

Book Review: Social Media in an English Village by Daniel Miller

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One of nine country case studies due to be published as part of the UCL Press 'Why We Post' series, **Social Media in an English Village** offers the findings of an 18-month ethnographic study of the use of social media platforms by residents of an English village. Renowned anthropologist **Daniel Miller** argues that his subjects utilise a 'Goldilocks Strategy' to calibrate their interactions to ensure that they are 'just right', indicative of a particularly 'English' engagement with social media. While **Nikki Soo** would have welcomed greater elaboration of Miller's concept of 'Englishness', she recommends this as a thought-provoking and relatable read that will appeal to media scholars and the curious layperson alike.

Social Media in an English Village. Daniel Miller. UCL Press. 2016.

This title is currently free to download [here](#) on the UCL Press website.

Social media clearly needs no introduction. Its seductiveness lies in its ease of use and [potential to spread with very little effort](#). Most of us have at least one account on a platform, although the majority uses a variety. More than [95 million pictures](#) and videos are uploaded on Instagram daily. There are approximately [1.09 billion active users](#) on Facebook and at least [500 million tweets](#) each day. Social media is what we turn to as things happen to share moments and express thoughts ranging from the contemplative to the mundane.

This is largely due to the accessibility of the internet and related technologies in our daily lives. Contemporary social science research has sought to investigate their development and their impacts as technology reshapes the landscape of our emotional lives through machine-mediate relationships. Yet, Daniel Miller's *Social Media in an English Village* does not just reveal that social media is prevalent in our lives, but also that the way it is used in a particular setting often reflects the existing culture of a country.

The volume is part of the UCL Press 'Why We Post' series, a set of eleven books produced by anthropologists over a period of 15 months. *Social Media in an English Village* is one of nine monographs, alongside a comparative book featuring all the findings and a final text contrasting visuals across the different field sites. Each seeks to explore how social media is used in different communities and a variety of social settings in the local language.

Miller argues that much research on social media circles around a problem. Is the overuse of social media resulting in modern-day syndromes such as smartphone addiction? Are [depression symptoms exacerbated or produced in light of 'Facebook Envy'](#)? What makes this book – and the entire 'Why We Post' collection – stand out is the fact that it is not trying to analyse a problem. It also steps away from focusing on each social media platform as a specific entity. Instead, three distinct arguments are made during the course of this book. Firstly, instead of looking at the platform, we need to consider the *content* of what is being posted. Secondly, since social media exists only because of the content that is posted, it is always *local*. Thirdly, social media should be considered as part of *ordinary life* and not a separate virtual setting.

The book is organised into seven chapters, with the same chapter headings as the other eight monographs, enabling readers to compare and contrast different community observations. Each chapter is accompanied by photos, tweets and posts to reproduce a vibrant and robust image of the situation as it took place.





Image Credit: Castle Combe ([Learn From. Build More. CC2.0](#))

As outlined in Chapters One and Two, the ethnography took place in what Miller calls ‘The Glades’ – two villages in suburban England just outside of London, Leeglades and Highglades (not their real names). Miller attests that key to comprehending how residents of an English village use social media is to acknowledge the ‘Englishness’ of their usage. This was not only a key finding, but also a key factor in how the study was carried out. A conventional ethnographic study would have involved close daily interactions, with the researcher living within the community and following residents into their private domains. However, Miller states that English people are less friendly and having a purpose for ‘hanging out’ is necessary. Unlike the other studies, Miller commuted from his home in London over the course of 18 months and did not seek to have the same type of trusted relationship that other anthropologists build with the community. Miller and two other researchers interviewed over 370 individuals and followed 130 of their informants (most of them 16-18-year-olds) on a variety of social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Other platforms and applications such as Tinder, Vine and Tumblr are included at random, but are not central to the book. Occasionally, the researchers were also privy to private messages exchanged on Whatsapp and Snapchat.

Through descriptive layers of English everyday life, snippets of interviews and pictorial illustrations of various moments on social media including screenshots of memes, tweets and photos uploaded on Instagram, Miller brings forth a concept he terms the ‘Goldilocks strategy’. This is where social media interaction is meticulously fine-tuned to ensure that each relationship cultivated is not too hot, not too cold, but ‘just right’. This concept is explored and analysed throughout

Chapter Four, ‘Social Media and Social Relationships’, is the crux of the book. It considers how social media is utilised within relationships between family members, friends or lovers. Varying degrees of closeness can be found, reflected in the different kinds of social media that the subjects chose to interact on. Twitter was considered more ‘private’ than Facebook for younger users as it was unlikely their parents would follow their Twitter account. Here, Miller’s unique ‘Goldilocks strategy’ organically surfaces. This refers to people keeping in touch through the use of social media but otherwise remaining silent. Users are able to socialise from a distance, sometimes developing interactions that allow them to be closer than they otherwise are.

In a fashion true to English mannerisms, Miller states that keeping a distance is not meant to come across as

unfriendly. Rather, it is delicately balanced to remain friendly in an appropriate way. While an interesting cog in his argument, he does not explain how 'appropriateness' is conceived or perceived. Despite this shortcoming, examples showcase human relationships that are not often discussed but would ring true to most, if not all, of us. One case discusses how an older woman maintains relations with her distant cousins after she reconnected with them at her mother's funeral. She ordinarily would not chat to them on the phone, but using Facebook to observe their lives allows her to participate in a passive way. She leaves a few comments and exchanges the odd message. Another example indicates how oversharing through the use of Facebook during difficult family situations can result in colder, anti-social conduct as conflict within families plays out publicly. The chapter concludes by explaining how the 'Goldilocks strategy' is an observation of how the English socialise online in the same way that they socialise offline, resulting in identical interactions presenting in polymedia.

Miller uses Chapter Five to demonstrate how these small-scale observations could result in salient and nuanced policy changes, most particularly in two areas: firstly, the impact of social media on young students; and secondly, the potential of social media for the terminally ill. The former was an unintended result of the project, whereas the latter was carried out after a request from a hospice director. Female students have been found to use social media to engage in cyber-bullying, while terminal cancer patients find comfort in discussing their diagnosis and issues on 'bosom buddies' forums with patients with similar illnesses. Both demonstrate how ethnographic work can shed light on specific niche community areas of which we might otherwise have little information. The key takeaway is that broad-based ethnographic studies will allow for impact and helpful suggestions for policy changes.

Overall, *Social Media in an English Village* certainly achieves most of its aim to provide an in-depth understanding of how social media is used within an English community. Certain concepts could be expounded on more clearly, such as the idea of 'Englishness' constantly referred to by the author. Personal anecdotes from the writer, presented alongside cases, quotes and other bits of evidence, nonetheless make the book easy to comprehend and very relatable. This thought-provoking publication will appeal to both the curious layperson and media scholars, no doubt igniting introspection about our own use of social media.

Nikki Soo is a PhD Candidate at [Royal Holloway, University of London](#). Her research interests are political communication, the use of digital media in campaigning and democratisation. She holds an MA in Public Policy from King's College London, and an MSc in New Political Communication from Royal Holloway. Follow her on Twitter [@sniksw](#). [Read more by Nikki Soo](#).

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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