



We're anti-social media

*I am regularly commissioned to ghostwrite articles for people. The skill here is to understand the subject and present it in a more engaging way than the subject would otherwise do, while retaining not only all the relevant facts, but their personality, too. This piece about a social media research project was written in 2017 for **University College London's** magazine on behalf of anthropology professor Dr Daniel Miller.*

HOW many friends have you got on Facebook? Ten? Fifty? Over a hundred? And you can communicate with them, send them your news, share your pictures. It's great – we're more connected with each other than ever before. It has changed our world, and the way we interact, forever.

Or has it? The idea that social media brings us closer together isn't necessarily actually true at all – and certainly not if you're English. In truth, we use it for the polar opposite purpose - to keep people at a distance. Sure, we love connecting with our scores of friends on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Linked In, WhatsApp – precisely because it means we don't have to have them in our house.

As with those people to whom we restrict our contact to merely a sparsely written card at Christmas, on social media we can keep an obliged cursory link without having to show any interest in them at all.

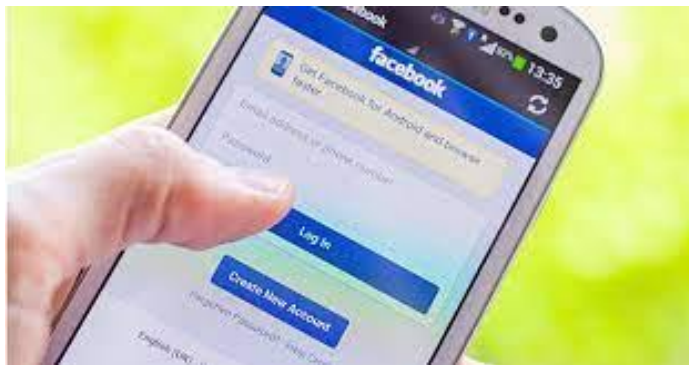
Our use of social media is fascinating to an anthropologist – and particularly the notion that technology is bringing us all together in a common, shared experience. Our research across nine countries around the world shows that our use of these platforms serves only to underline what we already knew about how our different cultures behave.



Take the idea of using social media to keep our friends and family at arm's length. This is a peculiarly English trait. Rather than the online community having a sense of the infinite, social media actually generally remains a very local environment which reflects the societal norms of those who use it. And with the English, that means a "Goldilocks" public approach to our friends and neighbours, rejecting both the 'too hot' and the 'too cold' relationship in favour of the in-between.

For most English users of social media – as very distinct from those in other countries – we found life is all about avoiding things that are too hot or too cold. A very individually English word reflects this perfectly – "nice".

To people from other lands, "nice" might seem a rather tepid or a lukewarm version of warm, but it's actually a very convenient way for us to describe the precise temperature of our interactions. We want "nice" online relationships. It's nice to keep in touch, it's nice to see online what people are doing and it would be nice to see them in person – but we don't



want to arrange a meeting and certainly don't want to appear so interested in their posts that they feel they have to meet us. An online facility to maintain that arm's length is also perfect for managing inevitable changes in relationships – such as that of groups of parents whose children were friends and in and and out of each others' houses,

and who used to communicate, literally, over the garden fence. Now the children have grown up, and even though they might all live on the same street, the parents graduate these relationships to Facebook, often exclusively so. But this use of such a platform doesn't exist in, say, southern India or among Turkish Kurds, where internal family relationships are much more intense and the content of the locals' social media posts reflects this by being much more intimate.

The English, too, are more reticent when it comes to connecting with people they do not already know offline, compared with, say, the Chinese, whose offline lives are so restricted that they tend to see social media as an opportunity to meet new people. The English Goldilocks strategy, by contrast, finds social media to be a wonderfully useful modern-day version of the net curtain, keeping us informed of but at a safe distance from friend, neighbours, even members of our family. Which is nice.

We should not be surprised by this. The English have traditionally protected their interior from exterior view with armour plating – or indeed, net curtains. We put down the toilet seat, we check the surfaces before people come into the house. Even the poorest people historically kept the front room “parlour” free of visitors. So a platform that renders people increasingly visible, especially to those we already know – which is even worse than being exposed to strangers – is bound to cause us anxiety. It’s not surprising, either, that we found that the English went through phases in their relationship with social media – embracing and loving it at first, reaching out to all those old school chums on Friends Reunited, before remembering why they never kept in touch in the first place, and therefore withdrawing again.

Another feature of Englishness online is how relaxed we are as a race with our image. In the pictures and messages we post, there is a whole, again very individual, genre of self deprecation that would astonish people of other cultures. English people actually post how rubbish they are at something and often put up pictures that evidence this – “my hair looks like it’s had electricity through it”; “I thought even I would be able to hang a picture the right way up”. Neither do we care about our personal appearance online. Our studies clearly show that while, say, an Italian would never go online looking anything less than immaculate, the English really don’t care. It’s not that we can’t be bothered, it’s that we are extremely unassuming and relaxed about how the world sees us. When you look at an Instagram picture, a YouTube clip, a Tweet, a Facebook photo – you are actually SEEING Englishness.

One of the perceptions of social media is that it is making us more individual and narcissistic and this is evident – but it’s more common to find examples of social media actually reinforcing social groups and our place within them, and that we have found, in those communities, ways of moulding social media to work for us. The same technology is used differently by different cultures – and therefore it cannot be that social media has changed the world, but rather, that the world has changed social media.

So why, then, do we post at all? Again, it seems to depend where we are – for instance, if Italians’ offline lives are largely satisfactory they make little use of social media but employ it more if they need help or advice from support groups, such as single mothers. In south-



east Turkey, the limitations of young women’s movement and social networks means they use Facebook to develop friendships outside their family. In Brazil, young people prefer the combination of both worlds – being able to maintain solid (as opposed to an English cursorily “nice”) relationships while exploring new contact opportunities in education or work. And in India, such is the extent of family monitoring of social media and its

categorisations around kinship, age, gender, caste and class that social media actually tacitly curbs users’ trends towards individualism.

But generally, repair is a common theme – most people in most places feel the intensity of social connections they associated with an ideal of past community has been lost in modern life. There exists a widespread fear in some societies that sociality itself is something we are losing and we are shifting more towards self interest.

But this, too, is developing – especially as we learn to use, that is, shape, our different forms of social media for different ends. The small groups of WhatsApp are now being used to balance the larger groups of Facebook. The intimacy of Snapchat balances the contact with strangers on Twitter and Instagram.

Critics of social media – and indeed many users – believe we are all becoming more superficial in this virtual world. But what is actually going on is far more incredible – that these are social media, woven into the texture of our relationships. Social media expands our capacity. But the anthropological findings are that however much we use it, even abuse it, it does not change our essential humanity. It doesn't, in the end, matter whether we do indeed have ten, fifty, a hundred Facebook friends– because ultimately, it doesn't change the people we are.

DANNY MILLER is the director of Why We Post: The Anthropology of Social Media, an extensive, nine-country research project and free online course exploring the varying uses of online communities around the world.