

Moment JOURNAL

Journal of Cultural Studies, Faculty of Communication, Hacettepe University

2017, 4(1): 14-18

ISSN: 2148-970X. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17572/mj2017.1.1418>

Interview

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE ETHNOGRAPHY: AN INTERVIEW WITH DANIEL MILLER

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Daniel Miller is a professor of anthropology at UCL. He is also an editor of the Material World Blog (“A global hub for thinking about things”) He has been working on digital anthropology and social media. His other interests are material culture and consumption, clothing and housing, transnational domestic labour, motherhood and hospices and ageing. His recent global anthropological research project “Why We Post” came up with eleven books including *Social Media in Southeast Turkey*. He has written/edited 37 books including *Webcam* (2014), *Digital Anthropology* (2012), *Tales From Facebook* (2011), *Materiality* (2005) etc. Our interview focuses on his recent and future projects, his views on a good and bad ethnography, interdisciplinary ethnography and more.

I would like to begin with your most recent and extensive research “Why We Post”. The research team, consists nine anthropologists, each spent 15 months with communities in China, Brazil, Turkey, Chile, India, England, Italy and Trinidad. How did that research team gather? And how did you decide on the regions? For instance the research in Turkey was held in Southeast Turkey, Mardin. Why there? And what was the criteria about who will be responsible for which region?

We called the project a global comparison, but of course you can never be truly global. In practice I wanted to cover the main population blocks, such as China and South Asia.

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Date of Interview: 04/05/2017

But the main reason for selecting most of the sites was simply that there were very few people who are sufficiently qualified to carry out this kind of digital anthropology, but also available at the precise time and wanting to be part of this project. I was very keen on having a field site in Turkey having been interested in the area for while and with friends in Turkish academia. But it was Elisabetta Costa who shows the precise site. She had previously carried out her PhD on political blogging in Lebanon and saw herself as a political anthropologist. She felt that the position and tomography of Mardin meant that it was likely to be of interest for her concerns. But in fact if you read her book you will see that she had to acknowledge that in some ways political posting was not as common as she anticipated and actually she therefore concentrates more on other issues such as gender.

What would be an introspective criticism on Why We Post research? When you look back, does that research experience offer you anything informative that will be useful and instructive for any future research projects?

I would hope there are a number of innovations represented by this project. One of the most important is probably the way we have learnt from digital technologies to, in turn, rethink how you can use these the dissemination of research results. You can see this in the way we have linked open access books written in a highly accessible style with our films website the free e-learning course on future learn, extensive translation, social media and blogging. Also we feel that we were able to realise an often claimed ambition towards genuinely collaborative and comparative anthropology that has actually been quite rare in practice. In a way the one real drawback from all this is the realisation that we were able to do this largely because we were well resourced and that is unlikely to be true of many anthropological projects now or in the future. So the real challenge will be to see if we can gain some of these benefits and goals even for projects that are much less well resourced. Having said that, in my previous work on blue jeans, a whole series of entirely separate projects agreed to less formal collaboration just on the basis of common interest, even though none of us were particularly well funded. So to some degree it is the willingness to collaborate, not always the funding, that may be missing.

Would you do that sort of research with sociologists or academics from communication studies area? In other words, can an “anthropological field study” be hold by researchers from different disciplines?

I am a great believer in interdisciplinary work and indeed many innovations emerge at points in which it is hard to link these new approaches to any one establish discipline,

because in some ways disciplines are inherently conservative. It is however the case that I personally am committed to long-term ethnographies and I see so many advantages, in terms of things like trust and depth, that I would not want to compromise for myself. So I mainly work with people from other disciplines who would also like to engage in this kind of methodology. For example, my first book about the Internet, was written jointly with Don Slater, who is a sociologist but worked with me as an ethnographer. Having said that, I think the point is to understand online life and that will never be achieved simply by one approach or methodology, so one is always looking for insights that come from, for example, quantitative surveys or different forms of communication studies, that give other kinds of information than would be available to us. For example, we did no work on the social media companies, but a full understanding of social media would obviously want to include studies of the corporations that control them.

And what makes a good and bad ethnography?

One of the things that tends to impress me about an ethnography is when people do not find what they are looking for or what would be in their interests. I have already mentioned that Elisabetta Costa wanted to concentrate on politics, which would have suited her career, but has clearly acknowledged that there were other important things in the ethnography that she needed to emphasise instead. The same was true of almost every one of our projects - that ethnographers allow themselves to be led by the values and concerns their informants and not simply by their personal interests as anthropologists. This is why I have always been suspicious of work founded in departments such as gender or ethnic studies, that thereby create an institutional need to focus on particular social dimensions as opposed others. I prefer an inductive ethnography where we are open to whatever turns out to be of particular significance as it unfolds during the ethnography itself.

In his article “That’s enough about ethnography!” (2014 | Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory 4 (1): 383–395) Tim Ingold says: “Ethnography has become a term so overused, both in anthropology and in contingent disciplines, that it has lost much of its meaning. I argue that to attribute ‘ethnographicness’ to encounters with those among whom we carry on our research, or more generally to fieldwork, is to undermine both the ontological commitment and the educational purpose of anthropology as a discipline, and of its principal way of working—namely participant observation”. What would you say about the points Ingold indicate here?

Tim Ingold has tried to carefully disaggregate the term ethnography from fieldwork or participant observation or method. I understand why he is trying to do this and the advantage to his argument that would bring. The problem is that for generations anthropologists have been using terms such as fieldwork, ethnography, and participant observation as more or less synonymous and in effect as the terms for our method. I suggest therefore that it would be better to accept the colloquial meaning and definition of ethnography and work from there. Unlike Ingold, I use the term ethnography in the way I think most people routinely use it.

Again coming from the recently completed *Why we post* project, in that project we call ethnography *holistic contextualisation*. The point is simply that when we started we had no idea why people post on social media. It might be to do with family, with class, with religion, or with politics. Unless we know something about all of these topics we cannot answer this question. Furthermore, no one lives just on social media—they live everything at once—so ethnography has to have the same integrity as everyday life, which is why most of our work is offline. Ethnography is never just observation because the whole point, for an anthropologist, is that as soon as you make the decision to describe something, with that comes a responsibility to account for what you claim to have observed. Furthermore, at least in our case, we guard against the potential parochialism of ethnography by always working comparatively.

My own model came from the ethnographies I was given when I first learned anthropology, such as the early works of Clifford Geertz. In these books there wasn't much debate with other anthropologists or something abstracted as theory; the strength of his work came from the original insights that helped account for what had been observed, and it is assumed that to the degree this was required, the ethnography would also include any wider knowledge that helped account for the observations such as history or political economy. Theory is that which gives clarity to these insights, not something which obscures them.

Could we learn a bit about your upcoming works, projects and courses?

The *Why We Post* project lasted for five years and is now complete. From October 2017 I will start on a new five year project. There were three particular concerns. One is to rethink the experience of age, not from the perspective of either the young or the elderly, but taking our point of departure from the ambivalence of those situated in between. That is the age group between 45 and 70. We will approach this by investigating the impact of smartphones which I think of now become the core hub. In

some ways social media just now become some amongst many other apps that we increasingly access through the smartphone. So these will be general ethnographies of peoples relationship to the smartphone. Smartphones can become an orientation to things we associate with youth, such as digital technologies rock music or dating. But as people become older and experience various frailties, I think smartphones will be increasingly used as a key locus for health.

There is a massive development at present of what is known as *mhealth* that is mobile health applications. And in this project, unlike the last one, I would like our work to be directly applied to ways in which we can improve the welfare of populations by learning from our ethnographies and making these apps more culturally and socially sensitive. Although then there is an applied dimension to this project, the approach will still consist of comparative 15 months ethnographies and those remain committed to this kind of holistic contextualisation in which we study whatever emerges from the experience of carrying out the ethnography. At the present time it seems that there may be 12 simultaneous ethnographies that will constitute this project, although on this occasion we do not have a field site in Turkey.