The Ethnographic Use of Facebook in Everyday Life

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Abstract

New social media have become indispensable to people all over the world as platforms for communication, with Facebook being the most popular. Hence, platforms like Facebook are also becoming crucial tools for ethnographers because much social life now exists 'online'. What types of field relations stem from such social media-driven ethnography? And what kinds of data do these relations present to the ethnographer? These questions must be considered in order to understand the challenges Facebook and other social media pose to ethnographic methodology. This article focuses on how Facebook may play an important role even in ethnographic work concerned with questions other than how Facebook works as a social medium. Most importantly it allows the ethnographer to keep up-to-date with the field. I argue that ethnography is already in possession of the methodological tools critically to assess the validity and value of data gathered or produced via Facebook including issues such as authenticity which are also pertinent to digital ethnography.

Keywords

Facebook; Ethnography; Social media; Fieldwork; Papua New Guinea

Introduction[1]

The challenges that ethnographers encounter obviously depend on the 'field' in which they engage. However, what counts as a field is a continuous and open-ended question, which again depends on the social relationships the researcher develops as part of fieldwork, and the data that one 'collects' or 'produces' from these relationships. For those who study online cultural phenomena, social media and the relationships mediated by these media have come to constitute field-sites in their own right. To many more, social media have become indispensable platforms for interaction between researchers and interlocutors – in the global north but increasingly also in the global south. Scholars theorising about social media have convincingly argued that online sites are by now so integrated into many people's everyday lives that it makes little sense to maintain a clear-cut distinction between online and offline (see boyd 2006; Gershon 2010; Miller 2011). However, no matter to what degree they are used, social media platforms may still challenge conventions on how ethnographic data are generated when face-to-face relationships with informants are supplanted by online communication. At the very least, ethnographic practice mediated by social media forces ethnographers to consider anew the requirements of their methodology (Beneito-Montagut 2011, 716–717), and how to collect and represent different forms of digital data (Coleman 2010, 494).

This article presents an example of how communication through Facebook has become an important supplement to a classic long-term ethnographic engagement with a field-site in Papua New Guinea (PNG). Throughout the article I focus on Facebook because it is the platform that my interlocutors in PNG have come to use. Apart from that, it is the most prevalent platform in terms of both registered profiles globally and monthly use.[2] In my research, Facebook has provided a way of staying up to date when the physical distance of the field prohibits frequent returns and the timing of the next field visit is uncertain (cf. Whyte 2013). Even if I went to PNG frequently, Facebook would remain important to access the imponderabilia of everyday life of those interlocutors who use it. One could argue that this approach to Facebook hardly brings out the whole range of ethnographic possibilities afforded[3] by social media, nor does it allow for theorisation of social media ethnography. Yet, firstly, if his or her interlocutors use Facebook, so should the ethnographer, and, secondly, this use of Facebook represents how ethnographers experience the way social media has replaced the communication with their field that letters, telephone and fax filled in the past (see Jackson 2015, 43). A discussion of Facebook in 'everyday ethnographic

practice' may also put to rest some of the 'hype' that often surrounds new media, and some of the anxiety that novice ethnographers may feel when there are few publications to guide the management of field-relationships online.

Despite being new media that provide new platforms for social life, I will wager that Facebook and perhaps social media more generally do not confront ethnographers with any challenges that are totally unprecedented. Qualitative ethnographic methodology, which has developed significantly following the crisis of representation and the advent of discourses of globalisation, is already in possession of the tools to deal with online platforms (cf. Beneito-Montagut 2011). These include: training in paying attention to detail through observation; immersion into a diversity of lived lives through participation; systematic modes of questioning through interviewing; and epistemologies for working with text, images, film and other media representations of self and other. What ethnographers do online in terms of pursuing research questions, and thinking critically and systematically about data and their sources, is not that different from what they are used to doing offline. Virtual or digital ethnography, which focuses on online modes of inquiry, goes back almost two decades, and is inspired by well-tested offline approaches (see Hine 2000). Studies of social media go back more than one decade with Facebook celebrating its 10th birthday in 2014 (see Lincoln and Robards 2014). Scholars in media studies have produced much work outlining the methodological importance of social media, but within anthropology fewer publications have tried to grapple with the topic (but see Horst and Miller 2012; Sanjek and Tratner 2015). For this reason, there is still much need for discussions of how fieldwork is facilitated both online and offline, and how field relationships become articulated in new forms with the new affordances of digital technologies.

In this article I will first go through some ways that Facebook fieldwork has been approached. From there I go into how an important part of doing fieldwork for me has moved to Facebook as a platform for communication, and I discuss the questions it has raised and the potential new understandings it has engendered. This leads me to the topic of the format or types of data to which ethnographers get access via Facebook, and what opportunities or reservations should be taken when dealing with Facebook data. Throughout the paper I will discuss Facebook in relation to how it may be understood in relation to my physical research site in PNG, where I have spent more than two years in total of research time between 2002 and 2012.

Approaching Facebook

Online worlds such as *Second Life* (Boellstorff 2008) and *World of Warcraft* (Nardi 2010) are designed as worlds in their own right and present a place-like spatiality via their interface. In contrast, Facebook and other social media are often considered to be more holistically entangled with the ways that the users value and practice social relationships and community across a variety of sites and contexts both offline and online (see Miller 2011). Facebook is to most users 'simply' a part of their lives (more so for some than for others), which sets a specific framework for interaction through the means of communication embedded in the template (chat and messages; posting on walls; sharing of links, images and videos; commenting on postings; indications of being in an audience through the 'like', tagging etc.).[4] On Facebook, one connects with other people, and these connections are called *friends*. Without friends the profile has little purpose (Dalsgaard 2008). It is by adding friends that a Facebook user gains the possibility of sharing and connecting, which is the essence of engaging with Facebook. Friending is reciprocal, and the friending may or may not be anchored offline. Friends may include close family, schoolmates, romantic partners, random acquaintances and complete strangers. The reasons for friending someone vary (boyd 2006; McKay 2011), and so may the very meaning that people ascribe to both the friend category and to friending (Miller 2011). Through their profile, users can communicate with their friends, but also with other non-friend users depending on the individual privacy settings applied, through various means from personal messages and writing on each other's pages (including posting of videos and photos), to indications of acknowledgement and preference with 'tags' and a 'like' button. By logging into Facebook, a user can follow what their friends are doing through a newsfeed where the recent activities of friends appear. What appears can be filtered by the user but is otherwise determined by an algorithm computing one's likely preferences from data about previous choices and actions online.

Facebook sociality appears centre-less and dispersed, when seen from the outside. This is often stressed as one major aspect that differentiates online from offline existence. Facebook is thus often designated precisely as a 'network' rather than a 'community' or a 'society' (Postill 2010), and social scientists have worked with the application of various forms of social network analysis derived from studies prior to the emergence of social media (see Wellman *et al*. 1996). The network

approach may or may not be relevant to an ethnography on or about Facebook, depending on what one wants to investigate. John Postill (2010), for instance, has suggested a conceptualisation where online interaction is part of offline contexts. Research prior to Facebook has likewise shown that the Internet may reinforce offline social relationships (Hampton and Wellman 2003), and that the majority of the people using social media employ it to manage social relationships, some of which are simultaneously mediated offline.

Whatever appears on Facebook often does so with direct reference to offline phenomena or it is integrated with what appears in other (online) media. Many ethnographic studies thus find that relying solely on Facebook data will be insufficient and instead adopt 'multimedia data collection methods' (Beneito-Montagut 2011). An example is Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller's (2013) study of transnational families, who stayed in touch across distances through a variety of digital media (email, webcam, social media, etc.). Madianou and Miller consequently coined the term polymedia to indicate that their informants saw the multiplicity of media not as separate channels but as a communicative environment of affordances, which meant that the choice of appropriate media for the informants had social, emotional and moral consequences for them as persons (see also Gershon 2010). Facebook has itself integrated a variety of communicative forms such as the Facebook Messenger service and applications where users can play, exchange or share in different ways. This makes it increasingly difficult to distinguish between the different media or the hierarchies between them (Madianou and Miller 2013, 172).

Madianou and Miller's work is an example of the need to pay attention to multiple channels and forms of communication when studying how people interact with and via media. Even if Facebook constitutes a new platform or 'template' for such communication and interaction, it is driven by human agents whose concerns and actions online are integrated with a variety of possible contexts and concerns. The template is also constantly developing with new features and as such Facebook is a phenomenon constantly in the making (cf. Gershon and Bell 2013). It is this recognition of the ongoing practical formation and emergence of Facebook as both 'culture' and 'cultural artefact' that ethnographers need to keep in mind (see Hine 2000). In this regard the word 'Facebook' may refer to several different artefacts. Firstly it may refer to the company (henceforth 'the Company'), secondly to the template which the Company has developed, and thirdly to the numerous practices associated with the use of the template, and the interpretation of what kind of Facebook appears to

the individual users, who may experience the template and its user-generated content in as many different ways as there are users (Miller 2011, 158). Annelise Riles (2001) argues in her ethnography of the artefacts of 'the information age' that Fijian mats and United Nations (UN) documents can be considered analogies, because both are perceived to weave people across the world into a form of 'unified document'. Mats and UN documents are thus both 'object' and the 'pattern' which is produced. Facebook presents another analogy to the woven interconnectedness of the global; like mats and UN documents, Facebook has become a manifestation of how people make moral and social distinctions and classifications. As Riles, for instance, focuses on the devices (brackets) that let the document be produced, so researchers of or on Facebook could focus on the devices or the affordances that let Facebook be produced socially. These include the timeline, the wall, status updates, the newsfeed, apps, the 'like', the tag and so on, and what people do with these affordances of the template. Likewise they present the researcher with tools of inquiry (Rogers 2012, 1).

When the Field Moves to Facebook

All research projects that rely on Facebook relationships probably do so in quite particular ways, and it is thus difficult to generalise about how Facebook should be approached. Facebook's role in my own research may be quite typical, though, because of the way Facebook affords maintenance of social relationships that existed prior to Facebook. These relationships may now be emerging in different forms mediated by digital technologies.

The field I got to know during the work for my PhD consists of a set of relationships centred geographically on Manus Province in PNG. I was first introduced to Manus in 2002, and since then I have returned regularly and I have had visitors from Manus in my native Denmark (Dalsgaard 2009, 2013). I thus developed intimate relationships with informants before Facebook became available as a platform for communication. Yet, since I have a Facebook profile and an increasing number of my acquaintances in Manus and PNG have created profiles since mobile phone coverage has spread in the province, it is only natural that some connections and communication has moved online. This communication has included posting on walls, private messaging, sharing and tagging of photos and most of the other means afforded by the template. Accessing the relationships that Manusians entertain with each other on Facebook also has not been a problem for me. There has

been no need to negotiate with gatekeepers, and in some cases I have even been invited to join Facebook groups administered by Manusians. Facebook-mediated communication has not led to any revolution in my understanding of Manus sociality as such. However, I have come to know Facebook-using interlocutors differently than I did before. Mostly this engagement has provided me with 'updates'. These are important to me personally but also for my understanding of my research topics. If someone in the village has died, it is often the subject of a post. If there is a large festive occasion, it will appear in the network that I am connected to.

Facebook-mediated updating certainly enhances my understanding of the political topic that I have previously studied (Dalsgaard 2010). Since I am Facebook friends with one of the two members of parliament for Manus, I receive frequent updates on political issues. This is further facilitated by my subscription along with more than 2000 other Facebook users to two open discussion forums about how to develop Manus. Facebook-use in PNG was dominated by young, educated urban elites until a few years ago (Logan 2012), but both younger and older Manusians now seem to use these Manus-based forums, with a few more male than female users.

Since my last visit, one of the most controversial political topics has been the Manus Regional Processing Centre, where asylum seekers from the Middle East and Asia are being held indefinitely as part of Australia's 'Pacific solution'. I expect that next time I return to Manus I will be able to debate this topic with people from an informed position since I am up-to-date about the Centre and the spinoffs that the Manus government has received in exchange for hosting it. I can also address the apparent contradiction between online Islamophobic comments and the hospitality that I have seen Manus people extend to foreigners under other circumstances.

In terms of what Manus people otherwise 'do' on Facebook, I have witnessed many actions that I imagine are shared by Facebook users all over the world. They post prayers, health advice, jokes, and death notices. They discuss politics and development. They share videos and photos of friends, family, events, cute animals or the land- or seascapes they inhabit, and they share their joys both large and small as well as grief over lost ones or minor annoyances. These are some of the trivia of everyday life that forms the backbone of ethnographic participation in people's lives (Okely 2012, 82). I have noticed some specifics, however, that are common amongst the Manus people I am friends with, but which I have rarely seen elsewhere. These include different writing styles

employed by Papua New Guineans on Facebook (I return to this below). I have also noticed how people often tag others on photographs that are posted on Facebook usually without an obvious link to the image itself (the people tagged do not appear), and I have noticed a certain etiquette of thanking those who have added one as friend, either in personal messages or on the wall of the one who has added the person in question.

In particular, the posts in the discussion forums can reveal general public concerns, but in some cases one must know the styles of communication that prevail offline in order to appreciate why people comment as they do. In Manus, speaking in public is associated with status. Usually only men of a certain standing will speak at public gatherings. Women and (young) men without land, wealth or other possessions risk ridicule if they stand to speak, and the rhetoric uses specific metaphors and registers that may be difficult for the outsider to comprehend clearly (see Otto 1992). From what I can gather, public forums on Facebook do not deter young men from making comments in the same way. This is partly because few elders are online, and partly because these young men likely have an education that gives them more confidence than their peers in the village-based settings that here form the comparison. Women post comments as well, although less often, and those who do are generally senior and well educated. While politics is thus still male-dominated online, women do post frequently on their own or their friends' walls. Audience is most likely as important as it is elsewhere (McKay 2011; Miller 2011), but it is unclear to me *how* Manusians consider or feel affected by audience on Facebook. Being careful with public behaviour is not new to people in Melanesian villages. Much has been written about the moral surveillance and suspicion that village life apparently inscribes on the social person (e.g. Küehling 2005). Traditional leaders and politicians in particular often use protective magic to avoid the dangers of being exposed to the public eye while speaking. Manus people may therefore be well-equipped to meet the demands of an emerging netiquette, because they are already acutely aware of the dangers of 'talk' and of being exposed publicly.

Facebook discussions can of course still 'go wrong'. As mentioned above, communication is occasionally presented in the guise of metaphor, but also in forms of joking that are common in specific kin or community relationships in Manus (for example, cross-cousin relations as a joking-relationship and metaphor – *tok piksa* – as a mode of presenting oneself as observant and intelligent in both public and private speech). Taken out of the context of particular relationships, such jokes or

metaphors are easily misunderstood. An example is the comment, "In town there seems to be doctors and nurses walking around in their theatre gear. Are there operations going on in the streets?"[5] This comment met heavy criticism from other members of the forum to which it was posted. Critics asked the author to post photos as evidence, to state who those doctors or nurses who were walking around 'showing off' in town were, or called for the administrators of the forum to check whether the comment was from a 'genuine' member. Others tried to calm the critics by saying it was metaphor for people protecting themselves from the dust in town, which again led some to harangue the author of the post for making fun of people protecting their respiratory system. The author later apologised for the confusion stating that he or she only wanted to draw attention to the felling of some large trees which contributed to the excessive amounts of dust that people going through town had to endure. In other words, using the genre of metaphor, which is common offline and which often wins praise if done intelligently, only caused confusion in this case. Of further interest to me was how the whole debate about dust in town was related to debates about development, local government and Manus' place in the wider world. From following these debates over time, it appears that the unpopular felling of the trees was decided upon by the town government in order to widen the main road through town to cater for the increase in traffic (of people as well as resources) after the reopening of the asylum seekers' centre.

Facebook discussions can also be disrupted by what in Internet slang is referred to as 'trolls'. The blogosphere and social media in PNG have grown exponentially in recent years, with an estimated 143 000 Facebook accounts in PNG as a whole as of December 2012 and likely many more at the time of writing.[6] Some have argued that online media has the potential to transform politics in PNG with regard to transparency, collective political identities and political participation (see Logan 2012; Rooney 2012), but I think it is as likely that the styles of intervention and argumentation that appear offline will move online too. Some bloggers have recently begun to suspect that several of those commenting on blog posts critical of controversial politicians are 'trolls' paid to derail the topic and defame the blogger. In the village context this practice often goes under the name of *bagarapim* (from English 'bugger up' – that is, to sabotage something). Frequently, much more frequently than my Facebook friends from elsewhere, Manus people appear under pseudonyms or made-up names, which may foster further suspicion as to motives during online debates. I will return to this authenticity of users below.

Eventually, when I next return to Manus I hope to follow up on these and other observations. In other words, Facebook has led me to formulate questions about the ways people communicate, what political aspirations some online Manusians have for their home province, and how Manus is perceived to be developing in light of the contemporary discussions about international politics and processes of globalisation made manifest by the foreign refugees. As a caveat against over-interpretation I want to stress that there are many cultural aspects – which over the years many Manus people have insisted upon as central to their sociality – which I have yet to encounter on Facebook. These include cultural symbols such as betel nuts, which are central objects of exchange and sharing among kin and friends, and the respect for a hierarchy referred to as *lapan* (often translated as 'chief'). If it is present, it is not obvious from the material or easily accessible. The form of 'traditional' culture that has migrated onto Facebook through photos of cultural performances is largely the recent celebratory version labelled *kalsa* (culture) rather than the notion of *kastam* (tradition), which has been widely documented and discussed by ethnographers working in Melanesia since the early 1980s (see Dalsgaard and Otto 2011).

Facebook communication can thus supplement my offline data, but it also generates further questions that could either be pursued online via Facebook or offline when returning to the field in person. At least that is how I hope to make use of the Facebook communication that I am part of, but how does this communication work methodologically?

Affordances for Ethnographic Methods

The sharing of experience has typically been crucial to ethnographic methodology, especially in the form of participant observation. Yet how does one share experience through online media? I will here distinguish between two types of sharing of experience, both of which can be seen as aspects of doing ethnographic participant observation. One of them is the bodily sense of presence and immersion, the other is the engagement with interlocutors via communicative exchange of greetings, information, fun, sorrows, etc. by which one becomes and acts as an accepted member of a group or a community.

Beginning with the bodily aspects, the methods of participation that are employed online necessarily depend on the forms of perception and interaction afforded by the medium in question.[7]

For a start, without a profile one cannot hope to do participant observation in Facebook, even if the online participation is merely meant as an extension of one's offline work (see Boellstorff *et al*. 2012, chapter 5). While smell and taste are not relevant bodily facilities here, and touch may only be so indirectly, watching and listening is a crucial part of participation, observation and interviewing online. For some sociologists participation online has primarily meant either checking interpretations or achieving familiarity with the setting (see Hine 2000; Beneito-Montagu 2011), but it can also be to experience the social and temporal rhythms of online communication (Boellstorff *et al*. 2012, 88–90). However, it is difficult for ethnographers to know whether their own bodily experiences are shared by the people they communicate with. There are therefore certain limits to knowing how one's informants know, because of the bodily absence, which previously has been a source of authenticity to the ethnographic account (Markham 2005, 808–809; Okely 2012, 77). One also cannot assume that informants are aware of one's online presence unless one acts as an active participant rather than observer. Some argue that, because of this, observation is limited to a form of 'lurking', while participation refers to active communication and dialogue (Garcia *et al*. 2009, 59).[8]

When it comes to Facebook, ethnographers only observe or see what appears as the result of their informants' interaction with a machine – a smartphone, tablet or computer. They do not know whether the informants stand or sit down, what sizes their screens are, or whether they use Mac or PC (unless the ethnographer receives emails or updates with the post-script 'sent from my iPad', for example). That is, ethnographers cannot say how informants interact with the technology physically, and rarely do ethnographers know how bandwidth, connection speed, screen size, pixels or colour configuration influence informants' interpretations of images, or their knowledge of what has gone before in an online (chat) conversation or a thread of comments. Ethnographers know that their informants *do* experience interaction with a device and with the Facebook template in various ways, and ethnographers do participate to the extent that they do exactly as everyone else does (facing a screen, working with the same template), but they may find it difficult to know *how* those others participate or experience in their physical environment, which traditionally has been one major advantage to participant observation (see Boellstorff *et al*. 2012, 72–73).[9] Familiarity with the affordances of the technologies employed by one's interlocutors (platforms, devices etc.) can thus provide important data too.

One also cannot assume that live online dialogue has people's full attention. For example, Crystal Abidin's (2013) fieldwork among commercial bloggers and 'blogshop' owners demonstrated that her informants were frequently multi-tasking while communicating online. That is, many (unknown) details may influence how informants read or what they post. It is also difficult to observe bodily indications of the informant's emotions. Abidin's informants consistently used emoticons to indicate or convey specific feelings to their audiences or water down harsh comments, (Abidin 2013), but it would be difficult to know how this strategic usage covered for other emotions.

Even if people pay attention to their online communication, there are also differences when it comes to what appears on their screens – especially in the newsfeed. The newsfeed and the advertisements on Facebook are adapted to the individual user, so there are limits to how much an interlocutor's experience can really be shared. Yet again, when witnessing a 'real life event', people will also be differentially positioned at the location, and may notice different aspects and afterwards recall the event differently. I have an idea about what types of devices my Manus interlocutors have access to, the speed of their connections, and where they are when they post something. I can deduce the latter from what they write or from the images they post (not just from the location service once provided by Facebook), but I draw heavily upon my prior Manus experience for this, and I do not know what the Facebook algorithms expose them to unless I ask.

Participant observation thus appears to be problematic in Facebook since the ethnographer rarely sits physically with the informants. Obviously one can discuss various degrees of observation and participation, and ethnographers do participate and they do observe, but does it entail the same immersive, embodied and simultaneous kind of participant observation implied in the classical ethnographic methodology? Even in classic face-to-face-based fieldwork, the ideal of participant observation has always been subject to the specifics of the situation, the informants and the ethnographer, and different fieldwork topics have always entailed different demands or affordances for participation. What matters is a discussion of what kind of observation and what kind of participation is available at any given moment during fieldwork, and how they facilitate each other.

For my own research, my Facebook profile has allowed a form of continuous (non-bodily) participation in some Manus communities to which otherwise I would have had much less access. I

have mentioned the discussion forums above. A more striking example was the death of a close informant who had been an influential leader in a village community where I had worked. I learned of his death via Facebook, and I could read the reactions to the sad news and the funeral postings. Facebook permitted me to send condolence messages and later to learn how the man's children described the conduct of the funeral. While giving me a sense of being a member of the community at the time of mourning, Facebook simultaneously created a sense of absence in me. Gathering from the Facebook comments, their kin within the Manus diaspora felt the same.

Facebook Interviews and Text

Where participant observation may involve challenges and require consideration of how one shares experiences, doing interviews via Facebook seems close to the offline equivalent, even if webcam-mediation may present technological challenges with sound quality and barriers to intimacy (Seitz 2015). In 2011 Facebook partnered with Skype to introduce video-chat opportunities, and given the right conditions this affordance offers potential for qualitative interviewing (see Garcia *et al*. 2009, 63; Seitz 2015). Apart from such direct interviews, Facebook communication remains largely text- or image-based. Admittedly, I have no idea how to estimate the proportion between textual communication and the rest (which includes everything from videos and links to tags and likes). Textual aspects have often been over-emphasised (Beneito-Montagut 2011, 720) and, like early qualitative approaches to the Internet, it is tempting to focus primarily on the linguistic resources that people use and to focus on text, because a lot of the communication that is posted on Facebook is precisely text (see Hine 2000, 18; Nardi 2015, 192–193).[10]

As a result of the prevalence of text, 'ethnographers must learn how to translate observational, interviewing, ethical, and rapport-building skills to a largely text-based and visual virtual research environment' (Garcia *et al*. 2009, 78). This is not really new to ethnography though. Ethnographers are used to transforming observations into field notes and speech into transcriptions even if these will always appear incomplete when compared with 'lived life' (cf. Sanjek and Tratner 2015). Interviewing via chat or messaging may entail advantages but also drawbacks (see Garcia *et al*. 2009). Where the processing of traditional face-to-face interviewing produces text, informants produce the text themselves in discussion forums, or in webchat and email interviews (see Nardi 2015).

One challenge is the implications for interview techniques which will necessarily differ when compared with the oral interview. The ethnographer may find it difficult to use 'the silent probe', for instance (Bernard 1995, 162), because the interviewee may be chatting with others at the same time or be engaged in other simultaneous activities (see Abidin 2013). Then there is the time lag in written communication. It may be good for reflexivity but not for spontaneity (Garcia *et al.* 2009, 67), and it may deter some interviewees, who are very talkative but not very textual, and as with offline texts Facebook communication favours those who are articulate in the technology that is available (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995, 160). The text may appear in various literary genres. These may match what ethnographers already know how to analyse, even if the textual expressions are different and sometimes unique on Facebook by offering alternative spellings, emoticons, interrupted chronology of postings and so forth (see Garcia *et al.* 2009, 61–62). Manus-based Facebook users write largely in a mix of English and Tok Pisin (the PNG lingua franca), and a few throw in vernacular expressions here and there. A lot of people seem to develop their own individual styles of spelling, particularly in Tok Pisin. As a comparison, studies of text messaging in PNG have argued how the new repertoires of writing among youth using the lateral connectivity of new media can act as rejection of the previous generation's language ideology (Handman 2013).

What is written on Facebook is potentially there for a long time as an online archive of social reality, which can aid ethnographers in recording what goes on (see Boellstorff *et al.* 2012, chapter 7). Especially with the introduction of the timeline on a Facebook user's page, old posts, status updates or photos can be retrieved in a chronological fashion, even if the affordances of the Facebook template in practice tends to engender 'newness' rather than acting as a repository; constant updates drive older posts or comments down and effectively hide them from view (Kaun and Stiernstedt 2014). While Facebook is certainly interesting for what is being posted as text, it is also interesting in terms of what is *not* posted, and those forms of communication that are not posts. An account of Facebook practices could go further than analysing text. One could make counts of the amount of postings, their timing, and the amount of 'likes' they attract (Kaun and Stiernstedt 2014) in order to evaluate other forms of communication that draw attention to people and their actions (the 'like' button, tagging etc.).

Facebook as Document

It is possible to scrutinise the production of text in several ways. The text-based interviewing in the previous section is one, while this section pursues the document analogy. The former was methodological, while the document analogy is of a conceptual nature and relevant in two ways. The first is how the Facebook that the ethnographer encounters can be conceptualised as co-produced by users and the ethnographer via the affordances of the template, which documents social life as it unfolds. The second is how Facebook material can be compared with more 'ordinary' documents, and how such comparisons can help guide analysis.

Regarding Facebook in its entirety as a form of document, Facebook-generated texts differ from regular documents particularly in the co-authorship that may be granted the ethnographer on Facebook. The text becomes similar to a conversation with different utterances that may be more or less instrumental, audience-directed and so on. Pursuing the phenomenon of 'the thread' on Facebook, or that of writing in general, what ethnographers do study is a document as it is written. It is co-authored by different informants and sometimes the researcher (cf. Riles 2001). The Internet itself is based on the hypertext, which Arturo Escobar (1994), in what was one of the first articles on cyber-ethnography, described as a document edited continuously with others in collaboration. This is where the parallel to mats and UN document as artefacts becomes relevant (Riles 2001). Taking Facebook seriously as a form of document would entail attention to all the different genres that function as devices or affordances for the production of Facebook.

Since most of the classic ethnographic methodology focuses on face-to-face presence for participation, observation and interviewing, it is easy to forget the importance of documents. Many of the classic studies in anthropology were done among non-literary (oral) cultures, and it is only within the last couple of decades that anthropologists (apart from historical anthropologists) have become used to eliciting and privileging documents from their field sites as forms of data (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995, 157). Sociologists have been used to written sources for much longer. Even though members of many rough urban groups and neighbourhoods, or inhabitants of skid row, are hardly known for their textual communication (at least, not before the text message became common), sociological research has often been based on paperwork or files or, for instance, biographies (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995, 158).

Apart from biographies, autobiographies or diary, Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) mention documentary sources where informants generate 'native' textual accounts about the everyday life around them. One of their examples is the Mass Observation Archive as a form of 'collective autobiography' (1995, 163). In this archive, researchers recruited insiders to give written accounts about settings that the researcher could not observe directly him or herself, at times even getting confessional accounts. Other forms of documents include the 'context documents' such as scientific reports (in particular in Science and Technology Studies), rulebooks, manuals, reports, legislation and so on. Hence the textual is by no means foreign to the ethnographic methodology, and many epistemological and analytical considerations can be transferred to the study of online phenomena. In this capacity these can be analysed whether as genre, discourse, speech acts, language games or something else (see also Markham 2005).

What Hammersley and Atkinson write about a study that used pupils' diaries as data seems equally fitting for Facebook as text:

> […] personal documents of this sort embody the strengths and weaknesses
> of all such personal accounts. They are partial, and reflect the interests and
> perspectives of their authors. They are not to be privileged over other
> sources of information, nor are they to be discounted. Like other accounts,
> they should be read with regard to the context of their production, their
> intended or implied audiences, and the author's interests. (1995, 165).

Facebook has parallels to the Mass Observation Archive as a collective autobiography. The Facebook template 'collects' events in the timeline of the individual user, and the status updates, even while short and often mundane in themselves, may form a larger pattern that resemble online diaries or journals of frequently posting users. The Facebook text itself opens up room for thoughts and commentary that the ethnographer could not have witnessed otherwise, and it displays who writes what (Nardi 2015, 194). One also potentially learns of keywords, dichotomies, phrases and formulations (cf. Abidin 2013), and while there is certainly bias to these data, this bias in itself reveals something about the interlocutor(s) in question and their mutual or conflicting interests, perspectives and so forth (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995, 160). Facebook data, like all other forms of data, are produced socially. So in particular when carried out in conjunction with offline

participant observation, the textual and visual analysis of online phenomena is a valuable set of data which can elicit social patterns. The discussion forums I subscribe to constitute examples of Facebook-based archives and collective journals of Manus people's concerns over development. Naturally, there are multiple motivations or motives for posting in these forums. The majority share information, but others may merely want to chat, while some want attention or try to present themselves in a specific guise or as a specific person. This point brings us to the question of authenticity.

Authenticity on Facebook

One key question concerning ethnographic data from Facebook is to what extent such data can be 'trusted' or seen as 'authentic'. There are three types of authenticity I want to address. Firstly, why people post what they do, secondly whether they are who they appear to be, and thirdly the authenticity of the ethnographic account (see Hine 2000).

Facebook places the individual profile at the centre of the user's social relationships. This has led to theories of how people increasingly are preoccupied with online 'impression management' or 'face-work' (Dalsgaard 2008; Marwick 2013). Marwick and boyd (2010) have shown how Twitter users employ deliberate strategies to target different audiences, conceal subjects, and attempt to maintain authenticity in their posts. Their techniques of audience management resemble practices of personal branding and strategic self-commodification, but if posts are a form of personal branding, then how much can ethnographers know about people through online media? It is tempting to think that the genre of metaphor mentioned above is an example of Manus people presenting themselves as 'authentic' online. As the example also demonstrated, without proper contextualisation such attempts can backfire in a discussion forum, where members include a wide public of Manus emigrants who live throughout PNG or in Australia.

Evidence of authenticity may take many culturally specific forms, and it may not even be something people try to pursue. The person behind the abovementioned use of metaphor appears from their posts to be a young male, but the profile image is that of a young female. Others change their profile name or establish new profiles in order to gain better control of the image of who they are and of their relationships. When I was first friended by Manusians on Facebook, I had no

difficulties identifying the persons sending me friend requests, but the more my Facebook network has expanded, the more difficult it has become. People are using a diversity of profile images. When matched with names that do not correspond to how they have previously been introduced to me face to face, it becomes impossible to identify them outright. Even if ignoring that several Manus Facebook profiles use made-up names or idiosyncratic spellings, it is common in Manus to have at least three and often four names. People typically have both a Christian and a local first name, and they use as their surname the name of their father (adopted or biological), or for married women that of their husband. Some ethnic groups also give their newborn a local name that indicates both gender and birth order (for example, first-born daughters are in one of the local languages named Alup, second-born daughters Asap and so on). A Facebook name may thus be constructed from quite a selection of offline options.

Authenticity is not only about how people try to appear. It is also about who they claim to be, as with the trolls mentioned above. I think that the social sciences have the conceptual tools at least to deal with the identification of the limits to interpreting authenticity claims and data about who is who. Most importantly this involves not making assumptions (of ethnicity, gender etc.) about one's online interlocutors based on the small bits of information the researcher gets from their online names, spelling and so forth (Markham 2005, 810). The presence of deception or anonymity does not necessarily make data useless, though (Garcia *et al*. 2009, 69). On the contrary, difficulties themselves become data, partly because online 'researchers are faced with the same problems as those of their research participants: how to communicate, present oneself, and interpret others' presentation of self' (Garcia *et al*. 2009, 78). Precisely, the new presentation of self via Facebook and other social media seems like a promising venture for further anthropological research in PNG. Marilyn Strathern's (1988) theorisation of personhood would, for instance, be interesting in light of Melanesian uses of Facebook, where the template presents people with a range of opportunities for constituting themselves through exchanges with other people in their networks.

The question of authenticity may finally refer to the authenticity of the ethnographic account, and how this is constructed (Hine 2000, 43–50). Traditionally, ethnographic authority has stemmed from bodily presence established through participant observation ('I was there'), which I discussed above. The crisis of representation in anthropology has created much awareness of the consequences for turning this 'being there' into an authoritative written account, and how that form

of account works more or less convincingly as a representation (e.g. Clifford and Marcus 1986). For my own research, having been to Manus is certainly crucial in providing my accounts with legitimacy, and while there are many people in Manus without a Facebook profile, interacting with Manus friends on Facebook and following their debates has become an important way of being present and reinforcing ethnographic authenticity.

One could imagine that Facebook would act exactly as an ethnographically-authentic collaborative document through which ethnographer and interlocutors share both work-tasks and access to each other's lives. It opens dialogic exchange with informants when one can create pages or forums, where the researcher advertises or shares his or her work (see also Murthy 2008, 845). This is not always unproblematic, and some researchers who have used Facebook as an ethnographic tool debate the problems of sharing of one's network across private and professional divides – including how to 'defriend' properly (Taylor, Falconer and Snowdon 2014, see also Gershon 2010). Having one's informants as Facebook friends is a way of displaying increased ethnographic authenticity – a renewed 'I was there' displayed through one's collection of fieldwork friends. At the same time, it may engender other problems, such as how to deal with anonymisation. Detachment and creation of distance can be a problem when going online or logging in becomes the new form of ethnographic travel. Christine Hine's (2000, 45–46) outline of virtual ethnography discusses a parallel between experiential and physical displacement, where she cites the ethnographic 'arrival stories'. These are no longer about pitching a tent on a beach (although, see Boellstorff 2008), but descriptions about the negotiation with research participants about access, observations and communication. These descriptions set up the relationship between ethnographer and field as one of sustained experience with interaction, with methodological reflexivity, and learning of local cultural codes or vernacular speech such as the technical glossary of online sites. The ethnography to Hine is thus to set up 'an analytic space in which only the ethnographer is really there' (2000, 46). The challenge is whether this new form of presence can generate adequate ethnographic interpretations of how different interlocutors understand both the technological artefacts and the concepts or idioms of practice such as what it means to be 'a friend' (see Gershon 2010; Miller 2011).

Revelation, Concealment and Self

Facebook's epistemological affordances are crucial to the ethnographer, who tries to understand the analytical value of ethnographic data from Facebook. However, if considered in terms of the notions of revelation and concealment, the affordances can be discussed in the wider sense of how the template as a cultural form becomes integrated with the cultural practices and understandings of its users. I do not want to imply that this article also presents an ethnography of Facebook or of online presentations of the self in Manus (there are several limitations to what I can say about that), but I do want to hint at some themes that could be worth pursuing – both for myself and for other ethnographers.

Strathern's work on personhood in Melanesia (for example, 1988) puts emphasis on concealment and revelatory moments for the display of self and the constitution of social relationships. With this in mind, it is tempting to argue that the online Facebook profile is an important objectification of the self. In Facebook the person and many of his or her relations are brought together, and qualities and preferences are revealed along with the statuses of relationships (although the affordances of Facebook's constant updating and renewal of newsfeeds may act as much as a process of concealment in practice). Exactly how visibility and the constitution of relationships work for individuals on Facebook depends on a variety of technological factors. Most important are the algorithms that rank advertisements and items in the newsfeed based on the individual user's prior choices of friends, likes, links etc. The question is how Facebook as a knowledge system affects cultural expectations about visibility and the constitution of relations and self.

Such a study would pose a comparative case to another ethnography of Facebook users. Daniel Miller (2011, 50) has argued that the Facebook profile is often seen by his Trini informants as a more real picture of the self than what the corresponding offline person portrays. Facebook to them is not a mask but a technology to reveal the truth. This is quite different from the way Facebook is often regarded as a 'presentation of self' in western thought, where it is assumed that the truth about a person is hidden behind the (virtual) façade (Miller 2011, 51, although, see Senft 2008; Taylor, Falconer and Snowdon 2014). Miller's theorisation of Facebook as culture builds on Melanesian ethnography via Nancy Munn's *The Fame of Gawa* (1986). Roughly speaking, Miller argues that, like Kula exchange, Facebook can work as a spatiotemporal extension of persons and their 'fame' by making their exchanges with others 'public' (2011, 205–215). It would, for example, be interesting to know if Facebook or other social media today have changed the organisation of Kula

exchanges and the fame they generate. Recent studies among Manus people point out that social media can facilitate debates about exchange and remittances between diaspora and home communities (Rasmussen 2015, 120–121). In comparison, Makiko Nishitani (2014) demonstrates how the use of social media among the Tongan migrants she worked with, rather than simply maintaining transnational ties, also engenders 'family dramas' since access and use is mediated by kinship, gender and cultural values (Nishitani 2014).

Addressing such questions of what constitutes 'family', 'friend', 'community' or 'the self' nonetheless requires long-term attention to a wide range of empirical material. For example, if one of my Manus Facebook-friends posts on his wall, 'It's enough to make you start drinking again', there is no knowing what frustrates the person in question unless one follows multiple postings or interviews the person. The snippet itself says little. It is most likely some kind of frustration, and asking whether the 'again' hints at something this person was known to do in the past or not, requires much sensitivity. A multitude of such postings along with postings of visual material and links to external content (films, news, articles, blogs etc.) may over time give a fuller picture of the person in question, but how that picture corresponds to offline practices or any notion of the self will often be an open question. If one assumes that constitution of the self is a holistic endeavour that reaches beyond social media (singular or 'poly-'), then it is hardly a question that can be addressed without an approach where online and offline data are used to supplement each other during long-term fieldwork.

Conclusion

Ethnographers may for good reasons be anxious about relationships with informants when these are mediated in new ways. Facebook and other social media may entail a blurring not only of online and offline for the social relationships that ethnographers study (see Beneito-Montagut 2011), but also of distinctions between the categories of friend and informant. Such blurring should not be new to anthropologists, many of whom become friends or even family to their interlocutors (see Suhr Nielsen, Otto and Dalsgaard 2009), and 'anthropology at home' is today a well-described endeavour. Yet Facebook does accentuate the merging of home and away in perhaps unprecedented ways, because the template does not require the physical proximity or face-to-face contact previously regarded as the cornerstone of ethnographic methodology.

By outlining how the well-known ethnographic practices (participant observation, interviewing, use of documents) may work via Facebook's affordances, this article has discussed how these practices may apply to Facebook-facilitated communication with interlocutors. The ethnographic examples stem from the way in which Facebook has become a platform for communication to enhance existing long-term relationships to informants in Manus, PNG, in a long and uncertain 'meantime' in between physical field visits. While this use of Facebook has not been intended to provide an actual ethnography of the way that Facebook has been adopted by Manusians, it remains important for other reasons. Most importantly, Facebook has facilitated updates of existing research interests. It has also opened up for new understandings of old tensions, and even exciting new angles on research topics such as authenticity and the self that are waiting to be picked up.

Doing ethnography via Facebook is, as it always should be, a question of getting one's epistemological and methodological foundations right about the forms of social interaction and communication that any given medium gives access to. Breaking down the forms of communication embedded in social media into their constituent parts, one may find that they are similar to the challenges that ethnographers have faced since ethnography became integral to the workings of the discipline. That is, to interpret the actions of fellow human beings and how their social relationships develop in interaction with the world around them. Online as well as offline, ethnographers work with texts, images and sound, and they are used to interpersonal exchange as well as communicating with both small and large audiences. Ethnographers are also used to carefully evaluating the bits of social reality that they witness or elicit, and as researchers they constantly have to assess and discuss what people do, when and where and why they do it, while also keeping in mind the ways in which their research may or may not affect people as groups or as individuals. Fieldwork via social media may require adjustments and incorporation of new procedures (see Garcia *et al*. 2009; Sanjek and Tratner 2015), but not necessarily any profound transformation of the fundamental principles such as how they determine validity or what counts as ethical (for instance, 'do no harm').

Of course Facebook is different from both Fijian mats and UN documents on several accounts. Most importantly, while mats and UN documents have endpoints, an aim, Facebook as a whole has no clear, agreed-upon aim and no singular endpoint. There are multiple endpoints of the different

users and of the Company. Facebook is designed to continue as long as users invest time in it, and as long as the Company can make money from advertising on the platform. Yet, like other documents, Facebook is fundamentally a device and artefact for social divisions of those investing their time in it (see Riles 2001, 95), and to researchers it provides the ultimate challenge not only of identifying and drawing the boundaries of one's 'field' (Dalsgaard 2013; Jackson 2015, 43). However it also entails the proliferation of contexts: 'the apprehension that there is no limiting device on what there is to know, the sense of being overwhelmed by all there is to discover but also of constant loss associated with switching from one perspective to another' (Riles 2001, 94). It should thus be no surprise that contemporary ethnographers can be bewildered because of Facebook.

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Notes

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[2] Facebook had 1.49 billion monthly users in the second quarter of 2015 (http://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/ accessed 9 September 2015).

[3] I use the term affordances here in the sense made popular by Donald Norman (1989).

[4] The Facebook template has evolved since its conception to include more forms of communication and exchange today than it did 10 years ago (see the special issue of *New Media & Society* 2014). I do not refer to any 'whole version' of the template in particular but rather discuss specific features that have been relevant.

[5] This and other comments are translated and edited for the sake of clarity and for anonymisation and protection from Google or Facebook searches.

[6] See http://www.internetworldstats.com/pacific.htm (accessed 8 September 2015). This is out of a population of approximately 7 million.

[7] One other option is that of designing an app which research subjects can voluntarily download. This form of research gives the researcher access to quantitative data about the research subjects' use of Facebook.

[8] What this entails for the ethics of doing fieldwork is yet another debate, which I cannot touch upon here. The recent volume *eFieldnotes* (Sanjek and Tratner 2015) contains several discussions of the ethical and legal challenges of managing digitalised data and documents.

[9] Some have suggested the term 'participant-experiencer' to replace 'participant-observer', but I do not think it catches the dilemma of not sharing the experience (see Garcia *et al.* 2009, 58).

[10] There is a large literature on the ethnography of photography, film and art, which would likewise be relevant, but due to limits of space I restrict myself to discussing text.