of repression

or constraint in the uses of social media in their respective sites. There were a few cases of individual criticism towards the central government in the industrial China field site, but these did not result in any repercussions such as a direct ban on the account or other punitive measures. These examples thus support the findings of previous studies, which argue that censorship in China is mainly directed at preventing any collective action rather than suppressing individual criticism.¹⁸

Outside the more overtly political sphere, McDonald observed other cases of everyday resistance through the circumvention of government-imposed restrictions. For example, throughout China, a ban prohibits youth under the age of 18 from using internet cafés, with users required to show a national ID card before logging on. However, at the only internet café in the field site the manager kept a supply of spare ID cards (borrowed from friends and extended family) for underage users to borrow in order to log on. These underage users were typically accommodated in two 'secret' rooms in the back of the café, away from the street and as such out of view of other townsfolk and inspectors. Despite only two per cent of middle school children surveyed identifying the internet café as their main place of internet use, these schoolchildren still seemed to be the most common type of customer in the café.

In southeast Turkey Kurds and left-leaning dissidents have suffered the consequences of state-sanctioned violence on several recent occasions. During the 1980s and 1990s imprisonment and torture, disappearance and murders were experienced by political activists, and other forms of suppression, for example the prohibition of speaking in Kurdish, were part of daily life. Today sympathisers with the Kurdish movement¹⁹ are reluctant openly and publically to criticise a state that is clearly willing to use violence against them. In this context internet censorship is another expression of the state's power and violence, and so shapes the uses of social media.

Unlike the Chinese examples the inhabitants of Mardin have also often been the direct target of bans and blocks: pages on Facebook supporting what at that time was the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) have in some cases been closed; in addition some people have been charged with defamation for their criticism of powerful figures. Government opponents generally feel the pressure of being watched and being under surveillance. As we have seen this has led to a suppression of open political discussion online, even as it has previously been repressed offline. Social media leads to an interweaving of the social and political fabric, to the extent that state surveillance overlaps

with – and is reinforced by – the social surveillance of friends, acquaintances or family members.

Local issues in political participation

This chapter began with the discussion of Mardin. There we saw that in places that have the most political tensions, actual posting on social media is highly constrained and careful. This section describes other forms of political engagement over social media. As with so much of this study, we will see how it is local factors that are paramount. Yet these examples also conform to our broader generalisation that the use of social media is carefully controlled, so as not to damage individual social relations and personal reputations.

We have seen how in the English field site humour about politics is really mostly designed to entertain friends and show how clever or funny the individual is. Similarly in the south Indian field site the most popular way to engage with politics over social media is through humour and sarcasm. As noted at the start of this chapter, direct political comment is rare. However, trolling (derogatory or insulting postings aimed at an individual) Tamil political personalities is common from those between the ages of 20 and 45, appearing on Facebook timelines and WhatsApp conversations. Such posts are directed with care, mostly at Tamil politicians who are not too powerful, and most onlookers would find these trolls funny because of their sarcastic tone. Yet the same people who might circulate these types of posts also distance themselves from trolls that are especially hurtful or use foul language to make a point – such users are perceived as taking the joke too far.

Only anonymity allows people to express themselves more directly on particularly sensitive issues. Several anonymous trolls on You Tube use offensive language and show little respect towards politicians. Some IT workers from the Indian field site comment on very sensitive issues, for instance Christian conversion of Hindus, Islamic terrorism or criticism of Pakistan, but mostly under fake user names to avoid being identified by other people. For example Sandeep, a 24-year-old employee of a small IT app development company, does not miss a chance to leave a sarcastic comment about Pakistan and its link with Islamic terrorism using one of his six fake accounts. However, he is very serious about taking care not to disclose his real identity.

The Trinidadian field site provides another example of how a political event played out online. Sinanan describes a hunger strike by the

activist Dr Wayne Kublalsingh, a lecturer at the University of the West Indies, St Augustine, Trinidad. Kublalsingh was the leader of an activist group, the Highway Re-route Movement (HRM), protesting about the construction of a section of a highway in the south of the country. Beginning in 2006, a group of residents in the area had tried and failed in requesting information and consultation from the state government over what they perceived to be their unfair relocation. When construction commenced in the disputed area, Kublalsingh embarked on a hunger strike in front of the prime minister's office. It lasted for 21 days. His aim was to force the government to reconsider its decision to build this section of the highway. Although construction has continued, Kublalsingh's actions were successful to the degree that an independent inquiry was conducted and subsequently published.

The HRM, the activist group behind Kublalsingh, had an active Facebook page that received hundreds of comments during the hunger strike. Some were funny and others contained serious discussion, but most were by people who did not otherwise identify themselves as being 'activists'. Kublalsingh's own strategy was to draw attention to the issue through the spectacular act of the hunger strike. His concern was to promote public discussion, regardless of whether people agreed with him or not. The hunger strike was also a media event, where posts and photographs of Kublalsingh's deteriorating body were displayed on both social and mainstream media. People thereby became not only embroiled in the unfolding drama, but also more exposed to the issues of development and governance surrounding the implementation of the highway as a large-scale state project. After the prime minister agreed to reassess the decision to construct this section of the highway and Kublalsingh ended his hunger strike, these conversations largely died down among the general public – although activists circles continued to post updates on Facebook, blogs and independent online platforms.

If, however, we examine this event through the local lens of our Trinidadian field site, people barely engaged with the issue on social media other than through a few jokes and memes, even though they were happy to express their views in everyday conversations. This case illustrates two points about political participation and social media in Trinidad. Firstly, although conversations around the important issues of governance and development were raised, they were largely overshadowed by the spectacle of the hunger strike itself. It is characteristic of politics in Trinidad that what resonated with people was the display of the body following from Kublalsingh's decision to mount a hunger strike and the performance of people associated with this event, rather than

any engagement with the deeper issues being contested.²⁰ Secondly the case showed that for people in a small town activism and visible political participation is something with which most people would rather not associate themselves. Conversations and banter about politics are fine, but 'being political', as reflected in a serious comment on social media, is not. People from the town are concerned to avoid being considered a political activist, a role that they perceive as belonging to urban elites, university students or artistic circles. The point is similar to that made about humour in England. Issues of scandal, gossip or things that make for visible spectacles are enjoyed and resonate, so these are the aspects of the political event that actually find their way into local social media. The contrast is with domains such as morality and religion, where people do commonly share serious memes.

To understand the situation in our field site in Chile we need again to consider what we mean by politics. So far we have talked about whether people engage with or avoid issues of local politics or national politics, but in this instance the core political issue was the construction of something that could be regarded as the local, as distinct from the national. As previously noted, residents in the area feel that the region (which only became part of Chile in the nineteenth century) is exploited for its natural resources, which sustain the entire country's economy, and yet they are neglected by the government. Most people feel alienated from expressions of the nation as a political entity. Yet Haynes notes that these northerners are intensely proud of being 'culturally Chilean' when it comes to cheering for the national football team, preparing traditional Chilean food and drink, or even when discussing economic or social rivalries with neighbouring countries. Even the slang used online is uniquely Chilean, and hard to decipher by other Spanish speakers. Social media in particular becomes a place to claim Chileanness through cultural and linguistic references while simultaneously criticising the national government and asserting a regionalism founded in marginality, using funny memes. This field site represents our clearest instance of social media as an instrument for bringing together the inhabitants of a town that has struggled to achieve more visibility within the nation.

Another common trait of political participation on social media is what can be called 'passive participation', referring to the tendency to criticise things in a more resigned way. In industrial China local middle-class men, for example the owners of small shops, used social media to make fun of politics and to make innocent jokes about politicians, in an attempt to appear funny and smart in front of their peers. In a similar way to 'older' media, social media was mainly used by ordinary people

to 'watch' politics, even as spectators watch a football match, rather than to 'do' politics. As in the English and Trinidadian examples, the key to social media's relationship with politics is that it is seen as a source of entertainment. Politics, like sport, is something that provides a common spectacle that people can exploit where and when they choose.

The same principle can apply to serious as well as humorous usage. In south Italy social media became the place where people expressed frustration and anger about politics generally, issues upon which most people agree. It is not that Facebook is being used to protest or initiate change in the current situation, despite many sharing hard feelings about the state of contemporary politics. Instead people use social media to criticise a well-known issue that many feel they are unable to change. As with humour, therefore, being engaged with politics does not amount to 'doing' politics, but rather to *using* politics for local purposes as a source of common discourse and often to express frustrations ('*stogare*'). The advantage of politics is that, as with sport or celebrities, it offers a shared common culture.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to explore how and why social media may be engaged with politics in field sites chosen primarily for reasons that have nothing to do with politics. We hoped this would balance the majority of discussions on this subject based on research in places where politics was of particular significance. In general we have found that, if one turns to ordinary field sites, politics on social media has a much lower profile than we might otherwise have expected. In some cases this may be because it is suppressed, leading to a highly conservative representation of people's lives and opinions online. In other cases, however, it is because social media is more associated with entertainment and social bonding than with serious issues such as politics.

These observations can be summarised as three main findings which equate to the three sections of this chapter. Firstly personal relationships are the key influence that shapes online political engagement and action. People's primary concern is how their postings will impact upon their family and friendships. In several of our field sites people felt that expressing political views and opinions could result in antagonism or conflict; as a result politics remains invisible and discussion is reserved for private spaces among one's closest friends and family. It is only in places where people use fake and anonymised profiles that direct

political comment is common. We do, however, have many instances of indirect political comment, for instance in south India and China comments are on national rather than local issues.

Secondly social norms, media genres and boundaries of acceptability are also influential in determining whether individuals enter political discussion or not. For example, we found that in our Chinese sites direct repression of individual politics was absent and perhaps not even required. More important was the historical development of social media that meant these sites were seen as naturally places for entertainment and friendship; political engagement would seem inappropriate to such media.

In our third section the emphasis was more on local factors: the way in which politics tends to be seen within the context of spectacle in Trinidad or as a means for creating local identity in opposition to national politics in our Chilean site. In another instance, for example the English site, people simply feel it is more useful to employ politics as a source of humour than to become seriously involved. This brings us back to our initial and most general point, which is that social media is most often a mode of small-scale group interaction and sociality. For most people, therefore, it makes more sense to exploit politics to enhance social media rather than to use social media to 'do' politics.