

Book Review

Daniel Miller. *Tales from Facebook*. Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011, 220 pp., \$19.95 (paperback)/\$69.95 (hardcover). ISBN 978-0-7456-5210-8.

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Facebook was created in a dorm room at Harvard University in 2004, yet according to the company's statistics, today roughly 80% of its more than 800 million active users are located outside the United States (<http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>). Although other social networking sites are dominant in certain countries (e.g., Orkut in Brazil and Cyworld in Korea), the sheer magnitude of Facebook's global diffusion would seem reason enough to warrant research on its implications for diverse groups of users. Moreover, both understanding common usage based on the platform's affordances and parsing the differences that emerge in specific locales are important issues that have been little-studied thus far.

In *Tales from Facebook*, Daniel Miller offers an ethnographic study of Facebook use in Trinidad, where the social networking site has a very high penetration rate relative to Internet users. Through investigating the meanings and consequences of Facebook for "ordinary people," Miller, an anthropologist known for his work on material culture, as well as prior ethnographic studies of the Internet in Trinidad (with Don Slater) and mobile phone use in Jamaica (with Heather Horst), also hopes to decenter the belief that Facebook's core demographic is in the United States or United Kingdom. Miller's starting premise is, therefore, that a universal "Facebook" doesn't actually exist. Instead, Facebook is produced in particular contexts where individuals draw upon their own cultural resources as they develop genres of use in line with their needs and expectations. For the most part, Miller succeeds in his aims with the book, and while the subjects of his study come from diverse backgrounds and Miller writes for a general audience, researchers in the field of information communication technologies and development should still find some of Miller's insights useful for their own work.

Tales from Facebook is arranged into three sections. In the first part, which comprises the bulk of the text, Miller presents 12 vignettes of different people (or actually, composites of people) that are representative of various types of Facebook use and the consequences, both positive and negative, of such use. The second part uses the ethnographic findings of the first section to posit 15 theses on what Facebook is, or is becoming, in relation to changing conceptions of the individual, community, work, leisure, and the like. In a shorter final section, Miller draws from a theory of culture derived from a prior ethnographic study of an island off the coast of Papua New Guinea to attempt to create a theory of Facebook.

In crafting his 12 portraits in the first part of the book, Miller shows how age, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status all play roles in determining what Facebook means to different users. He explores a wide range of topics: relationships, sexuality, religion, gossip, gaming, Facebook addiction, online stalking, the construction of identity, and the revitaliza-

tion of community. Throughout these explorations, he also addresses some of the most well-known critiques of Facebook, such as how it encourages superficiality, is a waste of time, and has broken down all notions of a divide between the public and the private. One of the most engaging vignettes concerns a cosmopolitan human rights lawyer who has become disabled and housebound and has successfully utilized Facebook to build networks centered around art and activism. Another features a young, impoverished woman who uses Facebook to construct an image of herself free of the constraints of her material life. Because people reveal so much about themselves on Facebook, and might also have things unintentionally revealed about themselves as a result of other people's posts, she insists that Facebook is actually a more truthful representation of an individual than how they present themselves offline. In contrast, still another young woman constantly posts poems, prose writing, and other material on Facebook as a way to present a public persona in order to maintain her privacy and protect her inner self. Although these and other stories, such as a young man who uses Facebook to overcome shyness, present a mostly positive view of Facebook, there are also portraits that reveal its negative side, such as that of a singing star who must deal with the repercussions of a leaked sex video in which she appeared, and a man who blames the deterioration of his marital relationship on his wife's Facebook addiction.

Many of the issues that Miller tackles in relation to Facebook will seem familiar to users of the social networking site. However, he takes pains to ground such usage in the particularities of Trinidadian culture (even including a glossary of Trini expressions at the beginning of the book). To that end, there is extensive use of Carnival in elaborating how masquerade (and by extension, Facebook) reveals the "truth" of a person, and the Trinidadian notion of *bacchanal*, meaning scandal or gossip that causes disorder, to frame discussions of how certain Facebook usage leads to embarrassment, jealousy, or unwanted exposure of something personal. One of the most interesting cultural insights is that "to friend" is not a new verb in Trinidad; instead, it is an old Trinidadian expression that means to have sex with a person, always in the context of a nonmarital relationship.

The 12 vignettes are intended to emphasize the

heterogeneity of Facebook use as it emerges in Trinidad, with rich details about Trinidad's culture and history that, while interesting, are, in a few cases, not always relevant to Facebook use. In the second part of *Tales from Facebook*, Miller presents some partial generalizations that are more or less positive about Facebook, including the assertions that, rather than creating superficiality in relationships, it can be used to nurture intimacy and achieve co-presence; that Facebook reverses the trend of the decline of community over the last century or so, though not without some negative consequences; and that Facebook continues to facilitate changing notions of time and space, just as other previous communication technologies have done. In the final section, he argues that Facebook is its own culture, with accompanying values and norms, and that it enables people to satisfy their need to expand their networks, set goals, and be recognized for their abilities and accomplishments.

Early in *Tales from Facebook*, Miller notes that the majority of Trinidadians are poor and uneducated. Given this reality, how are they able to access Facebook, and what are the implications of their Facebook use for their emotional or material well-being? As in many parts of the world, in Trinidad kinship ties play a key role in whether one has computer or Internet access. Parents buy a computer so their son can succeed in school; older brothers working abroad send money home so that a younger sibling can purchase a laptop. One young man relied on a library with Internet access or a wired neighbor to access Facebook. The whole process of friending was also used to try to expand one's social networks in ways that might increase one's social, and potentially, economic capital. For example, a common practice noted by Miller is that, upon being invited to be someone's friend on Facebook, the invitee scans the networks of the person who sent the invitation, to assess how they could benefit from these networks. Yet, as Miller notes, Facebook friends are not always a good indication of someone's significant connections, since people send and accept friend requests rather casually. Nonetheless, he does note instances of Facebook being used to develop business and expand business networks, and that, often, such social and economic uses of Facebook are hard to distinguish, as has been found in other parts of the world with mobile phone contacts (see Donner, 2009).

As enlightening as *Tales from Facebook* is, it is not without its shortcomings. Although Miller elaborates on how embedded Facebook has become in the lives of his participants and makes a case for what he calls *polymedia*, which recognizes the range of communication technologies and channels now available to many people in the world, he only makes occasional mention of how Facebook use is connected to the use of these other communication technologies. Also, aside from discussions of his own prior work and that of a handful of others, he engages very little with the large literature on online communities or the social and cultural uses of information communication technologies. In addition, he does not acknowledge how many of the practices he associates with Facebook have precedents in other technologies, especially mobile phones. For example, there is no mention of how teens have used texting as a way to overcome shyness or awkwardness in personal relationships (Ellwood-Clayton, 2003), the norms of gifting and reciprocity associated with text messaging (Taylor & Harper, 2003), or the “ambient virtual co-presence” enabled by mobile phones (Ito & Okabe, 2005). At times, Miller also veers toward the technologically deterministic in the agency he seemingly grants Facebook in destroying relationships or creating bacchanal.

These critiques aside, *Tales from Facebook* is an important contribution that aids our understanding of not only Facebook, but also social networking sites more generally. To Miller, the key attribute of Facebook is the way it is used to connect families (sometimes across continents), to reestablish bonds with long-lost friends, and to nurture close ties—in other words, to enable people to maintain and expand networks of sociality that have been said to have declined in the modern world. Miller’s conclu-

sion—that Facebook helps us understand social networking as “an intrinsic condition of social life, irrespective of the technology employed” (p. 218)—is also a welcome antidote to the fixation on the “new” that sometimes occurs in studies of communication technology. His research on Facebook use in Trinidad lays the groundwork for further studies of how diverse groups of users, particularly more marginalized populations, use social networking sites to fulfill both these and other needs. ■

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