Why We Post: the Anthropology of Social Media

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ABSTRACT
This paper will provide an overview of an extensive research project on the use and consequences of social media around the world that is resulting in 11 Open Access books as well as a dedicated website and an e-learning course in 8 languages. The project saw nine anthropologists each spend 15 months living in eight countries in communities as varied as an English village, a factory town in China, and a community on the Turkish-Syrian border, an IT complex set in villages within south India, a low income settlement in Brazil, as well as sites in Chile, Italy and Trinidad.

The project resulted in an original definition of social media as ‘scalable sociality’ and a demonstration of how generalisation, analysis and theory can be made compatible with the considerable evidence for cultural differences in the use and consequences of social media across the nine fieldsites. In particular it will challenge the usual way social media is represented in terms of platforms and their affordances.

Topics addressed will include the way social media changes human communication, and the reasons people post memes and selfies. It will explore social media as a place in which we live, and ask why social media may represent the world as more conservative than offline life. It will also briefly address the general impact of social media on areas such as privacy, commerce, education, gender and politics. In conclusion it will show how this comparative global project can be turned into new forms of global education.

BIOGRAPHY
Dr Daniel Miller (@dannyanth) is Professor of Material Culture at the Department of Anthropology, University College London and a Fellow of the British Academy. He has specialised in the study of material culture and consumption. He is the author of many books and journal articles, including The Comfort of Things (Polity, 2008), Consumption and its Consequences (Polity, 2012), and, most recently, Social Media in an English Village (UCL Press, 2016).