ACTUALLY COMPARATIVE ANTHROPOLOGY: WHY WE POST

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ABSTRACT

This paper confronts the disparity between a tradition that has defined anthropology as a comparative discipline and the practices which increasingly embrace cultural relativism and the uniqueness of each fieldsite. It suggests that it is possible to resolve this dilemma, through creating a vertical structure that complements the horizontal task of comparison across fieldsites. This vertical structure is composed of different methods of dissemination which make explicit a series of steps from a baseline of popular dissemination which stresses the uniqueness of individuals, through books and journal articles with increasing degrees of generalisation and comparison. Following this structure leads us up through analysis to the creation and employment of theory. This allows us to make comparisons and generalisations without sacrificing our assertion of specificity and uniqueness. We illustrate this argument though a recent nine-field site comparison of the use and consequences of social media in a project called "Why We Post."

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Anthropologists often present arguments for the uniqueness of their particular field site based on their specific histories and cultural traditions. As such they will encounter issues of incommensurability. Contemporary ethnographic writing tends to incorporate many stories or case studies, the effect of which is to suggest that even the unit we term *the field site* represents a dangerous generalization, which might suppress differences among the disparate individuals who live there. As a result, all generalisations could be considered a betrayal of specificity. The analytical possibilities that comparison opens up for anthropology is one of the principle grounds that might justify this betrayal. Yet anthropology, based on long-term ethnographic engagement, has been in thrall to cultural relativism to such a degree that comparative research is now quite rare. Of course, even a claim to uniqueness is intrinsically and implicitly comparative, in that to be unique means something must be compared and judged different to others. So comparison is something we always do, even if we are not quite sure where it fits today within the tasks of anthropology.

In order to begin to consider the potential of comparative anthropology, we need to start by explicitly tackling this tension between specificity and generality. This paper

will suggest that a resolution may be found, but not through trying to locate some ideal balance between generalisation and particularity. The alternative, which this paper will promote, is first to retain both premises in their extreme forms but then to create a spectrum of genres of anthropological writing. This spectrum makes clear how we understand the link between the most specific recognition that every individual whom we study is unique, with the most general theoretical arguments, such as our views on the nature of humanity. Instead of seeing these as opposed, the paper outlines how each can help legitimate the other. It also shows how popular renditions of our findings that rely on stories about specific individuals from the field, in addition to more academic theorising are both legitimised an equally clear relationship to the authority of the underlying ethnography.

The task of comparison demands a horizontal perspective that inevitably equates fieldsites. For example, we may compare a fieldsite in Italy to one in China with respect to a specific topic, to which they both speak in different ways. But this paper will suggest that for anthropologists to embrace such comparisons, this horizontal dimension requires the addition of a vertical dimension that takes us from detailed ethnographic reportage step by step upwards to generalisation and theory. The process is exemplified in this paper using the results of Why We Post, a recent research project concerned with the use and consequences of social media in nine different fieldsites around the world.

COMPARISON IN ANTHROPOLOGY: HISTORY, IDEALS AND PRACTICE

Of all the social and historical sciences, anthropology is perhaps that which is most formally aligned with the very idea of the comparative, often seen as definitional of the discipline. One of the standard anthropology textbooks defines anthropology as `the comparative study of cultural and social life' (Eriksen 2001:4). Wikipedia suggests that `Cultural anthropology is the comparative study of the manifold ways in which people *make sense* of the world around them.' One might therefore expect that comparison would be central to what anthropologists actually do.

Yet in practice social and cultural anthropology may be one of the least comparative disciplines. Its findings are characterised by a powerful particularism that implies not just cultural relativism but even incommensurability, because of our emphasis upon the specific cultural and historical context of each ethnographic case. The `other' is always present, but mainly to attest to the particularity of the case in question. This seems to have been the case from quite early on in the discipline's history. Hammel's 1980 paper `The Comparative Method in Anthropological Perspective' argued that anthropology was indeed born out of a comparative focus, represented by a paper from Tylor (1889), and many examples from early in the 20th century but not from later in the century. There are very few recent books and articles within anthropology that use the word comparative in their title. Though anthropologists may publish in the journal *Comparative Studies in Society and History.*

Hammel was correct regarding earlier Victorian anthropology, whose evolutionary and diffusionary perspectives were deeply comparative (Stocking 1991). As an example early British ethnologists used Oceania as a kind of laboratory to understand processes of cultural diffusion (Geismar 2013: 27). Boas (1896), saw comparison as a way of explaining commonality, asking `In as much as we see universal elements such as organisation into clans were these from common origin or independently evolved?' However, he was circumspect about the usefulness of comparison.

Geismar notes that after Malinowski, the 19th century legacy of historical comparison shifted to a concern for ahistorical comparison. The heyday for this was probably in the 1950s. Between 1957 and 1981 George Murdock (1981) developed an *Atlas of World Cultures*. Mostly the concern was to emulate the natural sciences through systematisation of findings into comparable classes of data. For those branches of anthropology that continue this naturalist tradition, for example, as part of evolutionary studies, refining such comparisons continues to be of interest (e.g. Mace and Pagel 1994). A similar argument could be made of archaeology. By contrast, mainstream social anthropology has generally repudiated this goal and focuses more on the problem of how to conduct comparison when the material is qualitative and pluralistic in contrast to most natural science (see for example, Fox and Gingrich 2002). There has to be some clear justification for this betrayal of cultural relativism. As Graeber (2015 :22-3) has recently pointed out with respect to recent writings on ontology, it is sometimes quite hard to know whether the turn to ontology represents an extreme repudiation of cultural relativism, as its practitioners claim, or actually an extreme expression of cultural relativism.

The point should not itself be overgeneralised. There are of course many versions of anthropology today which certainly imply a comparative perspective. Often a sub-discipline or theme will create conditions for comparison. For example, from birth (Jordan and Davis-Floyd 1992) to babies (DeLoache and Gottlieb 2000) to preschool (Tobin, Hsueh and Karasawa 2009) to child-rearing (Whiting, Ed. 1963). Comparison is often most common in periods when there is a dominant theoretical perspective such as Levi-Straussian structuralism or Latourian actor-network theory. An early example would be Mauss's (1954) work on the gift which has inspired comparative discussion ever since (e.g. Weiner 1992). One of the most committed comparative anthropologists, Jack Goody, started from a Marxist-inflected interest in forms of production (e.g. 1976) but later continued to use comparison for a variety of other topics (e.g. 1982). When Miller first took up employment at UCL Anthropology almost every seminar was about some particular example of pre-capitalist modes of production (Hindess and Hirst 1975), which in effect compared sites as long as they were first categorized as modes of production. In some more recent examples anthropologists have had reasons to take the issue of specificity, scale and comparison as of itself central to their investigation (e.g. Choy 2011, Common Knowledge 2011). So comparison was and is present, but the fact that it is still more

commonly implicit rather than explicit suggests a residual underlying problem with its legitimacy.

In practice the most common genre of this implicit comparison is the edited volume, where separate papers are juxtaposed and the editors take responsibility for introductions or conclusions that do the job of comparison. Yet the main concern is often to legitimate the topic at hand, rather than to move forward the project of comparative studies[1]. Mostly these volumes gain a reputation when they become a catalyst around which a new focus may crystallise such as an interest in objects (Appadurai 1986) or feminist studies (Rosaldo, Lamphere and Bamberger 1974).

An additional factor behind this lack of comparative work is likely to have always been logistical. It is quite costly to carry out extended ethnography and funding rarely stretches to multiple simultaneous ethnographic projects. Even if simultaneous work was affordable, the tendency to work in relatively inaccessible places with barriers to communication in the past has meant that comparison was hard to accomplish during fieldwork. So comparison was, of necessity, post-hoc. Finally, the very structure of academia, where much ethnography is undertaken by PhD students who need to establish their individual reputation in order to obtain a job, mitigates against the collective and collaborative work that would be required by a more sustained comparative approach. For all these reasons, there remains a huge gap between a definition of anthropology as comparative and its routine practice or explication, where the dominant use of comparison seems mainly to protect the relativist emphasis on the uniqueness of an individual fieldsite.

WHY WE POST – WHAT DO WE COMPARE?

It is against this backdrop that the project described in this paper emerged. The Why We Post project was an anthropological study of the use and consequences of social media around the world. As such, it is an example of the kind of thematic based comparative project referred to above. In various ways it also tried to extend this tradition as a project which at all stages, from conceptualisation, to fieldwork, and subsequent analysis, was intended to be as comparative as possible. This was possible firstly because of its extensive funding, including both a major grant from the European Research Council and additional funding[2] from elsewhere. As a result, the project could be composed of nine simultaneous 15-month ethnographies. These included one of the new factory towns and a rural town in China, a town on the Syrian-Turkish border, low income settlements in Brazil and Chile, an IT complex set

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[1] Miller has published several examples of this genre.

between villages in South India, small towns in south Italy and Trinidad, and a village in England.

The rise of new digital communication tools also provided an unprecedented possibility for the continual exchange of information even during fieldwork and not just post-hoc. During the ethnographers' time in the field, each month was devoted to a common topic among all 9 researchers such as commerce, social (in)equality, or gender. At the end of each month we each submitted at least 5,000 words about our findings which were then discussed via video meeting by the whole team. Collectively we would agree to drop some topics and add others. In traditional single-sited fieldwork the ethnographer starts by having a strong sense of the exceptionalism of their fieldsite, but inevitably several months of residence starts to make behavior seem more natural. One important aspect of comparison that our project clearly demonstrated was that at the end of the month we often found that other team members had reached entirely different conclusions regarding the exact same topics, placing renewed emphasis on the need to explain one's own particular findings. For example, the Brazilian fieldworker found people mainly posted themselves against places that expressed aspiration, but then noted that at the Chile fieldsite which was also low income people posted images that expressed that actual conditions of life.

The act of comparison in the natural and experimental sciences suggests that some variables should be held constant so that we can isolate and compare those of interest. In internet studies, typically all context is held as a given, so one can focus on a topic such as political tweets alone. But in our project we reaffirm the holistic nature of the anthropological endeavour. The people we study live politics, religion, family, and their employment simultaneously. Everything is context to everything else, nothing stands still or can be detached. So for us comparison makes no claims to even such temporary de-contextualisation. Comparison was also essentially qualitative; in chapter four of our comparative book *How the World Changed Social Media* (Miller et. al. 2016) we explain that while we carried out some quantitative survey work we made almost no use of it in our analysis. We found that individuals in each site interpreted questions differently, and that often participant observation revealed an entirely different picture compared to what was being reported in surveys.

Given the focus of our study, one important point of comparison was the social media platforms themselves. Two of our fieldsites used specific Chinese platforms: QQ and WeChat. We could ask what difference that made from the remainder of the sites that used platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Equally since many sites used Facebook we could see how different fieldsites used the same platform differently, building upon an earlier book where Miller examined Facebook as a specifically Trinidadian phenomenon (Miller 2011). Social media seems at first to represent what Miller (1995) had previously termed *a posteriori* diversity. In anthropology traditionally we have looked to *a priori* diversity, that which we assume

descends from history as the given cultural diversity of the populations we encounter. By contrast *a posterior* diversity arises when a phenomenon that has recently been invented becomes differentiated in the course of its dissemination across the world. This can happen with anything from a new form of education, or a principle of human rights, through to a technology such as banking or the webcam.

But this is not an absolute distinction. Perhaps the first fully established social media site in terms of popular ubiquity was Cyworld in South Korea. This platform is organised around concentric circles of friendship closeness in a manner that echoes South Korean kinship systems. QQ in China places emphasis upon the attainment of levels, achieved through spending time or money on the site. Perhaps this reflects the role of hierarchy and levels in Chinese society (McDonald 2016a: 116-142). Similarly, the development and popularity of ego-centred networking platforms in the US again may be resonant of values in that society. So *a posteriori* diversity can represent the re-imposition of a prior diversity and the differences with the Chinese sites can represent, as much as create, cultural difference.

In the Why We Post project the most prominent units of comparison are the nine fieldsites. The first problem this presents is that we can easily be led to overgeneralise a population. For that reason throughout our study we are careful to talk of the Chilean fieldsite, rather than Chileans in general, since we want to avoid generalisation at the level of the national. Our `Turkish' fieldsite is inhabited mainly by Arab and Kurdish people rather than Turkish (Costa 2016a). This consideration is even more important when it comes to countries as vast as China which had two fieldsites to enable a degree of internal comparison. One fieldsite was a highly traditional rural township within a region associated with the development of Confucianism (McDonald 2016a). Another was a factory town that exemplified the massive migration of some 250 million rural migrants into the factory system. While in some cases these fieldsites showed similarities that could be generalised as 'Chinese', in many other ways they were diametrically opposed. For example, the rural township was the site where people seemed to show the strongest concern with education of all our fieldsites, while the factory workers, where everyone is assumed to be heading for a job in the factory as soon as they are old enough, showed the least concern with education of any of our nine fieldsites. This is one of several instances in which the population of factory workers showed very little in common with many of the popular generalisations made about people in China (Wang 2016). This is an exception that applies not to some small segment of society, but to some 250 million people.

In one case we follow the genre of two site comparison, a mode that is well established in anthropology, for example Kapferer's (1988) comparison of Australia and Sri Lankan nationalism. The volume *Visualising Facebook* (Miller and Sinanan 2017) looks specifically at the difference in Facebook postings between our English and our Trinidadian fieldsites. This analysis included our most extensive use of quantitative comparison, examining over 20,000 images by looking at the frequency

of posting for each of the visual genres we identified, such as sticking out ones tongue or showing oneself on holiday. But the emphasis is again on specific contrasts. For example, new mothers in our English fieldsite tend to replace their profile photo with the image of the new infant. By contrast in our Trinidadian site, mothers will at that same point in their lives post more glamorous images that demonstrate that they have not lost their attractiveness by virtue of becoming a mother.

In practice the main unit of comparison is derived from the way one chooses to publish the material. In our comparative volume, each chapter reflects a major themes of the research (e.g. Education, Gender, or Work), and the chapter uses examples from different field sites to speak to conclusions on that theme. In our nine separate ethnographic monographs representing individual sites, we have conformed to a standard book format. For example, Chapter 3 of each book discusses the use of different forms of media in the field site and Chapter 4 examines media use among family and friends. We also frame comparison around topics: Why was social media seen as detracting from education in South Italy and as constituting education for many of those in our Brazilian fieldsite?

It is the topic that disaggregates the fieldsite. So if one was talking about the use of social media for gossip a relevant comparison might be between older relatively affluent Kurdish women and older relatively affluent women in South Italy. However, the topic of comparison is the result of fieldwork, not its premise. For example, Venkatraman (2017) situated himself in a fieldsite in South India with a huge IT complex of 200,000 workers surrounded by traditional villages in order to focus upon the difference between these populations. But he found that they had more in common as South Indians than otherwise. Haynes (2016) based herself a town in northern Chile with a high proportion of indigenous peoples in order to look at expressions of identity only to find that the indigenous identity, as well as other forms of identity politics, are suppressed in local social media. So in both cases the principle unit of comparison in the publications is different to that intended when the researcher started fieldwork. This is why a commitment to holistic and qualitative engagement is so important in anthropology. Our units of comparison are one of the main ways in which we express our conclusions and repudiate our assumptions.

ADDING A VERTICAL DIMENSION – THE POPULAR/ETHNOGRAPHIC BASE

The previous section provided a description of how and what we compared in the Why We Post project. But the result mainly confirms that while we viewed sites as commensurate, the emphasis was still on cultural difference. A central finding of our project is precisely that social media has geography. The anthropological contribution is to oppose glib generalisations that ignore cultural context. But nothing contained in this paper, so far, has helped to resolve the fundamental antagonism between ethnographic specificity and generality. As noted, we wanted to resolve this in such a way that we neither sacrificed the specific nor the general. But nor did we

want to end up in some muddled middle ground. How did we accomplish this resolution? The answer was through a conscious attempt to create a vertical dimension in our dissemination in order to resolve issues of horizontal analytical comparison. Starting with a base of popular dissemination which relied on specificity, we then worked upwards to an apex in theory with our more academic work, represented by journal papers and the Why We Post book series.

The idea was that this resolution would facilitate rather than suppress the extremes of particularity and generality. Indeed the emphasis upon specificity was exacerbated by our commitment to popular dissemination. The questions of "what exactly *is* social media?" and "what are its current consequences?" are of huge popular interest. If we can show that anthropology does a better job of answering these questions than psychology or sociology, it is an opportunity to demonstrate why the world needs anthropologists. We therefore wanted and achieved extensive media coverage around the world. We also created versions of our work that could be easily accessible at all levels of education, including the school curricula. Our work and that of Sheba Mohammid, a researcher in informal learning who advised us, shows how much informal learning today is via short (5 minute) YouTube videos. We therefore created over one hundred short videos from our fieldwork and feature them on our website. The website frames our conclusions as `discoveries' - generalisations which are then nuanced by findings from each fieldsite, supported by films and anecdotal stories.

At this level of dissemination to wide audiences, most of the material is in the form of highly specific stories and empathetic encounters with particular individuals. So a discussion of the selfie is actually an encounter with Matt, a hospice patient who uses a mirror selfie on Facebook to show to others not just that he is recovering from chemotherapy but to acknowledge this to himself. Or an encounter is with Shanz from Trinidad about why she takes a selfie most days before going to work. Anthropology's most powerful attraction to the wider public lies in this humanistic encounter. We used much of this material also in a free e-course (MOOC) on FutureLearn which has already been taken by around 13,000 active learners. Again this mainly consists of short videos and short texts. So, the commitment to popularisation also incorporates an emphasis on the ultimate unit of differentiation, which is the uniqueness of every individual we work with. When we say we don't want to lose the extreme forms of particularity it is precisely the humanism of unique individuals that this refers to.

The main output of this project is a series of eleven volumes, including nine monographs, each of which consists primarily of ethnographic description. They examine social media both in relation to the core social relations of each population, such as kinship and friendship, but also in terms of wider frameworks for example community, politics, commerce, gender, inequality, and religion. The series was published by UCL Press, the first fully open access university press in the UK. But being open access does not always mean being accessible. We tried to avoid the

use of non-colloquial English so that the books could be read by non-academics. These books also differ from typical anthropological monographs in that the discussion of other academic work is mainly contained in footnotes. The reason is that debates between anthropologists are of limited interest to the non-academic reader. The primary task of the monograph is to describe the findings and account for them through knowledge of the local history, political economy, social structure and changing circumstances. Again much of the content is in the form of stories, with the intention of making these books appealing by trying to convey the sense of empathetic depth in the experience of ethnography. We have already achieved over a quarter of a million downloads (287,000 by October 2017). This includes high download figures from countries in Africa and South-East Asia where it is unlikely that anthropological books are widely purchased. Wang's monograph on a Chinese Factory saw 12,000 downloads in the first four months which is astonishing for an ethnographic monograph. These books will all come out also in translation during 2018 which should considerably add to these figures.

On the other hand these books do not require the level of popularisation that we strove for on the website, as made clear by using words such as 'discoveries' to frame our findings. Instead, these books are engaged with issues of explanation and clearly enunciated theory, since they are intended to account for findings and not just describe them. With over 2,000 pages of ethnographic detail, this project cannot be seen as diluting the commitment to evidence or scholarship. In addition, we have produced the expected journal papers and book chapters, replete with discussions of other academic work and are directed entirely to academic rather than popular audiences. They are engaged in comparison in several ways that would be reasonably typical of such papers. They include titles such as *The Morality of Premarital Romances: Social Media, Flirting and Love in southeast Turkey* (Costa 2016b), or *Desiring mobiles, desiring education: mobile phones and families in a rural Chinese Town* (McDonald 2016b).

Through such journal papers, book chapters, and our own book series we can see how, in characteristic fashion, the findings associated with a given topic or fieldsite either support or contest wider generalisations. One of our interests was the way our evidence contrasted with what might be termed a `grand narrative' of social science regarding the transition from collective to more individualised forms of sociality (e.g. Castells 2000, Rainie and Wellman 2012). By contrast, many informants in our fieldsites saw one of the most important contributions of social media as the way it acted to repair traditional groups that had been subject to fragmentation as a result of other contemporary pressures. For example, Kurdish society is traditionally formed around lineage and tribal groups which, during recent decades of violence and new social mobility, have been threatened simply because people were physically separated. Social media allows for a degree of reunification of such groups around online communication. A young Kurd in our Turkish fieldsite might have hundreds of Facebook friends, but they are almost all relatives (Costa 2016a:

chapter 4). An island such as Trinidad is now so transnational that the majority of nuclear families are now themselves transnational, with either a child or sibling living abroad. One of the most common comments made about new social media is that it can, in some measures, reconstitute the family in terms of everyday communication. In several fieldsites families today use WhatsApp to circulate images of babies and toddlers so as to include absent relatives. The family is itself one of the most common WhatsApp groups. Similar arguments were found in respect to caste in India and traditional family relations in rural China. By contrast, as just noted, the situation for factory workers is entirely different since social media does create opportunities for individualism outside of the traditions of the extended family.

In a similar fashion the idea that we now `talk photos' connects us to one of the fundamental generalisations that came from this study, which is that social media has transformed human communication by making it more visual. Most evident in platforms such as SnapChat and Instagram, as well as the use of emojis in chatting, people in effect, hold conversations or engage in sociality through the exchange of images such as photographs and memes. In this case the generalisation does hold for all our sites; there is no place in which this is not true. However, what does vary are the meanings and consequences of this change. In Trinidad, for example, traditions of Carnival or indeed the deeper history of slavery, has bonded the visual and the surface to a profound sense of truth, where the interior is hidden because it is false, which makes things very different from a society which sees the visual in terms of façade and superficiality (Sinanan forthcoming). Equally the cultivation of appearance has a different resonance in southern Italy (Nicolescu 2016), where there is a civic responsibility to be stylish, than in our northern Chilean fieldsite where it is crucial to show a relaxed manner with not a hint of pretentiousness (Haynes 2016), as opposed again to our Brazilian site where this new visibility is important to show aspiration (Spyer 2017). Here again we can frame the generality in ethnographic relativism by noting entirely different consequences in each place.

The emphasis on visibility has profound consequences for other core topics. It explains why in many of our fieldsites online posting appears to be far more conservative than offline life, as visibility creates problems of potential gossip and scandal. It also explains why contrary to much academic work on social media we find politics to be more repressed than expressed on social media since it is often viewed as socially divisive. But we also recognised that social media today includes platforms such as WhatsApp which, by contrast, help to circulate visual and textual forms to much smaller audiences with sometimes a massive impact upon cross-gender relationships of the young, away from the surveillance of families. A similar set of arguments would follow for almost every one of our findings. The comparison leads to certain generalisations: social media has made human communication more visual, in which the specificity of each site becomes a caveat; visual communication is carried out differently between our Trinidadian and our South Italian fieldsites, in as much as it tends to express individual style in the former and conformity to wider

Italian stylistic norms in the latter. At this point we have moved from our foundational popularising emphasis on the specificity of each individual, upwards towards generalisation with relativised caveats. The units here are more likely to be groupings within fieldsites, such as young Kurds, or rural Chinese school children or working women in our Trinidadian fieldsite. This leads to our next step up the ladder towards theory.

ADDING A VERTICAL DIMENSION – UPWARDS TOWARDS THEORY.

The word 'theory' is both eclectic and unruly in social science usage (e.g. Ortner 1984), and at least for anthropology it would be hard to claim the degree of precision and definition that might be found when the word is employed in natural science. In an attempt to make a virtue out of this eclecticism, four examples are discussed in sequence, which represent quite different forms of abstraction and analytical conceptualisation, created for very different purposes. But it will be argued that when taken as a sequence they create another example of the vertical structure that complements the horizontal project of comparative anthropology. The first is not a theory, but a critique of a common mode of explanation applied to social media. The second is a framework for equating different examples of social media. The third is an attempt to define social media. The fourth is an argument for changing our fundamental conceptualisation of what it is to be human.

Anthropology has long been a powerful source of often highly generalisable theory, as evidenced by the development of structuralism. It is essential that anthropologists develop theoretical claims based on their own findings. The alternative is simply citing sources from meta-sociology or philosophy such as Giddens and Foucault, which tend towards large scale generalisations about the world, rather than working at the level of cultural specificity. The effect of employing such authors as though they represent anthropological theory is to out-source the problem of cultural relativism. It would obviously be better if anthropology tackled the contradictions between relativism and generality within our own terms.

Content migration is the first generalisation that emerges from the Why We Post project which is clearly a direct outcome from cultural relativism itself; less a theory than a critique of other generalisations and theoretical structures, which draws from the empirical results of the project. We find that genres of communication or other behaviour migrate between platforms. Memes in our Brazilian fieldsite can start on Orkut, move to Facebook and then to WhatsApp. A genre of banter can start in the playground, move to BBM (Blackberry's messenger service) and from there migrate to Facebook in Trinidadian fieldsite but to Twitter in English fieldsite. These observations are contentious because so much of current theorising of social media is based on the platform as assumed cause, and the creators of the platform as the ultimate determinators of user behaviour. Often explanation is based on presumed

affordances in the technology which again conflated with how and why we use that platform. Affordance-based explanations move us away from technological determinism, but retain an idea of the propensities of the platform itself (e.g. Hutchby 2001, see also Baym 2010).

The problem is that if genres of content migrate easily between totally different platforms, then it cannot be the nature of the platform or their propensities to be used in particular ways that determines this content. This has considerable implications for comparative analysis since it shifts the unit of analysis from the platform (as in Murthy 2012, or indeed Miller 2011) to the genres of content. In our project we turn this around. Usually we argue that it is content which exploits differences in platforms in order to express social differences. For example, school children in England have feminised Instagram as a site for glamorous photographs and turned Twitter into a contrastive expression of machismo `Twitter Beef' (with adult equivalence as in Beyoncé v Trump). Chapter four in each of the nine monographs of Why We Post is concerned with the way family and other social relationships mapped their differences on to the range of social media platforms, or through differentiation within a platform. So we may have a range of WhatsApp groups, but also we may differentiate our WhatsApp friends as against our Tumblr friends. If the platforms can be used in such varied ways they cannot be the cause of their own contents.

The second example, which is closer to what we generally think of as theory, is the idea of *polymedia*. This is a descendent from earlier structuralist thinking, in as much as it argues that the meaning of any one media or social media platform lies largely in its contrast with others. The point goes further than earlier discussions of media ecology, since *polymedia* claims in addition to be a re-socialising and re-moralising of media itself (Madianou and Miller 2012, Chambers 2013). In brief, the argument is that in earlier times people's choice of one particular media could generally be accounted for on grounds of access or cost. Today, however, in most of our fieldsites people have internet and phone plans so the choice of which particular platform to use is no longer determined by cost or access. This turns our selection of particular media into a choice which can be judged as reflective of the values and identity of the individual making the selection. As Gershon (2010) argued in a study of how young people end relationships, an increasingly important component was a judgement about which media they had used for this action. So polymedia foregrounds choice as a social and moral issue. There are many instances within the Why We Post project of how this then comes to be employed. For example, in contentious issues between parents and children, each tries to employ the media they are more comfortable with or have more control over. The child may avoid a phone call if they see it as allowing the parent to question them in detail over a misdemeanour, which might then lead to an argument.

The third analytical development derived from the need for this project to take responsibility for creating a clear definition of social media itself. In *How the World Changed Social Media (Miller et. al. 2016: 1-8)* it is suggested that prior to social

media, the way people communicated was dualist. Forms of media available fell into either the category of private conversational media which was mainly dyadic, or public broadcasting media. The earlier social media platforms scaled down from public broadcasting so that on MySpace or Facebook an individual could `broadcast' a post to just a few hundred people. By contrast, recent social media such as WeChat and WhatsApp, scale up from texting between two people, in order to create small groups, that are not based on individual networking, but on equal membership. A family can now collectively share an image of one of the children, or come together to plan a party.

Between them, these two trends fill out the space previously unoccupied for group communication, following upon other new media such as email. This allows us to propose a definition of social media as *Scalable Sociality.* Social media has occupied 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 in our Brazilian site (Spyer 2017) people often use *indirects*: postings which appear open to the public but can have allusions that can only understood by small groups, excluding everyone else.

Theoretical ideas such as polymedia and scalable sociality are one more way in which the project develops its own units of comparison. Under the terms of our vertical structure, we always need to include the caveat that these ideas will be expressed differently in each of our nine fieldsites. Scalable sociality means people can rank platforms according to the degree of privacy they provide. But in our English fieldsite people are hugely concerned by what they see as the loss of privacy, resulting from the use of social media. While in some other fieldsites in China and South India, people who traditionally lived in extended families may see social media as an unprecedented experience of relative privacy. So scalable sociality becomes the general theoretical contention that can be nuanced by reference to this comparative dimension.

Finally, however, we reach a level of theorisation that transcends these problems of cultural relativism, since the theory has no empirical base. It is merely an act of re-conceptualisation. In this case, what we called *A Theory of Attainment* (Miller and Sinanan 2014) came from the observation that one of the most common responses equally within social science, journalism and popular discourse, to any new technology, is to regard this as somehow detracting from our prior humanity. For example, it is assumed that face-to-face encounters are more natural and more human while social media makes communication more mediated; notwithstanding the legacy of people such as Goffman (1959) who showed quite clearly just how mediated face-to-face communication has always been. Equally common is the claim that these same new technologies are transforming us into *trans-humans* or *post-humans*. Almost every major new technology is now greeted by one or both of these two assertions (e.g. Turkle 2011 or Whitehead, N and Wesch, M. Eds. 2012).

The theory of attainment suggests that the problem may be with our definition of being human, which is too conservative. The concept of being human should include not just what we happen to have been in the past, but everything we are going to be in the future. A new technology just helps us to attain some latent aspect of being human that previously hadn't been fully realised, but now is within reach thanks to the capacities made possible by virtue of this new technology. Humans previously could only travel at a limited speed dictated by how fast they could run, but with horses, cars, and planes they can now move with extraordinary rapidity. But such speed does not change the degree to which they are human, it simply makes evident that this was a latent capacity that is realised as the result of technological development. The theory of attainment is not a product of our enquiry and is not derived from our evidence. It is an attempt to avoid spurious arguments that derive from deficiencies with prior conceptualisation about what it means to be human.

These four developments are the primary mode by which generalities have emerged from this comparative project. In deliberate contrast to what we saw as an often-obfuscating use of theory in academia, the aim in each case has been to achieve greater clarity regarding our findings. They also take their place within our vertical structure of analysis and representation. We start from an approach to content migration which is entirely a generalisation from evidence that accrued from fieldwork, followed by a consideration of the consequences of these observations across our fieldsites. Concepts such as *polymedia* and scalable sociality are generalisations we argue apply to most of our fieldsites. Finally, the theory of attainment does not derive in any way from our own investigations as an empirical generalisation. It is entirely a top down perspective from the peak of this vertical structure based on a re-conceptualisation of what we mean by the term *human.* It was formulated for the purpose of contending with the way people tend to respond to the results of our and other studies of new media technologies.

CONCLUSION

The starting point of this paper was an observation that comparison is often viewed as so central to anthropology as to become definitive of the discipline. Yet in practice, while there are several traditions within anthropology that are comparative, the typical monograph tends to emphasise cultural relativism and the uniqueness of that fieldsite. The focus is on context: the historical and social conditions that gave rise to that behaviour. The act of comparison makes a statement of equivalence between two different places, which seems to detract from this emphasis upon particularity. Anthropologists will usually argue that the same term, for example, friendship, means different things in any two regions, since the surrounding values of kinship, religion, and practices of sociality all impact upon the meaning and experience of friendship.

This paper describes a project that, as is common to comparative studies within anthropology, is based on a thematic concern. *Why We Post* was an anthropological

investigation of social media in nine fieldsites. In some respects, the central argument of this project replicates the drive towards cultural relativism. Even prior to the project Miller had published a book *Tales from Facebook,* entirely devoted to demonstrating that Facebook in Trinidad (Miller 2011) was quintessentially Trinidadian. A means to express local values such as *maco, commess,* and *bacchanal,* which are unique to Trinidad. Similarly, Why We Post was mainly concerned to contest over-generalised claims about the use and consequence of social media by pointing out the significant differences between our nine fieldsites with respect to topics ranging from the concern for privacy, through politics, gender and the use of visual media. Yet at the same time this project had the ambition of extending the traditions of comparative thematic anthropology, using both its foundation in a nine-site comparison and the new technologies that make comparison easier to conduct throughout fieldwork. We wanted to do far more than just juxtaposing our results, as has been typical in edited collections within Anthropology.

The claim made at the start of this paper was that we could resolve the fundamental contradiction in anthropology between cultural relativism and theory, or between specificity and generality, without sacrificing or compromising either. Our proposed solution is to create a vertical analytical structure that complements the horizontal comparison across fieldsites. The vertical structure consists of a spectrum within our dissemination from the most popular expression of our findings on our website to the most academic discussion in journal papers. This is also a spectrum from the most relativist recognition of the uniqueness of every individual, up through ever increasing levels of generality and, as it were, autochthonous theory, in this case including a theory of humanity.

The vertical structure may be considered a kind of ladder, with each step integrally linked to that below and above. For example, on our website we make general statements that summarise our findings, while nuancing them with findings from the individual fieldsites that both support and in some cases challenge these claims. We state that social media tends to decrease, rather than to increase, the tendency towards individualism. But we know that for the Chinese factory workers it does lead to an increase in individuality. Social media generally leads to an equality of capacity online, but with no impact on inequality offline. But again, this statement fails to account for some of our fieldsites. Social media may radically transform gender relations in some places, but not others. If we imagine the individual monograph as a step below such generalisations, then, in effect, these statements are a set of caveats, the word `but' that qualifies the general.

If we then step down to the level of the individual fieldsite the same sequence occurs. We make a statement of comparison between the Brazilian and the South Indian fieldsite. But that overgeneralises the Brazilian site. So here the caveat is - `but' in the Brazilian site women socialise in different ways to men. Which again leads to the caveat that Brazilian lower-class women are different from those

belonging to the higher classes. Until eventually we get to the admission that every lower class Brazilian woman in that fieldsite is unique. In this manner we can retain our commitment to the humanism of stories and our empathy with individuals, yet also theorise at a high level of generality. A vertical structure makes clear that each level is a caveat that protects the generality of the level above, by showing that the forms of difference the generality appear to ignore, have been taken into account and not traduced by abstraction and aggregation.

The same process works in reverse. To announce something as a *discovery* which is presented in a single sentence, will always appear to an academic as potentially crass and simplistic. It seems a betrayal of both our sense of holism and complexity and the importance of context. But the way that our dissemination is constructed, a person reading about such a discovery on our website is encouraged to go up a level to take the e-course to learn more. Here the discovery is unpacked in further detail and related to a wider context. In turn, a person taking the e-course, is encouraged to click through to the open access books where they will not only find detailed accounts of the context of every one of the nine fieldsites, but also the comparisons and contrasts between them and theoretical structures that clarify these arguments.

So, both the humanism of our stories, and the simplicity of our popularising discourse are protected as academic dissemination, because they are clearly linked to our evidence and to more theoretical propositions. They are thereby seen to be more than just anecdotes or mere positivist description. They become not just caveats expressing specificity, but also instances that speak to our discussion of typicality and normativity. Under these conditions, we can lose our fear of comparison. We can examine social hierarchy, or new visual forms of communication across nine sites, knowing that the counter point, where the phenomenon is explained through deep contextualisation, is to be found in the relevant monograph.

Clearly all of this has been made possible, partly, by the sheer scale of this project. The ability to publish eleven volumes, including over 2,000 pages of ethnographic description, is what makes possible both this amount of horizontal comparison across nine sites and simultaneously the creation of a vertical spectrum from extensive popular to multiple theoretical interventions. We are able to challenge many of the general claims made about social media. We have shown how social media can increase and not just decrease privacy, simultaneously assist and detract from education. We can acknowledge general changes, such as the way social media has made the visual equal to the oral and the textual as part of everyday human communication. But then nuance this by examining the many different genres of selfie, or explaining why we call the `meme' the moral police of the internet. We are able to tease out how far differences between China and elsewhere derive from the presence of different platforms as against cultural differences, while demonstrating that some of our most marked contrasts are actually between our two

Chinese sites. Above all we have shown why the study of social media needs to be through the appreciation of content rather than of platforms.

Beyond the topic itself we have tried to show how large-scale projects can demonstrate the potential for anthropology to come closer to its self-definition as a comparative discipline, transcending the limitations of most anthropological practice, which for lack of funding are commonly limited to individual ethnographies. By using the facilities provided by new digital communications and making comparison integral to the entire process, from inception to writing up, we come closer to the textbook definition of `the comparative study of cultural and social life' (Eriksen 2001:4). But equally important, by re-thinking the dissemination of our research results from a more holistic perspective, incorporating what we have called a vertical as well as a horizontal structure, we can reconcile the contradictory demands of our empathetic devotion to the uniqueness of people as individuals and the analytical requirements of generalisation and theory.

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