

Tales from
Facebook
Daniel Miller



Tales from Facebook

By the same author:

Comfort of Things

‘The very best kind of micro-ethnography. Miller writes better – and with more insight and compassion – than most novelists.’

Kate Fox, author of *Watching the English*

‘An outstanding piece of work: a fine example of modern anthropological fieldwork, a powerful corrective to the banal notion that materialism is synonymous with excessive individualism and, perhaps above all, an informed, sensitive, and wholly sympathetic guide to the human diversity to be found through the keyholes of our capital city.’

Laurie Taylor, *Independent*

‘A wonderful and unusual antidote to the fear that humanity and individuality is losing its battle with modern consumerism. In his book, even the most trivial product of consumerism can be rendered almost magical by its owners.’

Financial Times

‘Daniel Miller’s moving account, *The Comfort of Things*, is a stout defence of that pejorative notion: “only sentimental value”. He builds up a tapestry of the variety of ways in which people use things to express themselves and make meaning in their lives. The nondescript, the ordinary, can be invested with great value. In Miller’s account, people knit rich associations with objects, caring for each, using them to express relationships.’

Guardian

Stuff

‘[*Stuff*] really is a little gem. Timely, well-written and highly accessible, it is a concise and grounded resource in the struggle to analyse the complexities of contemporary cultural life . . . For undergraduates and general critical readers alike, it will be a welcome and thought-provoking reminder that the material world of things we have created, and which in turn helps to create us, needs to be understood dialectically – for better and for worse.’

Times Higher Education

‘[T]here are fascinating things here: a seven-page description of how a woman who wears a sari navigates daily life through the garment; a portrait of council tenants as “artists” redecorating their flats in different ways; and analyses of fashion, furnishing and “mobile phone relationships” in Jamaica. When Miller is focused on the details, the writing hums with empathetic colour and detail.’

Guardian

Au Pair (with Zuzana Burikova)

‘*Au Pair* is a ripping good read, full of salacious details of the indignities of trying to live and work as a foreigner in middle-class London households.’

Times Higher Education

With its fine-grained ethnographic detail, skilfully presented in vivid prose, this book illuminates every aspect of the hopes, fantasies and frustrations that constitute the frequently troubled ties and misunderstandings between au pairs and their employers. A huge pleasure to read, *Au Pair* provides a definitive, indispensable text for addressing this increasingly prevalent facet of family life, with its own suggestions for improving the lives of both au pairs and the families in which they reside.’

Lynne Segal, author of *Why Feminism?*

The Theory of Shopping

‘Miller begins with an excellent and sensitive ethnography of shopping firmly rooted among his own native north Londoners. It is a fine example of what an anthropologist can achieve at home.’

Times Higher Education

‘His demystification of what appears to be, on the surface, straightforward juggling of cost, quantity and quality is absorbing reading.’

Will Self, *New Statesman and Society*

Tales from Facebook

Daniel Miller

polity

Copyright © Daniel Miller 2011

The right of Daniel Miller to be identified as Author of this Work has been asserted in accordance with the UK Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published in 2011 by Polity Press

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-5209-2
ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-5210-8(pb)

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

Typeset in 11 on 13 pt Sabon
by Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire
Printed by Sheridan Books, Inc. Chelsea, MI USA

The publisher has used its best endeavours to ensure that the URLs for external websites referred to in this book are correct and active at the time of going to press. However, the publisher has no responsibility for the websites and can make no guarantee that a site will remain live or that the content is or will remain appropriate.

Every effort has been made to trace all copyright holders, but if any have been inadvertently overlooked the publisher will be pleased to include any necessary credits in any subsequent reprint or edition.

For further information on Polity, visit our website: www.politybooks.com

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xv
<i>Glossary</i>	xvii
PART I Twelve Portraits	
1 Marriage Dun Mash Up	3
We watch a man's marriage break up. Why he blames Facebook	
2 Community	16
A woman in a village compares her community with that of being on Facebook	
3 For Whom the Bell Doesn't Toll	28
A previously very active man, now in his sixties and housebound, is gifted his life back by Facebook	
4 The Book of Truth	40
A woman explains why what you see on Facebook is closer to the truth of a person than meeting them face to face	
5 Cultivating <i>FarmVille</i>	53
A rather unsuccessful young man finds friends through <i>FarmVille</i>	

6	Avatar	65
	A woman reveals how being extremely public on Facebook is her means to remaining extremely private otherwise	
7	Time Suck	78
	What do teenagers who spend six hours a day on Facebook actually do?	
8	Getting the Word Out	88
	The contrast between male and female usage within a church. Media as God's instrument for spreading the Word	
9	It Was Just Sex	99
	A sex video which features the lead singer of a band is leaked onto the internet – the consequences	
10	It's Who You Know	111
	How in business and private life we need to understand that all individuals are social networking sites	
11	Picking BlackBerrys	122
	A BlackBerry helps a man find a new role for Facebook, after it had first assisted and then betrayed his primary relationship	
12	The History Woman	136
	A woman links her personal history to the history of Facebook	
 <i>Lagniappe</i>		
13	The Philosophy of Doubles	145
	Quick thoughts from a fast food	
 PART II The Anthropology of Facebook		
	Introduction	157
A	The Invention of <i>Fasbook</i>	158
	What makes Facebook Trinidadian	
B	Fifteen Theses on What Facebook Might Be	164
	What makes Facebook important	
C	The Fame of Facebook	205
	What makes Facebook Melanesian	
	 <i>Conclusion</i>	 216

Preface

Facebook, now in the sixth year of existence, has overtaken Google to become the most visited site on the internet. According to the company's statistics,¹ there are currently over 500 million active users, of whom half log on during any given day. Every month sees three billion photos posted and every day sees 60 million status updates. The average user has 130 friends and spends just under an hour a day on the site. These are about the last figures you will encounter in reading this book. While we can all sit amazed by such statistics, this volume looks to the other end of the spectrum – the particular individuals, their friends and their families who use the site. It is an anthropological enquiry into the consequences of social networking for ordinary people. How have their lives been changed by the experience of using Facebook? What impact does it have on the relationships they really care about? Does Facebook approximate some kind of community? How does it change the way we see ourselves? Why are people seemingly so unconcerned with this loss of privacy?

One problem is the tendency to assume the origins of the site will necessarily dictate its future. We know that Facebook was invented for use by students in colleges. Yet that fact barely impinges upon the contents of this book. 2010 was the year in which we could start to see why Facebook might eventually have more importance

¹ www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics (accessed 27 July 2010).

for an elderly person who is housebound, and has no other means of effective socialization, than for a student. So the focus will be on what Facebook seems to be becoming rather than what it initially has been. Because Facebook started in the US, most of the research on its impact has been within the US. But today it is a global site where over 70 per cent of its users live outside the US and research needs to encompass this increasing diversity.

There are good reasons to view Facebook through an anthropological lens. After all, one definition of anthropology might be that while other academic disciplines treat people as individuals, anthropology has always treated people as part of a wider set of relationships. Indeed, prior to the invention of the internet, it was the way the individual was understood in anthropology that might have been termed a social networking site. So a new facility actually called a social networking site ought to be of particular interest to an anthropologist. On 21 April 2010, Mike Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, announced at the F8 conference a new phase in the development of the site. The words he used were 'we are building toward a web where the default is social.'² Given that for a century we have imagined that participation in community and social relations was in decline, this reversal of previous trends seems both astonishing and particularly relevant to the premise and future of anthropology.

Anthropology has a rather peculiar way of engaging with global phenomena. As Facebook has spread, it has also become increasingly diverse. So, from an anthropological perspective, it could be said that there is no longer any such thing as Facebook. There are only the particular genres of use that have developed for different peoples and regions. This volume is set in Trinidad, a place chosen specifically to dislodge the assumption that however people in the UK or the US use Facebook, that *is* Facebook. Trinidad is sufficiently distinctive to force us to engage with the comparative dimensions of Facebook's emergent heterogeneity. The intention is that for most readers this displacement from their usual setting will actually make this book more, rather than less, effective at helping them consider the impact also on their own lives. Although Trinidad is the setting, the focus is on particular individuals whose dilemmas and concerns will be familiar to most of

² <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/8590306.stm> (accessed 22 April 2010).

us. They help us to appreciate the effects Facebook can have on a marriage, understand what teenagers do all day long and how we decide whether information on Facebook should be regarded as a kind of truth about another person or just a facade.

Trinidad is a Caribbean island within sight of Venezuela. It is one of the two islands that make up the state of Trinidad and Tobago. Since this research is limited to Trinidad, it refers to *Trinis* rather than the common local expression of Trinbagonian. Trinidad is just under 5,000 sq. km, i.e. you can drive around it in a day. The indigenous population was largely wiped out by Spanish colonialists. After subsequent French and British rule, it became independent in 1962. The population of around 1.3 million is composed of around 40 per cent descended from former African slaves, 40 per cent descended from former South Asian indentured labourers, with the remainder having widespread origins, including China, Madeira and Lebanon.

I have been carrying out fieldwork in Trinidad intermittently for over twenty years and have written three previous volumes about the island. This book is based on a year's observation of Trinis on Facebook itself, in addition to spending two months in December 2009 and January 2010 carrying out fieldwork within Trinidad. The study of Facebook arose alongside a larger research project, carried out with Mirca Madianou of Cambridge University, on the impact of new media on long-distance communication. Current figures³ give a Facebook penetration in Trinidad of 26 per cent, of which 54 per cent are female. One analysis of these figures⁴ suggests that, taking users as a proportion of persons with internet access, Trinidad may be second in the world after Panama. During fieldwork, Facebook was found to be ubiquitous amongst those of high school and college age, with the exception of very low income areas.

The first part of this book consists of twelve portraits. These are all based on research but, with one exception, I have made extensive changes in detail and combined materials from different participants within individual portraits in order to protect the anonymity of those who participated in the study. The writing style

³ www.facebakers.com/countries-with-facebook/TT/ (accessed 2 August 2010).

⁴ <http://thekillerattitude.com/2008/06/facebook-statistics-and-google-motion.html> (accessed 29 March 2010).

is taken more from short story composition than from academic genre. It includes an element of travelogue and is intended to be an enjoyable read. For those who are engaging with this book largely for academic purposes, this may require some patience. The second part of the book is more analytical and uses the material from the first part to draw academic conclusions, though I hope this part also remains both readable and of interest to a non-academic readership. This section starts with a brief discussion of what makes Facebook Trinidadian. There follows an attempt to address Facebook in its more general and global aspects through 15 tentative theses about what Facebook may be turning out to be.⁵ Finally the book ends with a more theoretical excursion, an extended comparison between Facebook and a classic anthropological study of an island off the coast of New Guinea. By the nature of this social networking beast, we can assume that these observations will become outdated as Facebook evolves or is replaced. What remains is an anthropological study of people as social networking sites.

Why Trinidad?

On opening the pages and realizing that this is a volume principally about Facebook in Trinidad, the casual reader might be forgiven for assuming that it must therefore also be a book about some version of globalization or Americanization. That Trinidad is some poor peripheral island buffeted by the storms that emanate from the great powers. So the 'real', the 'proper' Facebook is that which we find in the US, where it was invented, while other places are reduced to inauthentic copies. This is a common perspective, especially in cultural studies and sociology, but I have always viewed anthropology as a place where things could and should be seen differently.

My own stance was made clear in the previous books I have published about Trinidad. The most obvious precedent was a book about the internet.⁶ Our starting point was that there is no

⁵ The focus remains on users. For a study of the company itself and a history of Facebook, the most authoritative guide to date is Kirkpatrick, D. (2010), *The Facebook Effect*. London: Virgin Books.

⁶ Miller, D. and Slater, D. (2000), *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*. Oxford: Berg.

such thing as the internet. Different people were using different combinations of web-surfing, emailing, instant messaging and so forth. The internet was whatever any particular group of users had made it into. No one population was more 'proper' or 'authentic' than any others. For an anthropologist studying in Trinidad, the internet itself was something created by what Trinidadians do online. From which point we then try and understand why each place produces the internet that we find there. My starting point is that Trinidad is the centre of the world, not some inauthentic periphery. Similarly, I once published a paper called *Coca-Cola: A Black Sweet Drink from Trinidad* because the meaning and connotations of this drink, how it is mixed with rum, how its distinction from red sweet drinks reflects the local ethnic differences within Trinidad – these are what makes the drink significant for Trinidad, not its origins in the US. The advantage of this approach is firstly to contest overgeneralization. In another book,⁷ I showed how even business itself operates in quite specific ways in Trinidad that are not exactly as predicted in business-school models. But this also showed that the word capitalism is used too glibly. That various forms of business and finance often work in ways that conflict with each other. The book also made the point that the biggest transnational companies in Trinidad were in fact Trinidadian and dominated much of the Caribbean, even selling into Florida.

These are the reasons why in this volume I will often refer to *Fasbook*, the local term, rather than Facebook. While Mark Zuckerberg may have created an interface called Facebook, it is the creativity of Trinidadians that produces *Fasbook*. As it happens, I have always been in awe of the creativity and intelligence of Trinidadians. The conversation between two Trinis strikes me as likely to be more articulate, funny and profound than in any other country I have been in (Trinis are not modest, a lot of them would say just the same thing). When Trinis migrated in recent decades to the UK, it was almost invariably as lawyers, doctors and other professionals. They expect to be more successful than the local population and they usually are. This too can be misleading since there are really two Trinidads. There are those Trinis who pass the early highly competitive examinations and are trained in one of the prestige high schools. These children

⁷ Miller, D. (1997), *Capitalism: An Ethnographic Approach*. Oxford: Berg.

generally score so well in exams that they expect to be offered a full scholarship to a US college of their choice if they should want one. Most of the extraordinary array of internationally known Trinidadian intellectuals, such as C. L. R. James or V. S. Naipaul came from such schools and, as those names show, they come equally from the populations of African and Indian origin. The majority of the population, however, do not make it into these schools and don't have the same opportunities in life – although, having spent much time working in low-income communities of squatters, I still find them more impressive in terms of general knowledge and entrepreneurial activity than their equivalent from any other country I know.

This is one of the reasons I tend to study new communication technologies in Trinidad. I anticipate that Trinidadian usage will not just be distinctive but also in some ways ahead of the game. That while innovation in Facebook as infrastructure will come from the company, ideas about what one can do with Facebook may arise first in a place such as Trinidad. There are historical reasons why Trinidad has a particular grasp on the possibilities of being modern. This is partly because the very rupture created by slavery and indentured labour created a subsequent sense of freedom that was different from the conservatism that emerged from more gradual changes in class and the peasantry in other regions. It has also done no harm that Trinidad was not just one of the world's first oil-producing countries but used the money to invest in educational infrastructure. So, to conclude, I am hoping that, given the time lag it takes for publishing a book, some of the already apparent trends described here for Trinidad may well match those starting to become evident in slower-moving places such as London or Los Angeles. We shall see.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost I would like to acknowledge the time and information given to me by all the Trininis who participated in this project. There must be upwards of a hundred individuals who have either been formally interviewed, chatted informally or become a key Facebook friend. I have made considerable efforts to ensure the anonymity that was promised them when I conducted the research, and I hope that everyone will respect this if they should nevertheless recognize someone or themselves. For this reason, I have also had to subsequently defriend them on Facebook. I apologize if I have failed anyone in this respect. Preserving anonymity also means I cannot acknowledge any of these individuals in person. That includes our excellent transcriber.

Happily I can, however, acknowledge the contribution of Mirca Madianou who jointly conducted many of these interviews and participated in the wider fieldwork. She has also been very tolerant of my building this project on the side of our joint research into long-distance communication in Trinidad and the Philippines. I am indebted to Simone Mangal who organized our accommodation, food and transport, as well as introducing me to some additional informants. Also, for discussion within Trinidad, hospitality and contributions to ‘liming’, I would like to thank Moonilal Das, Gabrielle Hosein, Francesca Hawkins, Kim Johnson, Pat Mohammed, Burton Sankeralli and Dennis Singh.

For commenting on the manuscript itself, many thanks to

Heather Horst, Gabrielle Hosein, Mirca Madianou, Simone Mangal, Anna Pertierra, John Postill, Jolynne Sinanan, Rachel Singh and the anonymous reviewers provided by Polity. Thanks to Ilana Gershon for sharing unpublished work. I would like to thank Lucia Neva for once again providing my cover design, and Polity for their help in seeing through this process of publication. Above all, thanks are due to my wife Rickie Burman for consistent and constructive criticism and editing.

Glossary

This provides approximate meanings of some common terms in Trinidad and Facebook. It does not deal with the examples of current youth dialect found in the volume. I have also tended to exclude terms that are clearly defined when first encountered within the text.

bacchanal: Disorder that derives from scandal and gossip. A word often used to describe Trinidadian culture in general

boi (boy): Hey you (male or female)

boldface: A kind of expressive bravado. Don't just misbehave, flaunt it

comment: A facility in Facebook where an individual responds to another's posting

calypso: Traditional Trinidad songs often based on social and political satire or protest

cuss: To swear at or curse

David Rudder: One of the greatest calypso singers

East Indian (Indo-Trinidadian): Around 40 per cent of the current population of Trinidad who came from India, originally as indentured labourers, to work the sugar plantations after the abolition of slavery

Eid: The most important Muslim festival of the year

FarmVille: The most popular game within Facebook

fete: The main term used for parties, especially the pre-Carnival parties dominated by Soca music

fas: Trying to find out about another person's business with inappropriate speed

friending: To ask someone to be a Facebook friend. But traditionally in Trinidad to be having sex with, or to be in a visiting, i.e. non-cohabiting, relationship with

'Go Brave': 'Just Do It' (without the Nike)

gyul (girl): Hey you (definitely female)

horning: Adultery

IM (or instant messenger): A means to engage in private, text based, turn taking, communication

lagniappe: A little extra one gives to the customers . . . just because

like: On Facebook when a person posts a status or news update, a friend can either choose to comment or press the 'to like' button signifying their approval

lime: A characteristically Trinidadian form of socialization, originally often based on hanging around street corners and implying spontaneity in both social composition and subsequent trajectory

LOL: Internet speak for 'laughing out loud'

maco: To be nosy or to spend time finding out about other peoples private business. So also a 'macotious' person

mas: Being a masquerader in Carnival. Also Mas Camp where carnival costumes are made for each band

mash up: To destroy

maxi-taxi: A small bus that travels on set routes. The most popular form of public transport in Trinidad

MSN: Windows Messenger Service, a popular form of IM

MySpace: One of the most successful social networking sites prior to Facebook

netiquette: The norms of behaviour that people come to feel appropriate to internet use

palance: Partying and having a good time. Massively over used in 2009 because of a soca tune with that name

pan: The music of steelband. Panyard – the place where they practise

parang: The Spanish-inflected music associated with Christmas

PNM: The People's National Party, the party associated with Eric Williams, the founder of independent Trinidad. In power during the period of fieldwork, and generally more associated with the Afro-Trinidadian than the Indo-Trinidadian population

posting: In 2009, the two main kinds of textual posting, that is, the 'status updates' and 'news items', were effectively combined

profile pictures: The picture that appears at the top left of an individual's Facebook page and accompanies their postings and comments

remediation: The way material in an established media becomes reconfigured as content in a new media (see Bolter, G. and Grusin, R. (2000), *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.)

slight pepper: Some pepper sauce, but not much

soca: A blend of calypso with various forms of popular music

steups: A disparaging sound made by sucking your teeth between drawn cheeks

tag: To put a name to a Facebook photo image such that everyone linked to that name becomes aware of the photo. Thus to detag is to de-link the name

TT\$: A Trinidadian dollar. At the time of fieldwork, the exchange rate was approximately TT\$10 per £1 or TT\$7 per US\$1

UTT: The University of Trinidad and Tobago, founded in 2004

UWI: The University of the West Indies that includes a campus in St Augustine, Trinidad, established in 1960

wall: The place on a Facebook site where status and news updates are posted

wining: A dance form, based on gyrations around the waist, associated with soca music. Typically men (try to) wine behind a woman

Part I

Twelve Portraits

Marriage Dun Mash Up

For a moment my eyes are diverted from the screen to glance outside the window where, in the middle distance, hovers a red bird-feeder like a mini-spaceship. The movement that caught my attention was the ubiquitous bananaquit with its yellow belly. It was soon followed by the even brighter green honeycreeper. These feeders are common in Trinidad and if you are lucky in the morning you may spy the iridescent purple-blue of a hummingbird. The birds here rival a coral reef in their strong palette. It's hard sometimes to concentrate on the screen in front of me since this office is set in the midst of a cocoa estate near the centre of the island. The large clear windows are intended to give a panoramic view of the surrounding environment. Earlier in the day I spotted an iguana, complementing the sighting the day before, in the forest, of an agouti which looks like a cross between a rat and a hog.

These days I am more likely to examine such wildlife through my television screen in London, viewed on nature programmes where the content typically oscillates between one species eating another alive and two of the same species mating. Today, by contrast, the natural environment is looking quite tame and sedate, while here on the screen I was about to bear witness to the ferocious tearing apart of something else. Sitting here, I was to watch unfold in front of me the evidence that Facebook can destroy someone's marriage. As time went on, I was to become increasingly