# PUDDING – CAN ANTHROPOLOGY TEACH US HOW TO USE MEDIA?

**Daniel Miller, Elisabetta Costa, Laura Haapio-Kirk, Nell Haynes, Tom McDonald, Razvan Nicolescu, Jolynna Sinanan, Juliano Spyer, Shriram Venkatraman and Xinyuan Wang**

**"Why We Post" Team, University College London**

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## THE PROOF IS IN THE PUDDING

The English phrase the `proof is in the pudding' tells us that it's is one thing to make extravagant claims to understand something like cooking, it is quite another to demonstrate that you can make something people actually want to eat. We may reject the `proof' of the pudding represented by natural science concept of `proof' as inappropriate to anthropology, but we may still feel that if we claim to have gained such original insights and important findings about what media now is, then someone could reasonably ask us whether that means we can ourselves thereby use media more effectively as a result.

So this paper aims to serve up a dessert and see how it tastes. Almost everything else that is being written as a result of the Why We Post project concerns traditional anthropological outcomes - what we found out through ethnography and how we account for these findings. But this paper will mainly look at something quite different. To what extent did a study of social media, how people use it and its consequences, allow us to then employ social but also other media, to disseminate the research findings of this project. Did we learn anything that we can now demonstrate was useful for this applied purpose?

The first part of the paper does briefly summarise what the project set out to do, how we carried it out and the main results, including a short section on our use of theory. But the bulk of the paper is concerned with the innovations made in the use of media for research dissemination and how that might be connected back to the research findings. There was, however, a specific reason why right from its inception this project was concerned with finding ways to broaden out from the usual categories of research dissemination

Many entirely worthwhile projects in anthropology deal with matters that are relatively esoteric and of limited appeal to a more general public. By contrast, most people spend considerable amounts of time discussing what is passing through their phone, tablet and

computer screens today, and items on the social and cultural consequences of social media appear daily in our newspapers. Furthermore, social media is particularly associated with the young. If a project could persuade these young people that anthropology was a discipline which could give them unexpected and deeper insights into something that they were extremely familiar with, then it might attract them to pursue anthropology further.

Similarly, if comparative anthropology could effectively demonstrate the centrality of cultural difference to the use and consequence of social media then this might be ideal grounds for encouraging people to take seriously the continued significance of such diversity. Especially as social media is otherwise merely assumed to be one more mechanism creating global cultural homogeneity. Finally, for parts of the world where anthropology is still considered only relevant for the study of 'minorities', evidence that anthropology can provide a means towards a better understanding of global transformations on this scale, could help transform the perception of the discipline and demonstrate how anthropology is equally pertinent to all populations.

In1995[i] Miller argued that anthropology deals with two kinds of cultural difference. One, which can be called a priori, comes from history, as the given diversity we encounter amongst the world's population. This is the primary concern of the discipline. But there is another form which can be termed a posteriori. This is the cultural diversity that arises when a phenomenon that has just appeared becomes diverse in the course of its dissemination across the world. This can happen to anything from a new form of education or a principle of human rights, to a technology such as banking or the webcam. In each case anthropology can demonstrate how, often in a short time, these phenomena take on a specific and regional character. The primary book in the Why We Post project is called *How the World Changed Social Media*, because this title implies the concept of a posteriori cultural diversity, an issues that will become increasingly important to anthropology in the future.

**DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT**

Mainly funded by the European Research Council[ii] in 2012 (the Chile project started a bit later) nine anthropologists set off to spend 15 months each in communities around the world in order to explore the uses and consequences of social media. The fieldsites included a factory town and a rural town in China, a town on the Syrian-Turkish border, low income settlements in Brazil and Chile, an IT complex set between villages in south India, small towns in south Italy and Trinidad, and a village in south England.

The project was highly collaborative from the outset. During fieldwork all nine researchers focused on the same topic each month, exchanging extensive notes before moving on to the next topic. The writing-up of the nine monographs followed the same procedure, with all but one book chapter being written simultaneously under the same heading. Much of what was produced, as an e-learning course and website, were created collectively and anonymously. All team members worked in exactly the same manner irrespective of whether they were

formally PhD students, Post-doc or staff. This commitment to a genuinely collaborative and comparative project was an essential to the subsequent dissemination of our findings.

One of the core findings to our project was simply an acknowledgment that a major effect of social media is that human communication has become more visual at the expense of oral and textual modes. The ability to communicate in primarily visual forms is especially important for people who struggle with literacy such as older low-income Brazilians, the youngest users who employ platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat, or groups with precarious social relations such as Chinese factory workers. Under these circumstances it seems unduly limiting that most journal papers and writings in academia about social media are without illustrations. All of our books have at least one chapter entirely devoted to the study of visual images and the book *Visualising Facebook* (forthcoming) s pretty much an experiment to see how a comparative ethnography would look if the primary evidence was almost entirely the visual images that people post.

One or are more surprising conclusions was that this increase in visibility has meant that most public social media is not a reflection of offline life but a much more conservative and conformist version. Many of the changes to more liberal behaviour offline in our fieldsite of Mardin in southeast Turkey are invisible on Facebook since this would cause scandal and gossip[iii]. In our fieldsite in north Chile, on the margins of that country, people want to create a respectable community coming out of poverty. For this purpose they stress conformity and equality. As a result, forms of identity, including a significant present of indigenous Indian identity, is supressed[iv]. Social media is not just visual but also predominantly social. Political scientists who want to find politics on social media find it in vast quantities, but when we sit for 15 months and look at the politics that passes through peoples' sites, it is relatively sparse since politics can be divisive and social media usually connects friends and relatives.

Having said that, there are other forms of social media such as WhatsApp which are having a radical impact on areas such as gender relations, for example in Muslim societies where this may be the first time young people can be in direct contact without the surveillance of parents. While in the west there is an almost obsessive concern with the loss of privacy, for people from rural areas in China and India who lived in extended families, social media may be the first time they have experienced something closer to privacy. In general, we find social media does increase online equality but in most places has no discernible impact upon offline inequality. Perhaps the conclusion that most strikingly contrasts from work in sociology and communication studies is that we do not see in most cases social media as an increase in individualism or individual based networking. More often we see it used to repair the rupture of modernity to groups, often families but also groups such as caste in India and lineage and tribal organisation amongst the Kurdish population.

These are generalisations, but most of our work is concerned with cultural differences and contrasts. One of our most dramatic contrasts is between our two Chinese fieldsites where one mainly uses social media to extend traditional values influenced by Confucius and the

other sees a vast population of factory workers who may find social media brings them closer to the promise of modern China than the migration from rural areas into the factory system[1].

These are just a few examples of the findings from the project which tackle a wide range of topics. But one topic is more germane to this paper, which is the impact of social media on education. As it happens education is perhaps the best example to date of the contribution of social science to understanding the impact of social media. We have the study on American teens' new media use by Ito and her colleagues,[2] which showed how teenagers use new media to create opportunities for friendship driven by peer-to-peer learning, and fostering media literacy. Lange [3] examined the creative ways in which young people use YouTube. Both boyd[4] and Clark[5] demonstrate how problems relating to social media use are often unfairly attributed to young people's behaviour, while highlighting how the behaviour of the parents in managing and using social media is an equal – if not greater – influencing factor. Clark also examined the problematic impact upon social class. The importance of paying attention to this wider context also emerges in a forthcoming ethnographic book by Livingstone and colleagues[6] based on an ethnography of one school class in England which included time spent with these children in their homes.

Our own work fell into a relatively clear pattern. In fieldsites where children receive a relatively good education with plenty of access to new media, such as in the English village fieldsite, then personal social media is seen more as a distraction and a threat. While in fieldsites such as that in low-income Brazil where the educational provisions are very poor social media is seen as an alternative source of education especially through the sharing of YouTube videos. One of the clearest examples was Venkatraman's research in our south Indian fieldsite[7], since this included a huge complex for IT workers set in ordinary rural villages. As a result the schools varied from very well provisioned to the opposite, so this spectrum of views about social media was especially clear. The details may be found in our book, but as for most topics we studied, the key point is that these are social media, mainly used for communication around specific groups of relationships. So much of our study of

1McDonald, T. 2016 (September) *Social Media in rural China*. London: UCL Press, Wang, X.. 2016 (September) *Social Media in industrial China*. London: UCL Press.

2Ito, M., et.al. 2008. *Living and Learning with New Media: Summary of Findings from the Digital Youth Project*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press; Ito M. et. al. 2010 *op. Cit.*

3Lange, P. 2014. *Kids on YouTube.* Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press.

4boyd, d. 2014. *op. Cit.*

5Clark, L. S. 2013. *op. Cit*.

6Livingstone, S., and Sefton-Green, J. forthcoming, 2015. *op. Cit.*

7Venkatraman, D. (forthcoming) *Social Media in south India*. London: UCL Press.

social media in education actually concerns the impact of social media on the relationships between parents, pupils and teachers.

In addition Miller was simultaneously co-supervising a PhD project by Sheba Mohammid. Sheba who had for many years led the government of Trinidad and Tobago's initiative in Open Access e-learning, but was concerned with the limitations of such top-down strategies. She therefore conducted research on informal learning by low-income populations in Trinidad. Juliano Spyer has also worked on such informal learning. All of these studies pointed to the central role of short videos based on YouTube as a primary form of learning for young people today. We shall see below how this impacted upon our own dissemination strategy.

**THE ROLE OF THEORY**

One of the other concerns within this project was to try and develop analysis and theory endogamously. One of the problems for anthropology is that in our concern with relativism and incommensurability that comes from our defence of the specificity of ethnographic findings can make both analysis and theory - which tend to generalisation - amount to a kind of betrayal. Perhaps for that reason we often find anthropology ceding authority either to philosophy or to macro-sociologists such as Giddens or Bauman (though there is also, of course, plenty of specifically anthropological theory). Somehow it is OK to cite Giddens or Foucault as a generality no longer subject to relativist critique, precisely because they are not anthropologists. By contrast, we wanted to allow our generalisations and theory to emerge from our own project and therefore take responsibility for the contradictions this represents with respect to our ethnographic specificity, which in any case was being confronted by the very nature of a comparative project.

This also ensured that we don't fetishize theory as though this is the aim of the exercise. In our project theoretical ideas are always there to provide insight and clarity to the findings, never to obfuscate. Again we can only hint at the results here. Taken from prior work the concept of polymedia was used to show how people configure the range of social media that are now present and how people are judged on their choices. Perhaps one of our most contentious claims is for content migration; that is we find genres of communication or other behaviour migrating between platforms. Memes in Brazil can start on Orkut move to Facebook and then to WhatsApp, playground banter can move from BBM through Facebook to Twitter. This is contentious because so much of current theorising of social media is based either on the platform as assumed cause, e.g. the corporation creates a platform which then determines our behaviour, or explanation based on presumed affordances in the technology which again explain how and why we use that platform through an analysis of the platform itself. But if, as we contend, content migrates between totally different platforms all these accounts and forms of explanation become suspect.

Finally we felt a responsibility to define social media itself as the topic of our enquiry. We argued that prior to social media there were mainly either private conversational media or

public broadcasting media. The earlier social media scaled down from public broadcasting so that on MySpace or Facebook you `broadcast' a post to just a few hundred people you know. By contrast, recent social media such as WeChat and WhatsApp scale up from texting to create small groups, that are not based on individual networking but equal membership. These two trends fill out the space previously unoccupied for group communication. This allows us to propose a new definition of social media which we call *Scalable Sociality* to show how social media has colonised the space of group sociality between the private and the public, creating scales, including the size of the group and the degree of privacy. Though people can also scale within a given platform, for example, between `indirects,' only understood by small groups who recognise the allusion, to larger broadcast-like postings that are clear to everyone. These developments in theory such as polymedia and scalable sociality are developed in more detail in the books, but represent our own way of ensuring that we make clear how we conceptualise the relationship between the generalisation of theory and the specificity of comparative fieldwork.

**THE DISSEMINATION STRATEGY**

The first principle of research dissemination was to create a structure in which we could defend the popular renditions of our work, by simultaneously developing our substantive scholarship and showing how the former were derived from the latter. Producing highly accessible versions of our results, such as for use on our website where a major finding is reduced to a single sentence, requires a level of simplification that might seem crass and a betrayal of scholarship. This become more acceptable where one can trace a direct route from this short claim to the extensive and more nuanced material upon which it is based, here represented by some 2k pages of descriptive ethnography, found within these books and the associated journal articles, all of which were subject to the normal processes of peer review. So the innovation here is not the commitment to popular and accessible output but the spectrum established between these and the other more scholarly research outputs.

At the most academic end of this spectrum, the journal articles, are entirely of the standard format required by each individual journal, and include the normal concerns with how the findings relate to wider academic debates and contributions. At the next level however, changes were required since these were intended for a wider audience. So the books are essentially the results of our ethnographies. Anthropologists know from experience that 15 months of fieldwork often provides so much descriptive material, original insights and requirements for contextualisation that even a full length book seems to traduce the richness of ethnography. But traditionally as with journals they also comprise debates within the discipline. Our reasoning was that the wider audience wants to be informed about the details of how social media is used in each specific case, and our explanation for what we found. They are not taking an exam in anthropology and are unlikely to read a book focused on other anthropologists or theoretical debates. For the same reasons the books were written in colloquial English, avoiding terms that would be unfamiliar to non-academic readers. Popular anthropology books need to read more like popular historical books in that respect, where

even the most scholarly volumes largely consist of narrative descriptions, with discussion of wider literatures consigned to endnotes. Such books are no less scholarly they just prioritise different concerns

The primary substantive output was nine monographs; one for each 15-month ethnography. In addition there is one general comparative volume, and one more comparative analysis of the visual content of Facebook from two of the fieldsites. The entire Why We Post series is being published as free Open Access Pdfs as well as print on demand volumes. The first three books of the series were launched on 29th February 2016. The fact that there were nearly 10k downloads within the first month suggests this concern with a wider readership was warranted.

We were fortunate to coincide with the foundation of UCL Press, the UK's first university press committed to Open Access. We strongly favour the entire discipline of anthropology committing to genuine Open Access and abandoning absurd schemes such as 'Gold' access that simply subsidise external commercial bodies[v]. There is also a preference for Open Access journals such as *Hau* or *Cultural Anthropology.* One of the arguments for Open Access, that is particularly pertinent to anthropology, is that the cost of books may have limited our global appeal. This seems borne out by the evidence from the downloading of the books. Over the first month the book How The World Changed Social Media was downloaded across 129 countries, and countries where we see more than 100 downloads include Brazil, China, India, Mexico, Russia and Turkey and high figures also from Indonesia, Nigeria and Romania.

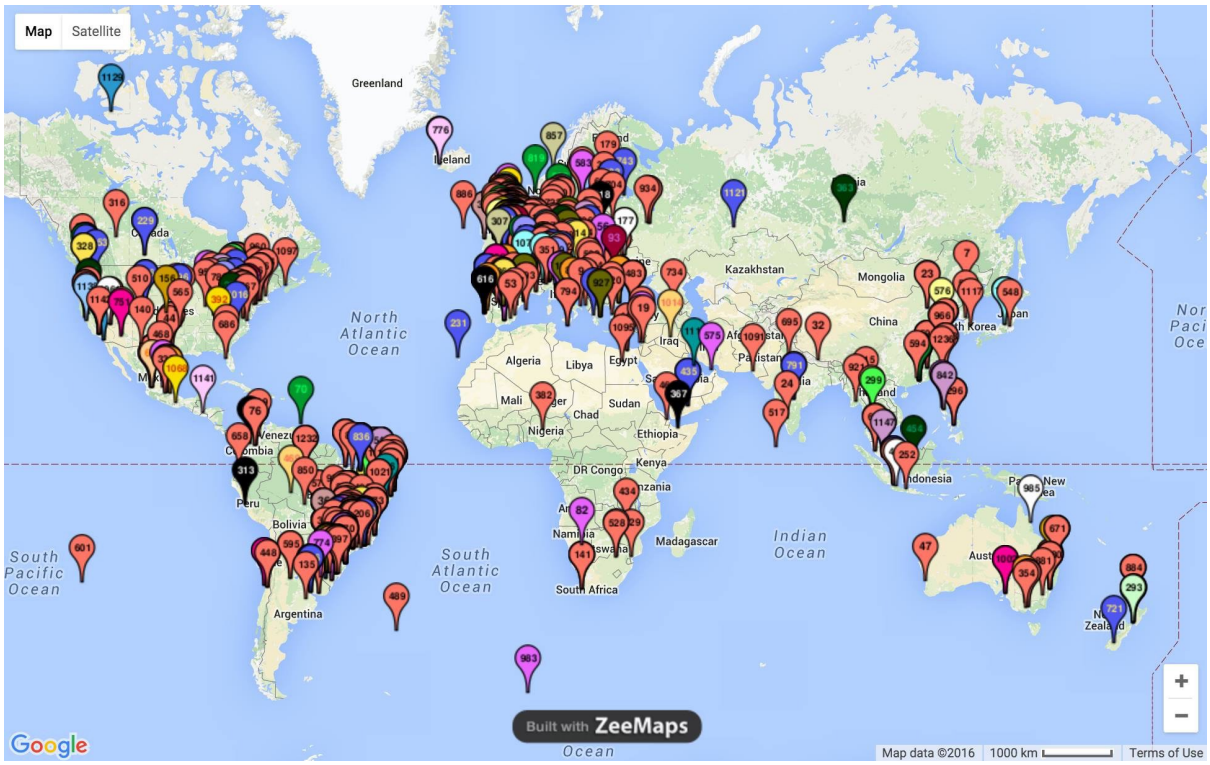
In recent years traditional forms of lecturing have been challenged by the rise of free e-learning courses known as MOOCs (massive open online course). Recently the UK Open University developed its own initiative through a platform called FutureLearn. For various reasons this was our preferred platform, and we were fortunate that at just the right moment UCL signed an arrangement with FutureLearn and we were chosen to create the first UCL FutureLearn course. Rather than using traditional lectures the steps of a MOOC are typically short videos of the kind that we were producing. It was here that the research discussed above by Sheba Mohammid and Juliano Spyer came into play. By studying how people learn from short videos we can see how in turn to create and deploy them within these new learning structures.

A major attraction of the MOOC for this particular study is that it represents a re-purposing of social media as an instrument for learning. The ethos of the MOOC comes from a set of studies within pedagogy. For example, anthropologists such as Mizuko Ito, have participated in research around the concept of 'Connected Learning'[vi] in which the overall aim is to shift teaching from lecturing a passive audience to creating the conditions for peer-to-peer discussion which often reflects back on the experience of the learner. After producing the course materials, as educators we barely need to be present during the course since it is the peer-to-peer element that dominates. So in effect a MOOC works as a bespoke social media

platform encouraging interactive sharing of postings, experience and comment between those taking part. We then incorporated this MOOC into our own course on the anthropology of social media within the MSc in Digital Anthropology at UCL. By taking part in the online course and reflecting on their experience in seminars, our students were, in effect, engaging in participant observation of a social media platform.

The English language version of the course will repeat three times this year: February, June and October. As is common for such courses, the 13k registered reduced to some 5k `learners', but unlike most classes that we teach these people are voluntarily undertaking education in their spare time. The degree of participation on every step of the course has been impressive: one of the more theoretical components, an argument for a new definition of social media as 'scalable sociality,' received over one thousand comments from participants by the end of the first delivery of the course. The course was produced entirely 'in-house' with the infographics created by Xinyuan Wang, one of the team and most of the films made by Cassie Quarless, a student on the UCL MSc in Digital Anthropology, who had also produced the films for our Trinidad fieldsite.

The audience for this course was clearly global, as this map shows. There were more than 100 registered students from places as diverse as Ukraine, Mexico, Indonesia and Russia.




Typical students are people studying social media, or anthropology, around the world.

There are many discussions around the impact of the MOOC movement[vii], with critics pointing out that most people who participate in such courses do not complete them, while others note that this still amounts to a much wider participation than traditional face-to-face

forms of teaching. While we have not yet undertaken systematic research, our impression is that the MOOC is generally considered essentially as an alternative to lecture courses. What is different in our case is that we conceptualised the MOOC instead as part of our spectrum of research dissemination for this particular project.

Such e-learning courses tend to attract often older audiences who may already have a university degree as this is clearly a university/college level format. This article opened with the suggestion that such a project has a responsibility to try and appeal directly to younger audiences and make anthropology itself an attractive option. For that purpose, we now shift from the Why We Post e-course to our website[viii]. People who had previously engaged in the popularisation of anthropology encouraged us to announce our research results as 'discoveries'. This poses a problem, since the primary finding of our research concerns regional differentiation and heterogeneity, while the term 'discovery' resonates with a more natural science model, implying a high level of generality.

This highlights perhaps the most fundamental issue in anthropological dissemination which is the contradiction between relativism based on the specificity of ethnography against the generalisations required for teaching, analysis and theory. In this case we used the very structure of popular digital dissemination to create the resolution to this dilemma. The website was designed so that insights would be given in the form of 15 'discoveries', but each of these would be nuanced by commentary from each of the fieldsites. So all of us could therefore comment on the 'discovery' and they might indeed confirm that this 'discovery' was relevant to their fieldwork, but only in some particular way, or indeed that the discovery was an unwarranted and mistaken generalisation for their particular fieldsite.

So if our 'discovery' is that social media on general; does not lead to greater individualism, we can still note that for factory workers in China social media does lead to greater individualism, while in another site it depends upon what you mean by individualism. Similarly we state as a discovery that in general social media increases equality of technological capacity but this does not reduce offline inequality. But again this is not true for all and inequality itself may mean different things in different places. In short this website format was used to create generalisations that incorporate their own refutations and caveats in order to convey the heterogeneity of comparative anthropology under this rubric of 'discoveries'. This creates a particular form of anthropologically inflected generalization,

Given the `protection' offered by the scholarly weight of our eleven volumes we were prepared to fully embrace the forms of content and techniques of sharing that pertain to social media itself. Several of our discoveries also appear in the form of 'cat memes' on our website and on social media. The cat meme exposes the logic of our dissemination strategy as a spectrum. It represents the lowest but potentially also the first level of sharing. Having become intrigued by such a meme, for example on Twitter, a user might then examine the website from which it came, and view something more substantial such as a YouTube video. That might be sufficiently interesting for them to take the MOOC, which would lead them to

read one or more books and finally from that they come to the journal articles. We don't expect many people to follow the entire sequence, but the structure was created systematically to allow for such a possibility. Most students take anthropology courses in order to obtain a degree, whereas this progression is intended for to encourage voluntary learning. Under these circumstances the onus is on the profession to demonstrate how interesting the results are at all levels.

One critical limitation to all of this would be language. Most of our informants, as of course most of the world, do not speak English. We therefore used some of our funding to translate the entirety of the MOOC and website into the 7 languages of our fieldsites besides English. This required subtitling 130 films in English and then managing the subsequent 910 individual pieces of translation, all of which was managed by Laura Happio-Kirk who had to also ensure that they did not thereby lose their anthropological inflection. At present, FutureLearn does not support multiple languages and we do not have the long term resources for our own engagement in these languages, so the foreign language MOOCs sit on an alternative platform developed by UCL called UCLeXtend[ix]. We will be promoting these in the future, but already our Brazilian team member Juliano Spyer has managed to attract an audience of over 1,300 to the Portuguese version. For the second run of the English course beginning on June 13th, we will take advantage of FutureLearn's new capability to support multiple language subtitles. We will also integrate the UCLeXtend versions more fully by linking to translated content, particularly on steps that use more complex language, such as readings on academic approaches to social media.

To reach these global audiences other tactics are required. One of the reasons our initial media coverage focused on multiple radio and TV appearances with the BBC and coverage in magazines such as *The Economist*[x] was the realisation that these are the type of recognition that gave us the imprimatur to being taken seriously by international media which can then lead to coverage in key publications in other regions such as *O Globo* in Brazil or *The Times of India*[xi]. So again it is observing how the media works that creates a strategy for using media conducive to the dissemination of anthropology

We still, however, had not reached our final goal, which was to attract still younger people who had yet to choose their university course and low-income people at less prestigious institutions worldwide. This involved two further strategies. In the UK we are working with Laura Pountney, the co-author of the text book for the doomed anthropology A Level[xii], but also of textbooks for the continuing sociology A level. She is incorporating the Why We Project into the school curriculum for students in the UK which means they will, in effect, be learning about comparative anthropology even if they do not study A level anthropology. We hope this will encourage applications to study anthropology at university level. Meanwhile Shriram Venkatraman had observed how certification is simply essential for any widespread take up in South Asia amongst the less elite institutions, many of which also do not have good internet access. In response he personally distributed DVD copies of the course in Tamil to individuals but always accompanied with further discussion with educators to understand that

since all our material is under a Creative Commons licence, educators are free to incorporate it under their own local certification schemes.

To return to the opening of this paper. People might assume that the claim that we are using media partly on the basis of what we learnt from our study of social media would result largely in a discussion of how we used social media ourselves. Yet quite deliberately this paper barely touches on this topic. Of course we are using Facebook and Twitter in our dissemination and this forms part of this dissemination strategy. We have been running quite a successful blog about the project from 2012. But what makes anthropology different is that it tends to see things in a more holistic perspective. The core to our study were nine 15 month ethnographies mainly engaged in typical offline research in order to understand and contextualise social media. Other disciplines tend to be task focused and technology focused. But for us the study of social media is mainly not about tweaking the way we employ Twitter but seeing how social media forms part of the wider ecology of sociality or in this case research dissemination.

Just because we are studying social media we remain very concerned not to exaggerate its importance and also to regard this as something more than just the most quoted platforms. So in our dissemination we recognise that some things like the MOOC actually are a form of social media even if they are not called that. We conceptualise social media as polymedia, observing how these platforms fit within both conventional media such as books, journal articles or lectures, and other new media such as YouTube and websites. This is what has been reflected in our discussion here. What have we learnt about how to re-configure social media as one part of a much wider programme of research dissemination that confronts the diversity of audience and the diversity of media. Adding this much wider spectrum of ingredients hopefully makes for a much tastier pudding[xiii].

iMiller, D. 1995 Introduction to D. Miller Ed. *Worlds Apart; modernity through the prism of the local.* London Routledge

iiThe primary funding for the project came from the ERC ….SocNet funding for Nell Haynes was from.. funding for Xinyuan Wang was from.

iiiCosta, E. 2016 *Social Media in southeast Turkey*. London: UCL Press

ivHaynes, N. 2016 (June*) Social Media in northern Chile*. London: UCL Press

vMiller, D. 2012 Open Access, scholarship and digital anthropology, *Hau* 2 (1)

vihttp://dmlhub.net/publications/connected-learning-agenda-for-research-and-design
http://www.itofisher.com/mito/weblog/2012/03/connected_learning.html

viiFor a comparable case of a MOOC in archaeology see Alcock, S, Dufton, A. Durusi-Tannover, M. 2016 Archaeology and the MOOC. the Journal of Social Archaeology. 16 (1) 3-31

viiihttp://www.ucl.ac.uk/why-we-post

ixUCL eXtend

x*The Economist* – 5/03/2016 Anthropology - The medium is the messengers

xiE.g. http://oglobo.globo.com/sociedade/tecnologia/pesquisa-mostra-diversidade-do-uso-das-redes-sociais-pelo-mundo-18819081 and http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bengaluru/Socialising-over-caste-is-the-new-norm-in-rural-India-says-global-study/articleshow/51530630.cms

xiiPountney L and Maric T. 2015 *Introducing Anthropology*. Polity Press. For a discussion of the anthropology A level more generally see Basu, P 2016 Anthropology education and public engagement: Where do we go from here? *Anthropology Today* 32 (2) 3-4

xiiiThis paper is all about intentions and the initial creation of a project. We imagine in a couple of years we will be able to review the problems, failures and hopefully some successes. Laura Haapio-Kirk, a research assistant on the project, will be using a combination of metrics and qualitative methods to constantly assess the results over the next year.