Chapter Title: Making social media matter

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Making social media matter

Across all nine volumes in this series we decided that Chapter 5 could be used for whatever purpose the individual researcher chose. In most cases this is to highlight a particular interest or finding, but in my case I have decided to use this chapter to demonstrate a potential in our work that is otherwise sometimes assumed to be absent. I am referring to the practical use of our research results to inform and change policy or practice in applied areas – suggestions intended directly to improve the welfare of populations. In short, can our work be useful? For this purpose I have taken two areas from opposite ends of our research spectrum: learning from our observations regarding the impact of social media upon young people at school, and the potential of social media for the hospice movement, which deals with people who have a terminal diagnosis – mostly, but not always, older people.

   In the first case this potential is simply drawn from our findings, since there was no initial intention of making the work with schools an applied study. These policy-related issues emerged unbidden as we carried out research with young people. By contrast the study of the hospice was always intended as an applied project, undertaken at the request of the hospice director. This request was accepted on the grounds that I felt a project of this scale ought to include a component whose primary purpose was to assist the welfare of our informants, even if this was never part of our research proposal or our grant application. The advantage of the first case is that it illustrates the way in which research that was not carried out with the aim of applied usage often still has that potential.

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Learning about education

This section effects a transition from pure research to practical application through several routes. The first involves what is often called 'best practice', that is, simply reporting an exemplary case so that it can be copied by others. A second example is through collecting information that was not previously available, but may prove a useful foundation for informing future policy. The third and final example will examine a case in which the evidence we collected could be used to change the terms of a major debate about one of the most concerning aspects of the impact of social media on schools – an aspect generally referred to as 'cyber-bullying'.

The first example, that of best practice, was encountered in one of The Glades' primary schools.[1] The attraction of this case study will be evident to most parents, who at least in this region will usually confess to a common experience of frustration as a parent. When their children are at primary school, it becomes almost a daily ritual to try to find questions to elicit information about what pupils have done that day at school. Underlying this is the probability that most parents find the increasing autonomy of their children's school lives difficult to come to terms with. Going to school is for many parents the first instance where a whole section of their children's lives is completely out of view. Typically parents want to acknowledge and congratulate the subjects of their love on their achievements and build their confidence, as well as to be alerted as early as possible to any problems they face – many feel this is something of which the teachers themselves might not be aware. Parents of course are not a uniform group: some are happy to cede authority to teachers, while others cannot believe that anyone other than themselves can properly understand the child's needs (including the child). While academics may perceive this as a problem about granting autonomy to children, parents are most likely to see this retained concern as a natural manifestation of the depth of their love for their children.

The problem is that almost inevitably the children's answers are laconic in the extreme. When asked what they did at school that day they typically reply 'nothing' . . . 'can't remember' . . . 'what's on television?' This drives parents to distraction and also leads them to devise all sorts of strategies and even threats, such as 'you are not getting any tea until you tell us at least one thing that happened at school today'. Given that this is such a common experience, and one that parents frequently discuss with each other, I confess to being completely entranced when

Ciara and I first heard about a primary school blog – not at the school, but from teachers and parents whom we happened to come across during the general ethnography.

The story really starts from the appointment of a new headmaster who gave all the teachers Wi-Fi enabled devices for taking photographs of the children's work. This in turn was posted on a blog page for each class, linked to the school's website. After the blog received thousands of hits in the first month, the headmaster sent letters asking all the parents of the approximately 400 pupils for permission to post the blog, to which all but a few agreed. From then on each class not only set up a Twitter account, but was also expected to post detailed visuals of its activities on a daily basis.

The parents reported that this made a huge difference to their interactions with their own children; they could praise and discuss specific pieces of work undertaken that day, for instance a drawing or a poem. It also made the general relationship between schoolchildren, teachers and parents less formal, with less reliance upon authority or knowledge held by only one or two of these three. Parental anxiety about what was happening to their children, about which previously they had had no knowledge, was significantly reduced. Within the more general ethnography perhaps the single major expansion of social media use in recent years was among new parents. Such an inclusion of school material fitted easily within their home-based online activities, and children's work could in turn be shared with interested relatives such as those living abroad – many villagers seem to have relatives in Australia in particular.

The development of this blog may also have fitted in quite neatly with a possible shift in childcare. Women in The Glades typically expected to spend at least a year on maternity leave.[2] This made the subsequent break from their children that much more difficult, and in the ethnography women seemed subject to feelings of guilt and loss, which made the blog still more cathartic. The brevity of Twitter and the very nature of primary school activities meant that the character of postings tended to be focused around the idea that everyone was having 'fun' just as much as being educated. There did not seem to be any evidence that the children resented this intrusion, possibly because the reaction of their own parents appeared almost entirely positive and congratulatory. This may be partly because a duty to foster one's children's self-esteem is pretty much the mantra of contemporary parenting. One caveat that would require further investigation, however, is that extended studies in the US have noted a worrying trend in which new media has been

used for 'over-parenting' and reducing the autonomy of children with negative consequences, though this may relate more to an older cohort.[3] It is possible that this blog also may be merely kicking the problem of childhood autonomy further down the track, but it is too early to tell.

If the later experience of the children confirms this overwhelmingly positive response from the parents and teachers, as well as Ciara's[4] evidence of the way in which this facilitated a less formal relationship between school and home, then the ethnography has encountered something which bureaucrats could reasonably term a 'best-practice' innovation. The role of our research is then to attest to this result. As we were independent from the school, and in any case deeply involved with these parents as part of our ethnography, we can provide additional evidence and support. Through writing our account we hope to promote this example as something potentially easy to emulate at primary schools in the UK and elsewhere.

The second way in which our project was able to contribute in an applied fashion to contemporary education was through the collection of data. Initially we assumed that this would emerge directly from our ethnographic authority, which came by virtue of studying in the village for 18 months. This assumption was naïve, as we discovered through an unexpected incident. At the time of our field work most people assumed that Facebook had become the dominant, almost monopolistic platform for social media among the young, having seen off prior alternatives such as MySpace, while Twitter was assumed to be used mainly by professionals and journalists. As soon as we started field work, even before we worked within the schools themselves, it was obvious that young people had radically changed their relationship to Facebook. Facebook had previously been a primary site for 'cool' sharing and peer-to-peer banter, at which time children and youths assumed this to be 'their' medium. They were consequently quite shocked at that iconic moment when 'my mother has just asked to friend me on Facebook'. Previously adults had in general looked askance at this social media, being mainly concerned to deter their children from spending any or at least much time on it.

Our research showed that this tipping point, when parents sought to friend their children on Facebook, was if anything more profound than either had realised. It precipitated a massive change in perspective, which did not mean that young people's presence on Facebook diminished. Indeed the contrary was true, since adults who had once discouraged this usage now insisted that their children remain on a site where they could share materials increasingly with grandparents, relatives living at a distance and others, as well as with

the parents themselves. As a result the status of Facebook as the primary 'cool' peer-to-peer medium between young people could now be pronounced 'dead and buried'.

When I published this finding on our project blog[5] I did not anticipate the response, which was that the 'news' went viral. Reports, often wildly inaccurate, appeared on literally hundreds of news sites all around the world. I was surprised partly because working in the schools made this not seem like news at all. It was something that nearly every teacher and parent already knew very well. All class information went through Twitter; there was no instance of a teacher using Facebook in the hope of informing pupils. Something so blindingly evident hardly felt like a discovery. Yet somehow this shift had remained almost entirely unknown at the level of formal news and journalism, as well as to the general public or in countries where this trend was not yet evident. Indeed some journalists refused to accept these findings, despite the fact that they only needed to ask a few children to have it confirmed. In some cases a failure to read the original posting meant some assumed I was claiming a decline in Facebook itself. It also became evident that journalists were not familiar with the kind of authority claimed by anthropological work. Because the blog post did not include statistics, tables and more general quantitative material, they tended to dismiss these findings as anecdotal, ignoring what was by then already many months of intensive study.

By 2016 it is unlikely that anyone would still doubt these findings. In fact almost immediately some journalists in countries such as the UK, Australia and the US reported a similar loss of cool, but the heated discussion that followed from this blog post showed that to gain authority research may need to include other kinds of data than are normally included in anthropological work. My immediate response was to conduct a survey of 2,500 pupils (actually we ended up with 2,496) – initially, to be honest, partly to show that I could.[6] Fig. 5.1, for example, is a chart showing the presence on the main social media for each age group which confirms the growing presence of Facebook.

This confirms that there is no loss of presence on Facebook, but the same survey also asked these school pupils to name their top three favourite platforms. Only 12.7 per cent picked Facebook as their favourite social media, 8.4 per cent as their second favourite and 9.7 per cent as their third favourite. This was certainly vastly different from assumptions made prior to this study, which saw Facebook as basically a young person's platform now dominant in their lives and with which they entirely associated themselves. At a mere 12.7 per cent Facebook is clearly no longer the dominant 'cool' platform for social media.
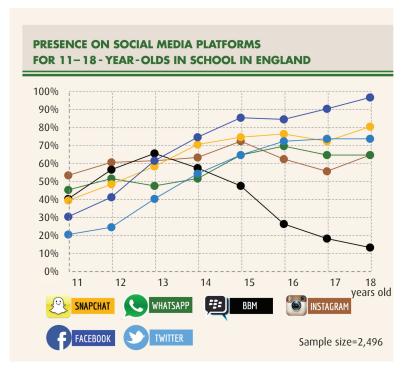
Fig. 5.1 Presence on social media by age at four secondary schools close to The Glades

More work will be carried out on this survey later, but it can already be used to demonstrate, for example, a statistically significant tendency for females rather than males to use visual media such as Instagram and Snapchat. It also confirms the general contention of Chapter 2 that most teenagers work now in a situation of polymedia where they employ several platforms simultaneously. It was also striking that these six platforms were far more prevalent than a whole host of others that are often discussed but are simply not that common. Tumblr would come next, and there is some usage of game stations, but others barely register. Mostly the statistics merely reproduced observations that were in fact evident from early on in the field work and do not seem to merit the time involved in their collection. Yet in addition this survey gave some guidance to usage for those under 16 with whom no ethnographic work was carried out – for example, demonstrating the continued importance of BBM for the younger group. So this represents a second route towards more applied consequences, the provision of evidence.

It is, however, the third route that probably represents the main strength of an anthropological contribution and is precisely the kind of evidence that not only does not lend itself to quantitative investigation, but also exposes the misleading consequences of approaches that come top-down from policy-driven research. There was no original intention of contributing to policy concerned with the problem of cyber-bullying.[7] In general the aim was similar to that of a recent excellent ethnography of a school classroom,[8] which was merely to observe the use of new media with an open mind. It was only subsequently, on reading the background literature, that a marked discrepancy became apparent between the way in which behaviour was reported and explained in that literature as compared to what was encountered during our study. It also became clear that the main reason for this is that the policy-directed literature was derived from research with a specific agenda and set of interests that seem to have influenced its findings. The main advantage of ethnography here is that, without any specific focus, it tends to see behaviour within a much wider context, thus changing our understanding of what is being observed.

The issue of cyber-bullying is less pertinent to the age group of 16–18-year-olds, but during discussion these school pupils talked at some length about the previous two years. For them, coming into the sixth form at 16 was seen as generally marking a decline in the incidence of this kind of behaviour, but the memories were fresh and traumatic; they seemed to be something the pupils really wanted to discuss further in retrospect. Several examples have been presented in previous chapters to illustrate how school pupils use social media for a wide mix of arguments, banter, gossip and conflict that may sometimes spiral into abusive and destructive interactions. Early on it seems that the primary platform for these was BBM; for a short period this migrated more to Facebook and its current manifestation is mainly within Twitter beef. The topic emerged immediately because the start of field work coincided with a recent suicide of a 15-year-old girl in a nearby district. This had been widely reported in the newspapers as a case of cyber-bullying, though both the police and the child's parents argued the cause was otherwise. We decided to follow up this story and travelled to that district in order to interview those associated with this event. All of her friends that we spoke to supported the newspaper claims:

> I know for a fact when I was friends with her, it was social media that was getting her down. All BBM. Or MSN. Facebook inboxes. They don't understand the impact it has on someone, getting those

messages. Think 'Oh it's just nasty messages between girls'. It's not, not for someone like Tricia who took everything to heart. She really cared about people and took it all to her heart. They won't accept that. Calling her a slut, saying she's disgusting. All stuff like that. It must have been horrible. But never really understood the impact it would have. Especially, we've grown up around it. We understand it. Onlookers don't really get it.

One of the reasons parents and police may have been less aware of what was going on was that much of this took place on BBM, a heavily encrypted platform where material generally goes under the radar of adult surveillance. However, the same friends helped provide the wider context to this event. They did not seem to regard Tricia as a passive victim of cyber-bullying: rather they framed this tragedy in terms of the ubiquitous presence of arguments and abuse circulating among girls of that age. Tricia would find herself in conflicts with peers in which she would argue back as much as she would receive. In other words, there were likely to have been other encounters in which she might have been framed as the cyber-bully. As one friend put it, 'Tricia had a mouth on her. She knew how to argue. People used to not like her for no reason. Even people in my year . . . She had her group of friends. She was constantly on Facebook and Twitter'. The sense seemed to be that Tricia would equally send and receive negative messages with her peer group, pretty much as the rest of her peer group did. Rather than defining people as perpetrators or victims, therefore, the pupils saw certain people, for example Tricia, as taking a more active role in these exchanges, while others prefer to stay aloof. The issue of suicide is not seen in terms of the interactions themselves, but rather in terms of the underlying vulnerability and volatility of emotional states that girls of around 14 and 15 seem to experience. Among these are potentially devastating losses of self-esteem where things that would otherwise not have major consequences may at that particular instance be severe enough to be considered a reason for suicide. It is worth noting that this is the age group in which anorexia, bulimia and especially 'cutting' are prevalent.

This is of course an extreme case, but it confirmed a more general trend that emerged from the 80 interviews we conducted at these four schools. The term 'cyber-bullying' was hardly ever used by pupils, and we realised it mainly occurred when we had introduced it or in reference to news coverage. In some ways it was the news that made this a topic in its own right. In another case a girl in the village on several occasions presented herself as considering suicide from cyber-bullying.

However, this was done in such a manner that it seemed more likely that she was using the anxiety created by the news in a conflict of power with her own parents, rather than a situation emerging from her own experiences at school.

As boyd notes, 'When adults reframe every interpersonal conflict in terms of bullying or focus on determining who's at fault and punishing that person, they lose a valuable opportunity to help teens navigate the complicated interpersonal dynamics and social challenges that they face'.[9] The problem is that there are many books on cyberbullying,[10] and because of the focus on policy much of the discussion seems to be dependent upon the definition of clear categories. If one can identify individuals simply as either bullies or victims it may be possible to characterise the demographic and other parameters that correlate with this categorisation. Such a simplification makes advising school and parents a good deal easier. People are told to look for the 'signs' of victims and bullies and to be aware of where they are likely to come from.

However, our evidence suggests that this advice may be quite misleading and therefore possibly ineffective in dealing with these problems. It ignores the wider context – a pervasive culture of what might be better termed endless banter and taunting, or, as suggested in another paper, cyber-drama,[11] which most young people participate in and which at some level occurs nearly every day in passing slights, insults and innuendoes. The problem with policy discussions that equate quantitative evidence with data is that often these papers suggest that we have not properly understood cyber-bullying because we do not yet have enough data, or that the data has so far produced inconsistent results.[12] This approach also claims that the problem could be resolved if only we had a more precise and consistent definition of terms such as 'harm'.[13] Our conclusion is that this desire for precision, and similarly the desire for quantitative data, is generally at the expense of understanding. The problem is not lack of consistency in semantics, but lack of contextualisation in research. In the experience of these children there is simply no clear line between abuse, insult and banter and bullying. From an ethnographic perspective the first stage would be to try not to frame this and narrow it to specified categories, but rather to open up the enquiry so that this behaviour is understood to be just one end of a wider spectrum.

In this instance the potential contribution of this research was to give a more detailed answer to one specific question: how precisely has the advent of social media changed and impacted upon a situation

that was clearly fully fledged prior to social media? The interviews and online observation suggested three ways in which social media itself has actually changed the nature of these interactions. These were firstly indirects, secondly the erosion of distance and thirdly the concept of hiding behind a screen. There is no inference that these were necessary consequences, deterministically caused by the technology. It is rather that these are the ways in which social media have been exploited in this instance.

Indirects

An indirect is simply a comment or an accusation made on social media that does not specify the name of the person, or people, at whom it is directed. Students reported indirects to be the most common form of 'negative' usage of Twitter, which was also evident from following their accounts. Students would often see an indirect and worry that it was directed at them. The prevalence of indirects was shown to affect both personal confidence and the relationships in female friendship groups; often a girl would suspect that someone they believed to be their friend was in fact publicly venting about them.

> Indirect tweets are horrible. They are horrible. And everyone assumes it's about them. Everyone. The indirect thing is a nightmare. Had one the other day 'Fake friends, I can see you'. Now, this is one of my friends, we were all sat there like 'What?' Got a text from one friend saying 'Is this about me?' . . . I text back saying 'Is this about me?' Because none of us know, so it just sends everyone off against each other.

Asking the person that posted the tweet who the tweet was directed at may only serve to worsen the situation:

> You've got two or three girls saying "Oh is that about me?" Then someone else tweeted "Oh, this isn't about you, but obviously you've done something wrong . . ." I think Twitter ruins everything. I really think it does. Like with friends and stuff, 'cos you're always wondering "like is that about me?" . . . And I just think if it wasn't for all the social networking I reckon things would be so different. Like good different . . .

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On the other hand, an indirect may be posted in a situation where many people, including the person at whom it is directed, know precisely who the tweet refers to. This is intended to create embarrassment and anxiety for the individual accused due to the wider reach of people who would be witnessing the tension, in comparison with offline equivalents. The 'known' indirect could be re-tweeted by those who support the tweeter, thus generating further anxiety for the accused, or it could provide an opportunity for those in support of the accused to defend them.

These are two entirely opposite but complementary problems created by the indirect: those caused by everyone knowing to whom it refers and those caused by no one knowing. An indirect can be a means of harassing a particular girl and encouraging others to do the same. In such cases there are no doubts about the target, and the indirect may simply be a way of avoiding the 'evidence' that is these days far more easily recorded since this material is online. Pupils are well aware that platforms such as Twitter have the consequence of making them quite transparent to each other, in contrast to Snapchat and WhatsApp. Often a particular class group or year group is seen as divided into several smaller sections, which comprise close friends of varying constancy. Such groups may be quite transient, and it seems as though indirects could be as much used within what was previously a close group as outside – those who are already friends know more about each other, and have more ammunition and possibly reasons for competition and jealousy. Outsiders thus need to confirm the current state of these dynamics, as one pupil noted:

> I try and stay neutral with quite a few people, 'cos then if something is said, I'll be like 'Oh is that about me?' and they'll be like 'No don't worry', OK fine. Which happens quite a lot. Like 'Oh it's not about me is it, what have I done?' They are like 'no no no, not you, another person in your group'.

Another key factor is that indirects can also be a side effect of something rather different. On Twitter English schoolchildren are generally competing over how clever they can be in terms of wit and banter. An indirect can be appreciated and gain recognition in the form of 're-tweeting' or 'favourites' – not because it is abusive, but because it is creative and even stylish. The primary drive may be an opportunity to be funny, and the suffering is secondary to that purpose. This would be especially true of male uses of insult that would lower the perpetrator's reputation unless other people regard it as funny. On the other hand, one easy way to seem

funny is to be outrageously acerbic. Such a comment can be especially cutting, with the situation compounded by the fact that the recipient, in being hurt, thereby demonstrates that they cannot take a joke.

The erosion of difference

Much of the literature on cyber-bullying emphasises the way in which digital technologies have eroded the boundary between school and home. Home no longer exists as a refuge, since in many ways the main arena in which social life is lived is now online – irrespective of whether the young people are physically at home or in school. These exchanges can now continue 24/7. While there has been much academic discussion on how the internet brings the public realm into the private, for example networked privacy,[14] social media is in addition seen to bring the school realm – where 'traditional' bullying took place – into the home: 'They don't have the decency, let them have their home, somewhere safe to be. Now there's nowhere to go. People say "just log off Facebook", but if you log off you have the voice in your head like she's posted six things about me and I can't see it . . .'

   While parents may think that their children are safe and asleep in bed, or studying at their computer, they may in fact be engaged in conflicts with their peers online. A family psychologist who served the area of our field site commented on this: 'They keep [their phones] on all the time, that means they are hyper-alert all the time, they don't relax, it keeps the tension up for the young people. They have to reply, they get anxious, they are quite private so they can't talk to their parents about it.' Arguably issues of physical abuse would create more visible evidence for parents that their child had been suffering at school. However, teenagers reported their own resistance to parental requests to view abusive materials due to the fear of losing their offline privileges. Teenagers very much want to continue their social interactions on evenings and weekends, especially as opportunities to play outside the home are being restricted. Yet this desire clearly leaves them vulnerable to persistent assaults that sometimes grind down their already fragile self-esteem.

Hiding behind a screen

The third problem we found that corresponds to the rise not just of social media but also of new media more generally, is the consistently asserted

proposition that teenagers, especially girls, say things in the evening from behind a screen that they would never say face to face in the class-room. Screens appear to act as a point of engagement which allows a thought bubble to burst into text. Other girls then tweet responses using the similar protection/mediation of the screen.

> People can hide behind their computer screen. They are not face to face with someone. They don't have that shame, they don't have that remorse for someone. If they are gonna be rude or say a harsh comment, they've just got a screen in front of them rather than an actual person, they are more inclined to say exactly what they think rather than hold back.

> 'Cos it's so easy. On Twitter people don't think before they say. Twitter is a form of speech now, you just think and tweet. Before you had to think about what you said, you could see people's reactions.

> Pupils assert that migrating from Facebook increases the incidence of conflict because of the use of re-tweets, though there were ear-lier equivalents on BBM and then Facebook.

Another reason for focusing upon these three factors is that they seem to support each other. The problems caused by indirects are exacerbated when they have the ability to cause distress outside of the hours of the school day, the time at which those experiencing only traditional offline bullying would have been able to escape from further harm. Similarly the prevalence of indirects could be partly explained by the confidence acquired by being behind a computer screen.

Direct boys and indirect girls

One of the consequences of this degree of specificity is that it also helps us to understand why the pupils clearly saw gender as such a critical com-ponent of these changes.[15] The term 'indirect' is actually quite helpful in understanding how these pupils stereotype gender. For them, males in general are seen as the natural *directs*. They suggest that males are just as capable of saying nasty, horrible things, but they tend to say these directly and respond immediately. Young boys will fight physically and be directly aggressive. As a result it is dealt with then and there, rather than rankling and occupying their minds in the same way. By contrast it is suggested that the natural mode for girls is indirect – a situation in

which issues of unfairness and imagined revenge go constantly round and round in the head, evoking recrimination and (usually) temporary bouts of hatred.

At the same time, while girls are seen as more likely to be directly involved in this kind of online behaviour, boys are indirectly seen as the cause of much of the quarrelling – partly because they enjoy egging the girls on and 'stirring' issues and partly because the quarrels are often about them. A typical quote would be: 'Guys tend to just say stuff, say it and get it over and done with, but girls, we're not like that, probably just beat around the bush a bit.' There again many of the accusations concern relationships with boys: 'Yep. Always around different boys . . . There was a comment made like so and so is trying to steal my friend, or "hate it when a girl flirts with someone else's boyfriend", and we think "Oh I wonder who that's about?" Might be about us. . .'

Boys clearly regard major quarrels between girls, especially those that blow up into Twitter beef, as a form of entertainment, and are happy to find ways to incite girls into these or to extend them. In the case below, girls had kept party photographs private, but a boy then used them to make mischief:

> But then one of the boys got hold of a picture by mistake, took someone's phone and sent it to himself. Put it in his group chat, and they were like 'urgh that's disgusting why would you get with her?' And they like tweeted indirects about it. And we were like 'We would never do that. She's embarrassed to have got with you as well, but we aren't gonna openly put it on, we knew what it was as well.' And they think they are just so big and 'oh we're year 12s now.' But they aren't, still act like year 8s. They get really nasty with each other.

With some exceptions, this is a fairly consistent view of gender. Boys are not more benign: they are happy to stir and publicise quarrels, to betray girls through postings about their ex, to lie, cheat and slander others. They suffer less, however, because the results are more short term. Girls find it harder to confront each other directly, or perhaps confront themselves. They are therefore more likely to retain the hurt and live in a world of anger, regret and low self-esteem.

If we then reflect back on the specific ways in which new social media seems to impact upon cyber-drama, each of them can now be seen to have a strong gender component. The rise of the indirect is associated

particularly with females and is opposed to the stereotype of males as being more direct. Yet this is also true of the sheer emphasis on social interaction as the overwhelming concern, all day, every day, which now continues through to the evening. This commitment to constant social interaction is also seen as intrinsically female. Males are viewed as more likely to turn away and be content with more autonomous activities, for instance playing games on computers. Furthermore, the erosion of distance is also closely associated with a shift from physical dominance to an emphasis on verbal assault. Males would be expected to dominate physical abuse or similar forms of offline bullying.

So in all three ways the shift to online cyber-drama means that females are more closely associated with the perpetration of such abuse, nullifying the advantage accruing to males in traditional bullying because of their physical capabilities. In effect females have attained new capabilities and exploit the potential of social media more effectively than males. This would make these changes a clear example of what could be described as an 'attainment'[16] – that is, an ability of young women to achieve something previously latent, since it arose from a frustration with their lack of strength relative to males and their subsequent vulnerability. So in these three specific instances we could conclude that social media has empowered female school pupils, recognising that there are many others such as revenge porn where it has not. The fact that they may subsequently use these attained advantages to harm each other does not make this less of an empowerment: as with other fields such as military hardware, new forms of harm are one of the tasks for which new technologies are commonly employed. The problem is that the glib use of terms such as empowerment seems to have neglected even the possibility that power is not always a good thing.[17]

As a summary to this section, these instances were provided to show how our research on social media might have an applied and welfare usage with respect to the field of education. A primary school blog was argued to be an example of best practice, while a survey of social media usage provided new information and a study of online banter and taunting suggested a revision of the standard literature on cyber-bullying. What all three have in common is that the interpretation depends upon the wider context of ethnography. The significance of this will be considered alongside a second example of this more applied perspective – the work with a hospice.

Social media and the hospice

Around the time when the larger project on social media began I was approached by Dr Ros Taylor, director of the Hospice of St Francis in Berkhamsted, who suggested I carry out some research alongside Kimberley McLaughlin, one of the senior managers at the hospice. This would be the first time I had carried out research whose primary result would be a consultative and practical rather than an academic report. The work involved interviewing over 90 individuals, of whom 50 were patients and the rest carers, relatives and hospice staff. Some of the patients were interviewed just once, others several times. Most of the patients had received a terminal diagnosis of cancer, although some other illnesses were encountered, and while a few have recovered almost all of the patients have now died.[18]

I agreed to volunteer for this work because I hugely admire the hospice movement. My subsequent experience from this research has entirely surpassed even those positive expectations. It is really quite hard to convey just how effective the hospice movement has been. In my past I had encountered dying people as mainly angry, frustrated and largely unreconciled to their situation – not conditions in which you expect people to provide positive acknowledgement. Yet in two years of hospice research I did not meet a single patient who was not fulsome in their praise for the Hospice of St Francis and the difference the hospice has made to this stage in their lives. To their *lives*, not to their *dying*, since the ethos of the hospice is to transform a situation in which the focus has been on death to one in which a terminal diagnosis is regarded as a stage in life that should be made as positive as possible.

Why would a hospice be interested in the potential of communicative media? While in some countries a hospice is largely the place where people go to die, in England, where the hospice movement was invented,[19] this is only a small part of its function. The Hospice of St Francis cares for hundreds of patients at any one time, mostly for months if not years, but the average stay in the hospice itself is only nine days. Most people want to be cared for in their own homes and so, while they may come to the hospice for support services such as pain control or counselling, mostly the hospice staff spend their days visiting patients in their own homes. As a result communication between the patients and the hospice is hugely important, and provided the initial focus of research. Eventually it became the first half of the research and

culminated in a report to the hospice advising them on how they could use new media to improve their services.[20]

As the work progressed, however, it became clear that because patients were in their own homes an equally important dimension in terms of the potential for social media was the communications between them and those relatives, neighbours and friends who comprised their support network. Social media is already becoming an integral part of these communications, both for patients and also for having an impact upon bereavement.[21] By expanding the study to the patients' social universe the applied project dovetailed with the simultaneous ethnography of The Glades as a study of people within their entire communication network. Indeed the hospice research became one of the most comprehensive parts of the larger ethnography; we were able to understand any impact or potential impact of social media within the frame of all other forms of communication, including face to face and traditional media such as the telephone and letters. This in turn helped to expand the work on polymedia and other issues central to this volume.

In the report to the hospice the first section examined the immediate potential for each new device in tandem with the others. Take webcam as an example. Given the English cultural norm of responding to the question 'How are you?' with, 'I'm fine, thank you', webcam was seen as providing access to patients' current physical conditions and wellbeing. It could resolve nurses' frustration at their inability to convey visible support to a patient sobbing on the phone. Staff envisaged webcam as useful for an immediate appraisal of symptoms, helping to decide whether a home visit was required and for demonstrating devices or regimes for taking medicines. It could also be valuable for dementia patients, who find it easier to recognise a person's face rather than his or her voice. Nurses also suggested that webcam could provide an interim assessment as to whether an elderly patient who had suffered a fall, for example, needed the additional trauma of going to the hospital's Accident & Emergency unit. Webcam might increase trust between medical professionals, who otherwise may meet only as a voice on a phone, and could also substitute for staff meetings requiring an additional two hours' travel and petrol costs. Patients suggested webcam could facilitate a virtual presence at a wedding or funeral that they were too ill to attend, and enable relatives abroad to attend the patient's own funeral. Each new technology in turn revealed similar advantages, such as the potential for texting between nurses and patients, the use of iPads or tablets for taking notes and the incorporation of specialist phone Apps.

In addition to considering the potential of each new media, the report made 11 practical recommendations. For example, there was the potential for digital legacy Apps in which patients could leave voice recordings and other material to their descendants and a scheme for 'kite-marking' medical information that is found on the internet. The research on polymedia became a direct challenge to the way in which doctors have previously assumed a knowledge of the appropriate media for each kind of interaction. This research showed that patients differed considerably in their responses to medical communication about something as sensitive as their own terminal prognosis. Some preferred to write emails late at night. As one put it:

> I would never have come into a hospice to see a counsellor or anything like that but to let out how I was feeling, on my terms, in the moment I wanted to and then press the send button felt very cathartic. I didn't feel like I was bothering anyone and knew they would respond when convenient to them – this kind of support really fitted for me.

By contrast, others preferred more face to face contact. The idea of polymedia thus turned into a recommendation for an initial consultation as to which media any given patient preferred for each of the different kinds of communication in which hospice staff envisaged they would become involved.

Potentially social media could be at the heart of these recommendations. The wider problem has been a disastrous history of a UK National Health Service spending vast amounts of money on bespoke computer services, including ideas for telemedicine and other services, most of which have failed. In the past a researcher might have suggested a new scheme or device. If accepted this might be developed by a major corporation such as Microsoft, then tested and sold back to health services at considerable cost. The issue is not just these costs, but also the fact that a new device, for instance a bespoke Videocam, will inevitably appear clunky and dated by the time it is established in usage. All of this reflects a history of healthcare which has tended to operate in a top-down fashion.

Today we live in an unprecedented time with regard to new media. Every six months the smartphone gets smarter, new Apps appear, internet sites are established and social media goes through another change. Even more important is the evidence that the creativity is moving from producers to consumers, allowing several of our routine technologies,

such as texting, to spread to populations as unpredicted appropriations by ordinary users. It is even more likely that those with special needs and their families will, from now on, be the vanguard in adapting ordinary commercial media to their specific requirements. Typically it was an elderly patient's grandchildren who knew about some recent App or who could research a voice-activated system for a patient who could no longer type – or who could turn a device into remote surveillance so that their mother could keep an eye on their grandfather.[22]

The report proposes a social media group around 'Patient's IT Initiatives' in which healthcare professionals, while assuring the anonymity of their patients, post short descriptions of their observations of patients' use of IT devices, specifically outlining the positives and benefits of these devices to the patient's welfare. Other clinicians who read these postings would be able, in turn, to repeat them as suggestions for their own patients with similar issues or problems to solve. This could be a useful site to report on failures as well as successes, giving feedback and relating other experiences that people in similar situations might learn from. Such a scheme bypasses all forms of bureaucracy and all those seeking to make profits out of this sector. In effect it adopts the 'peer to peer' and 'open access' initiatives that have become the vanguard of our new digital age.[23]

These initial proposals were aimed at healthcare professionals as ways of making their work more effective. The second half of this research was concerned to find out how palliative care patients themselves used social media, and their subsequent experiences. This usage was going through remarkable changes. At the start of our project most people believed that social media, such as Facebook, were a young person's prerogative and doubted that older people would ever be attracted to these new digital worlds. By the time of the hospice ethnography the fastest increase in Facebook usage was among the older population: around half of the over-65 year olds encountered in the general ethnography were now using Facebook. As already noted, the evidence from this ethnography suggests that the longer-term outcome for Facebook may well be a general migration to older people. They will increasingly appreciate the functionality of being in touch with family and overcoming issues of immobility, while younger people will migrate to newer platforms better suited to their interests.

During this period of transition, the situation usually encountered was an older population just starting to use Facebook, and very occasionally other platforms, but still regarding them all with deep suspicion. For example, Elaine has three children and several grandchildren; she

was separated from her husband. At various times she had been a social worker and home care helper, and then had taken an Open University course. She had previously had breast cancer, but retired in 2012 when her current cancer had made ordinary work no longer viable. Unusually I came to know her within the hospice itself, where she had come for respite and pain relief. Like many older people she distrusts Facebook. However, the way that she reported her ambivalence towards social media also seemed to implicate the very 'English' nature of this distrust, which encompassed both social media and several other relationships.

For Elaine her increasing engagement with social media has coincided with the various stages of her cancer. Earlier on, when she first experienced breast cancer, she had used one of several Facebook sites called 'bosom buddies'. One of the most important features of this site had been its supposed anonymity. Elaine was then faced with what she describes as 'a bizarre coincidence', when she recognised the person living on the other side of the street as someone with whom she had been communicating through this site. What this story brought out, however, was the way in which her many concerns with privacy and potentially also embarrassment in her use of social media were actually a migration of a pre-existing set of concerns formed in relation to offline social situations. Elaine has many stories that relate to concerns over face to face relationships, for instance neighbours not knowing how to respond to the news of her cancer. Another example was her not knowing whether a particular neighbour had actually seen the card that she put through the letter box – and if he or she had then been unsure how to interpret the lack of response. This was the kind of instance that informants used to highlight the advantage of WhatsApp, where one sees if the message has been read.

Elaine also provides examples that fit with what in the last chapter was termed the 'Goldilocks Strategy'. She described how her sister had used Facebook to organise her mother's funeral. Elaine noted that when it came to responding to the news of this death, people who were really close to the family would not have said anything on Facebook, nor would those who felt too distant and were therefore probably not on their Facebook anyway. However, Facebook was used by some people who did not feel close enough to make personal contact, but still wanted to make some sort of response to the news of the death.

For her own part Elaine distrusts Facebook and will not use it to discuss her illness directly. Indeed she worried for some time after a friend used direct messaging for that purpose in case all the other 'friends' on Facebook had seen this. Despite her ambivalence, however,

Facebook has an important if indirect role in dealing with communication about her disease. As she put it:

> We went on holiday, and I was trying to get pictures of me looking happy, and reasonably well, 'cos it says a lot doesn't it. A picture says a thousand words and it saves me having to keep saying this that and the other. If you just do a picture and put it on Facebook then everyone can see I'm having a great time in Spain and I don't have to explain myself . . . we went to France before that, and I took more pictures and I got other people to take pictures, and I did get an awful lot, I think a lot of people didn't really know how I was, at that point, I got huge amounts of likes, like 30 likes, because I think it was a way people were genuinely pleased to see me having a nice time. It was nice, it was good. Yeah.

At the same time her 'Englishness' comes to the fore when she contemplates the falseness of this kind of self-representation. As a result she is very tempted to turn this into ironic humour, and especially black humour, that typically English idiom. What she wants to do is post a pastiche of that message related to her present condition: '"Here I am, having a lovely time in the hospice". It would be quite funny really wouldn't it? . . . I could do that I suppose. I don't think I've got the nerve to be all – "Oh here I am having a jolly old time at the hospice". If someone posted that I'd just laugh, so maybe I should.' She also notes that social media becomes especially important partly because otherwise lying in bed is so boring. Yet she also sees a negative side.

> I do look at Facebook, but I think it is one of those things. I have heard it can make people depressed, Facebook. If everyone seems to be having an incessantly happy time, and you're not. It can be a bit. It's the other side of it really. I've experienced both. And I had to stop Facebook for a while. I don't want to see about other people's holidays, I don't know, it does lend itself to showing off, Facebook, it is about that. It's not a place to put your innermost thoughts or your dark thoughts or things like that really. It's that sometimes, I don't know, it's just a time I got a bit low. I don't think you should look at Facebook when you're low. It just makes you feel . . .

This ambivalence emerged recently when there was something Elaine felt she really needed to communicate. The problem was that she had

become increasingly upset by one particular phrase. Many patients struggle with the dominant conversational conventions about 'fighting cancer' or that one should 'be strong'. When her surgeon had finally told her that her cancer was inoperable he had ended the session with exactly that phrase: 'Be strong.' Elaine saw this advice as absurd, implying as it did that she had some control over these events, when in fact personal fortitude would do nothing to prevent this cancer from killing her. She contemplated Facebook, but then actually used text, to tell people that the one thing she did not want to hear was to be told to 'be strong'. The reason she chose text was she felt that this gave her more control over who saw this message.

Facebook has thereby become part of a wider polymedia. Sometimes it is better to text, sometimes to post. Elaine remarks on how nice it is to receive a physical card, but also how someone including their mobile phone number within such a card gives her the option of renewing a relationship. Each media has occupied its own niche within a complex situation. On the one hand she is dealing with profound and consequential communications, but on the other she wants to retain her English sensibility in controlling how people respond, and to keep humour as an integral part of such communications. As she notes, a physical card is great, although for a terminal cancer patient the conventional 'get well soon' greeting is not really appropriate. As usual she finds this funny.

There were many such personal stories about an individual's relationship with social media which reveal the way that scalable sociality, as part of polymedia, gives the ability to craft a repertoire of communicative channels; these are aimed at different groups of acquaintances to help the patient to deal with the issues arising from living with a terminal condition. However, as the research developed, the links between this experience and the wider ethnography of Englishness became stronger. What emerged strongly as the hospice research progressed was the evidence of isolation and loneliness among elderly people, especially elderly men. This would not have been at all surprising in an urban study, but had not been anticipated in a context where most of the hospice patients lived in villages much like The Glades. At the same time as this hospice study was demonstrating the consequences of isolation, the ethnography of The Glades was inching towards an explanation of the cause.[24]

As already noted, the preferred mode for English sociality was always in the public domain, for example greeting others in the street or when out shopping, socialising at village events such as the annual carnival or going to a performance of a cultural society. Some people used

the sports clubs, others preferred the pub. There was evidence of wide-spread philanthropy and the hospice itself, which is one of several in the region, has over a thousand volunteers. This friendliness in the public domain and commitment to public welfare is contrasted with a powerful normative rule respecting the autonomy of the private domain: it is reflected in traditional sayings such as 'an Englishman's home is his castle'. Especially for working-class informants, people avoid going into each other's homes if they are not related. There is a consistent fear of imposing oneself upon the time or interest of others, and especially of being viewed as a nosy or inquisitive neighbour. The English assumption is that other people have better things to do than be interested in oneself, complemented by a fear of being thought boring or boorish if one imposes oneself upon someone else. The core characteristic is reticence.[25] As a result social networks developed in the pub or on the golf course did not follow people back home when they became ill and unable to go out. People who regularly volunteered to work for institutions such as the hospice in order to provide private care to strangers found that they were embarrassed to offer that same care to friends and neighbours, and sometimes even to family.

The result of this propensity to social embarrassment is highly problematic. We found hospice patients who were born, schooled and lived in a village, but today as elderly cancer sufferers know only two other people in that same village. Neighbours cannot be presumed to know one another. Perhaps most shocking are reports from both patients and staff that relatives and friends actually stop contacting the patient, reflecting a deeper avoidance of acknowledging terminal sickness. In some respects kin relationships seem to be following the pattern of friendships in this regard, rather than the other way around.

This reflects the general point in Chapter 3 that friendship is becoming the idiom of kinship, while historically the opposite had been true. Grandparents take huge pride in claiming that they are not 'a burden' and have very limited contact with their descendants, so the reticence often derives as much from patients as it does from family and potential friends. It is the patients themselves who back off, not just friends and relatives. While this is hugely variable, the overall evidence is that the social universe of the elderly can often be remarkably small. This is especially true of older males who often choose to back off rather than become a burden. Institutions such as the church serve relatively few congregants. The problem is exacerbated once a patient is ill and loses their faculties, whether from immobility or dementia – at this point their social universe can shrink to nothing. The evidence is there with

hospice patients, with staff reporting that in the most extreme examples even children may be absent from the funeral.[26]

This leads back to the fundamental point of this book with regard to social media itself. Into an English situation, which strongly contrasts a charitable public face with a defensive private space, comes a new set of platforms called social media. These have been defined here as media that do not fit traditional concepts of public and private media, but which occupy a space in between. As noted in previous chapters, the result is social media reconfigured to manage a space that is often neither too close and intimate nor too distant. As older people have migrated to Facebook, this has been one of the principal reasons for its success. They can, in effect, be inquisitive without being intrusive. It is early days, but there are already many instances where it seems that Facebook has enabled people to retain communication that otherwise would have ended when he or she retreated to the home. Because they remain in active contact they are also more likely to engage in active support, at the very least in the form of continued social communication – something that people suffering from loneliness and isolation desperately desire. If this proves to be the case in the longer term, then it will be because the very nature of social media, as located between the private and the public, addresses this very specific problem of English sociality: how to overcome the boundary between the two.

In my report to the hospice this conclusion needed to be set within the current situation of hospice care. As hospice staff noted on many occasions, the moment when a person is diagnosed as terminal or when a spouse loses their lifelong companion is the worst time to try to introduce new media to facilitate social contacts, as people may also have lost hope and confidence. The staff can predict this, but the patients cannot. As one nurse put it: 'I have been a nurse since 1980, and I can honestly say that out of all the ways in which this can help it is with the unbelievable loneliness of people. It is so tragic seeing patients who have lost someone they have lived with for 60 years once they have died because they have nobody going into that house, except once a year.'

For this reason it seems vital proactively to foster wider social relations that can turn into social support later on in the trajectory towards death and bereavement, and this should be done at the initial assessment. An older person who can Facetime on an iPad, or a younger person active on Facebook, has unprecedented means for retaining connectivity with others. Yet teaching new media takes considerable patience and commitment from the trainer, as well as confidence and ability in the learner. This may be easier when partners are still present or the cancer

is in a relatively early stage, when there is a reservoir of hope and self-confidence. Clearly there should be no pressure to impose new media on the unwilling, but there are grounds for explaining to new patients, who have never used a computer but might be less intimidated by a tablet such as an iPad, why this may become a very useful tool later on, even if this is not something in which they particularly want to engage.

Again social media works here within a wider context of polymedia. As already noted, webcam, with that additional comfort of visual encounters, often works best for patients. A nurse talked of a patient who now can only move one finger and her eyes, but has retained remarkable autonomy through her iPad. She remarked how fortunate it was that this skill with the iPad was already in place, since it could never have been introduced at a later stage. Apart from the iPad, however, the platform that seems already to have the most positive and sustained impact when elderly people take it up is probably Facebook. There are the extreme stories, such as someone whose life was saved through being able to communicate while still on Facebook that he was having a stroke, enabling the recipient of this information to call for an ambulance.[27] More routinely Facebook may be having a considerable impact on grandparent to grandchild communication. Where WhatsApp is accepted, this is developing as a key platform for sharing photographs of new family members such as babies and infants. Because social media goes to groups, it can save a person constantly having to repeat updates about their condition to each individual.[28] It can also be valuable to carers, whose problems of increasing isolation are almost on a par with patients and who also need social support to alleviate their sense of anxiety and frustration.

Overall we found that there are grounds for advocating both the development of specialist internet sites such as 'bosom buddies' as well as general social media platforms. People with particular types of cancer often feel they do not want to discuss intimate issues to do with parts of their body with anyone other than those who are undergoing the very same and directly comparable changes. At the same time patients undergoing chemotherapy, and who are thus susceptible to infection, or patients who feel disgusted and ashamed by changes in their own appearance, find social media the only way to retain contact with others.

Finally the research encountered cases where patients are using Facebook cathartically to discuss openly both the experience of having cancer and the situation of knowing that they are going to die.[29] This can also help overcome the reluctance of other people to engage with the topics of death and dying. In one case posting and receiving responses from a growing body of relatives and friends helped to bring a patient's

estranged family back together. As a result she argued that Facebook had been instrumental in transforming this period of her life before she died, allowing her to use her experiences to educate and uplift others. A man in his forties who worked in IT carefully considered how to use Facebook to keep friends and relatives informed as to the progress of his treatment. However, he also saw these postings as instrumental in his own acknowledgement of such developments.[30]

Why breadth is depth

Many people would expect that an academic project funded through the taxation system, as opposed to commercial funding, comes with certain social responsibilities. A rather simplistic version of this would be the idea that it should be shown to have demonstrated 'impact', viewed as practical and applied consequences. There is a danger that a chapter on applied consequences could be read as a narrowing of that kind, but actually the contents of this chapter lead to a very different and much broader conclusion. Firstly such a criticism ignores the most important of all the benefits of this kind of academic research. These are the contributions to knowledge and education which are equally ways of contributing to public welfare. Hopefully all of this book is worthwhile and matters – not just this chapter.

However, the real danger of such an argument is that it would lead to a similar narrowing down of research. Already research grants are increasingly trying to pre-empt the research that they fund, to the extent that the proposed 'impact' is specified from the start. This consequently influences the proposed methodology, increasingly conceived in the language of correlations and specified relevant variables. The conclusions of this chapter are diametrically opposed to such logic. It is hard to imagine that the sheer volume of knowledge and insight that should arise from the scholarly commitment of ethnography would not ultimately be relevant and helpful to applied and practical projects conducive to the welfare of populations. However, this is actually much less likely, and the evidence base would be far shakier, if this were done at the expense of the rather special and distinct quality of ethnography as open-ended and broad-based holistic contextualisation. The response by the ethnographer to the request for consequences should not be a narrowing down to selected topics, presumed likely to be the key variables prior to that research. Ethnography rather shows how this is likely to lead to mistaken and misleading results.

The two examples described in this chapter make this same point in very different ways. In the first case this argument follows by default. The ethnography of The Glades was not intended as an applied project, and the enquiry always retained an open-ended commitment to breadth, so that the study of taunting and negative interaction, for example, was merely one component of the research on schools. The ethnography equally contributed to the evidence for the opposition between visual materials on Instagram and Twitter, presented in Chapter 3, with no applied intentions. It was this breadth of ethnography that suggested there might be a problem with the more policy-directed research that had already predetermined categories of bully and victim. It was because the ethnography encountered these issues equally through engagement with parents and pupils in their home context, rather than just at school, that the analysis could be more precise in delineating exactly how social media transforms these negative encounters as indirects, the erosion of distance and hiding behind a screen. Ethnography is the only approach that tries to engage people in all their varied contexts, as opposed to presuming in advance which will be relevant to which. Taunting could be revealed to be part of a wider culture of negative interaction rather than an expression of predefined roles.

The same point emerges when we start from the opposite trajectory in the second example. Here the initial enquiry was narrower, since the hospice is not situated in The Glades and the study was a response to the request by the hospice director for some applied research. This meant first interviewing patients in their homes and then speaking to staff and carers at the hospice. Only subsequently did it became apparent that the results and recommendations would be much richer if this study were combined with the simultaneous and wider ethnography based at The Glades, because one of the core problems that emerged from the hospice research was that of isolation and loneliness. Yet it was not simply the interviews with patients that helped shed light on this; it was actually the primary research project directed at social media in The Glades. A patient who implied that their only social contact was their gardener was backed up by our interview with a gardener in The Glades; he noted how elderly people increasingly employed him for tea and company, not just for gardening.

It was also the wider ethnography that helped to highlight the specific issues of Englishness and the problem of separation between the private and the public, and this in turn helped to explain the prevalence of isolation and loneliness even within a village setting. The hospice study might have been both less successful and produced less useful

suggestions for application and policy had it remained true to the initial project, focused on the hospice itself. In social research breadth is the prerequisite for depth.

In examining these two studies that target either end of the age spectrum one can see another reason why breadth matters. Often we see things in a narrower compass because of institutionalisation. Young people are studied in schools, those with terminal conditions in the hospice – but people do not live only in schools, nor in England do they only die in hospices. In both cases people spend time there, but they mainly live and often die at home. The same assertion would be true almost irrespective of our topic. Anthropology has become ever more essential to the study of modern life partly because more and more of that life takes place at home – which means we have to understand and engage more closely with these private worlds. It is only ethnography that feels 'at home' in people's private homes. Yet without understanding the lives of families and homes, we miss the fundamental context for so much else. The same lesson is likely to follow as social media itself becomes more significant in people's lives. If social media is where we increasingly live, then this is where research will increasingly need to take place.