

FACEBOOK AND COMMUNITY – A STORY

Daniel Miller (a more complete version of this story appears in D. Miller 2011 Tales from Facebook. Polity Press)

One of the problems in teaching anthropology is the awareness that so many people come to study this discipline because of some romantic idyll of kinship, the village or community. These seem to be imagined as some kind of paradise lost, remaining only in these enclaves studied by anthropologists. This romantic otherness is largely used as a stick to beat ourselves with. All sorts of faults and deficiencies are assumed to exist in our own society as against these others. One of the reasons I try to conduct research in areas as varied as London, Manila, village India or Trinidad is in order to contest such assumptions. We all live equally in the present. Peoples studied by anthropologists are not some evolutionary remnant of our own past. Anthropologists themselves can be in thrall to the marginal and to the critique. So it seems almost heresy to want to use anthropology to affirm positively that which we can accomplish within the contemporary world we actually inhabit, rather than use it as some kind of lament and regret. But that is my desire and intention.

Having said all this, although I barely know Alana, sitting in this quiet rural hamlet, it is quite hard to entirely escape from this romance of community. I can just feel sentimentality creeping up my spine, softening my resolve, despite all my attempts to disown it. I blame the palm trees. But if I have let my guard slip, it is more because Alana herself seems incredibly nice. There is something about her that is warm and gentle and considerate and seductive. Although she is twenty-five and good looking this is not an erotic attachment. Actually it's more the feeling that you want her to be your mother, to comfort you when you get hurt, to keep your inner-most confidences and protect you from horrible people.

This sentiment naturally extends to her family who seem just as benign. Each of them seems to have a kind of maturity of vision as to how to care for others; that natural sense of the balance between order and freedom, concern and autonomy that makes parenting work but is so hard to explain or achieve. It is conservatively gendered. The mother cooks, while the father pontificates wisely about the future of the world and local politics. Both seem strong in the appropriately gendered fashion for Trinidadians. I confess I tend to be more drawn to the woman's world. Especially as it turns out that Alana's mother is preparing a Christmas drink I adore called punch à crème. Now the problem when I want to prepare this drink at home is that my own family is a bit fussy about downing raw eggs, which I assumed was essential to this delectable concoction. But Alana's mother has a recipe using cooked eggs. Basically mixing 6 tins of condensed with 4 of evaporated milk, heating this up with

nutmeg, the rinds of three limes and other spices (unspecified - I can't give away all her secrets) and then whisking a dozen eggs into the hot milk. Finally adding two and a half litres of strong rum and leaving at least overnight.

Fortunately this was one of those 'here is some I made earlier' cookery classes. But I honestly don't think that my three glasses of punch a crème were the only reason I felt this benign glow in the company of Alana's family. They all seemed to embody an ethical sensibility of concern for others wellbeing. But never as a matter of abstract principle. Always with a touch of humour, and those allowances for slippage and spoilage that are realistic about the actual world and its foibles. This attraction first for Alana and then her family leads to back to that romantic ideal of community, since Alana lives in the kind of settlement which has become quite rare in contemporary Trinidad.

Modern Trinidad is a pretty mobile place and I meet relatively few people of any age who live where they were born. But as one moves along the main East-West corridor where much of the islands population live, there are roads that lead out to the North. Where, if you travel for a while, you can hear the forest echo with the last voices of the original Amerindian populations of this land, where there is a sense of continuity and history.

Santa Ana is known as a Spanish village. Spanish is a curious Trinidadian term, in that it can apply to a person who has absolutely no claim to any lineage that comes from Spain. Rather, it tends to imply a mixed descent, often a very mixed descent. You can have a bit of Chinese, Syrian (who are actually Lebanese) Portuguese (who are actually from Madeira) Indian, African and French Creole (some of whom are British); the combination of which makes you quite clearly Spanish. Some dispute this, but my reading of Trinidadian history, is that there are no people in the island today who can claim pure descent from the pre-colonial population. For a long period Trinidad was under the titular rule of Spain, though it was pretty sparsely inhabited by either Amerindians, decimated by disease, or indeed Spanish. Both of these groups largely disappeared through the pores of later French and British colonialism. In the middle of Trinidad there are Spanish settlements founded by people who migrated from Venezuela, but in most other areas Spanish really just means mixed and old.

Santa Ana is quite small. There are around twenty-five houses straddling a ridge in the foothills of the mountains that form a spine pointing north into the hills. These houses, with only two exceptions, represent the descendents of the same three or

four core families. So by now pretty much everyone in the village is related to pretty much everyone else. When it comes to any kind of significant event, such as a wedding or a wake, then any remaining lack of relationship is ignored. For all intents and purposes this village is a family writ large. All of which makes this the kind of place one imagines to approximate that romantic idyll of community. And Santa Ana has that feeling of common identity, of solidarity and reciprocal concern. Working back downwards this is the solidarity and common care that seems to be channelled through Alana's exemplary family and thence to Alana herself.

None of this means that everything in the village is actually peace and goodwill. Alana's family have a running feud with their neighbour that has gone on for years. Every time a pause arises that might have led to a rapprochement it gets extended by disputes about where children shouldn't be playing or when dogs shouldn't be barking. They even have a classic confrontation as to where exactly the boundary lies between the two houses, and who last moved the fence late at night to their advantage. If we stand around the village for an evening and gossip, its not going to be long before there are whispers about who has slept with who and really really shouldn't have. This is a real village. I seriously doubt there was ever a community so iron clad that you couldn't find pockets that have been corroded deeply by illicit sex. If the newspapers regularly find this in communities of monks and ascetics, what hope for a Trinidadian village?

Within this actual community with all its troubles and potential claustrophobia Alana has in fact thrived. She didn't get to one of those elite secondary schools which are so often a passport out to other lands. But she did just fine at the local school. She worked hard, is naturally bright, and achieved the A level grades to take her to the University of Trinidad and Tobago (UTT). This is the new University that was set up six years before to try and expand tertiary education beyond the hallowed, impressive, but also now somewhat musty halls of the University of the West Indies (UWI). UTT, being less pretentious and more sympathetic to the applied side of academia, suited Alana perfectly and she has flourished there. Doing well in her first degree and now embarked upon a master's course in occupational psychology.

Alana explains almost nothing about herself, as being simply an expression of her own individualistic whim. Everything around her is understood as connected to the networks she lives within. She was reluctant to come onto Facebook in the first place. But pressure from her younger cousins forced her to give in. and once on, she loved it. Today her main usage follows naturally from the social circumstance of her day-to-day life. It works exceptionally well within the ethos of collective education. This has turned out to be central to her course in occupational psychology where the

teaching has a strong background in social psychology and family therapy. Typically part of the marking system depends upon group work. The teacher had intended this to be carried out as a group blog but Alana and her peers felt things worked much more smoothly when tasks could be integrated between studying and social networking more generally. So they have opted to do all their group work through Facebook. The teacher agreed. It's typical of the way the internet more generally seems to have become consolidated around Facebook over the last year in Trinidad.

This also fits in well within Alana's own networking. She has around two hundred Facebook friends of whom about forty are relatives. She has less than ten friends from outside of Trinidad. This is unusual for Trinidad, which could hardly be more transnational. In a previous study I found that the majority of the population is transnational even at the nuclear level, defined as having either parents, children or siblings, living abroad. The bulk of her network are from her university and centres on her class. She logs on in the morning before she goes to class and spends much of her lunch time on Facebook. There are computers available at college for use when she is not actually in lectures, and she spends about an hour a day there on Facebook. But the real commitment comes later. Most nights she goes to sleep around eight. Then, when the rest of her household is asleep, she gets up. From midnight to three in the morning is her core Facebook time and life.

Her reasoning is that this is the quiet period when she can concentrate on her studies without household disturbance. But there is more to it. Almost all her class have adopted the same diurnal rhythm. They have become a Facebook flock that roost together at night, setting up an incessant chatter that echoes through the branches. As a supervisor of post-graduate students I learned a long time ago that the more learning is fun, the more that it is social, the more that individual students actually learn. I have rescued a few pasty-faced US students who have been to colleges where the ethos was that if the students ever lifted their noses from the grindstones they were poor students. By contrast I recommend long weekends and evenings when students are forbidden from even thinking about their thesis and that ideally most intellectual discussion is in pubs and infused with alcohol. I find a direct correlation between how much they enjoy their work and the quality of their work. After all, this is anthropology. If you don't like to socialise and make friends, you are in the wrong business.

Alana's group has discovered this quite happily for themselves and without any such pedagogic prompting. Free of the delusion that learning is competitive or a limited quantity, everyone helps the others. If you are all on Facebook together then researching homework and socialising are seamlessly joined. In the middle of

chatting about boyfriends, you ask for clarification about a term you suddenly remember you hadn't understood in class. Conversely as this guy explains patiently, clearly and with obvious knowledge, about some nineteenth century approach to the psychology of work, you start to see things in the man you hadn't previously acknowledged. By the end of the explanation you find a reason to need some further point of clarification in person next time you are in class together. For the group as a whole it provides a kind of general reassuring co-presence. As she describes it `Yeah like seeing that, say if all of us up studying at the same time we would log on just for each other to know that we there. So in the event that you come across something that you don't really understand we would do it over Facebook or if it very necessary then we call.'

Yes, of course, this can be distracting and Alana reckons that only about 20% of the conversation is purely discussion of homework. Mostly this is a public set of encounters, but not entirely. There is nothing to say that you can't also have a few issues that are better discussed more discretely, through Facebook's internal IM facility or message sending service. Anyway, if you end up having a private chat through Facebook with your three best friends, more or less every night, as Alana does, it isn't necessarily because things need to be more discrete. It's also just an affirmation that they are your best friends.

Within Facebook one can have different networks that largely ignore one another. Alana probably wouldn't be that interested in FarmVille, left to herself. But she has a score of younger cousins who need her to be a good neighbour so they can progress in the game, which anyway she finds reasonably relaxing. She admits that this can add up to something like two hours a day online labour. But the consequence is a thriving online cousinhood that is effective in developing her extended family relations. It co-exists without much overlap with the network that forms around her class. Alana partly uses her diurnal rhythm to keep this separation. The FarmVille with cousins happens between six and eight. The exchanges with her class come when the cousins are asleep. There are other networks she refuses. She knows, for example, a group of her friends use Facebook extensively to discuss politics. But she is wary of the falling out that this brings and refuses to get involved,

Having this degree of sharing is also a way to leverage networks. Some, but not all, of those in the class may have the kind of links to people that everyone would quite like to have some sort of connection with, but have no means of achieving for themselves. So one girl is a relative of a key Soca star of the moment, Bunji Garlin. Another was at school with a well known Rasta singer. A third has a link with a guy who isn't just a member of the national cricket team but is also pretty cute. Much of

the 80% of communication, that is not homework, could be at least loosely described as gossip. So these little tit-bits of news and closeness to semi-celebs seem to add yeast to the general doughy gossip that bakes of a night.

Then again research was never something that was confined within academic boundaries. A person does well in class because they know how to locate the latest journal articles and the most recent internet debates about the topic they will be examined on. This may be the same person who is first to know how to find out what is in fashion and where are the cool places to be seen. Its all research, and knowing how to know things first. Not necessarily new things. Alana has just been learning about an ideology that springs out of Rastafari. Called Bobo Shanti it was founded in 1958 by Prince Emmanuel Charles Edwards who formed a kind of black trinity with Marcus Garvey and Haile Selassie. In Trinidad they appear as more extreme than most Rasta, whether in what they wear or how they live. They also lean towards Jewish customs such as a Saturday Sabbath. Alana is no more than curious about them, but chatting on Facebook with someone whose close friend is actually part of the movement is a good way of satisfying this curiosity. She is someone who doesn't like to be ignorant about anything much at all. It may not have any immediate purpose but at this point it's hard to make a firm distinction between curiosity and research.

The other side of gossip though, especially in Trinidad, is scandal leading to bacchanal. At the fringe of their group is a photographer who tends to take pictures of people having 'scenes', such a couple quarrelling at a nightclub. It seems OK when he managed to show a policeman verbally assaulting a driver, but what of an ordinary couple spotted after a couple of drinks, who unintentionally bring their quarrel out into the public domain. And then he posts it on Facebook or Youtube? Even abstractly this was a problem. But then recently this same photographer took a picture of one of Alana's classmates who was dancing with a guy when everyone knew she was engaged to another. It's not like anybody thinks that an engaged women will never dance with someone else. But once it was on Facebook it was bound to cause problems in their relationship and to spread as the more insinuating form of negative gossip. There are also too many instances of women being malicious to each other, as recently happened to a girl who wasn't too worried about her profile, since her boyfriend is not on Facebook. Then another woman put up explicit posts about how 'I thought you already had a man' causing her to defriend that woman. Trinidad is an island where there tends to be an assumption that women in general will maintain a certain level of simmering resentment and competition in relation to men. It goes with the myth that there are more women than men in the country.

Alana fully acknowledges this problematic side to Facebook. As she puts it you might trust your ten friends, but then they trust their ten friends and a friend's friend doesn't have the same trust and commitment to you. So before you know it, things get circulated that shouldn't. It's not usually so bad or so common in her age group. Though even she finds herself often tagged in photos. Quite a few times she has moved swiftly to untag them. After all she has most of her family also as friends on her site. But then she also monitors what she does in public, because she knows this could happen. Where she feels Facebook really causes havoc is amongst the teenagers. Partly they simply haven't learnt the self-discipline that this technology so evidently requires. But also they are the ones who play with taking risk; where the girls compete in trying to look sexy. It is also at this age when sometimes girls can be complete bitches to each other, especially when your best friend, who told you all her secrets, is now suddenly your worst enemy.

You could have this discussion with pretty much anyone who uses Facebook. But it is particularly significant to this research project to be having the conversation specifically with Alana, since who else could give a sense of what it means to call Facebook a community than someone who actually lives in a close-knit community? Listening to her talk about the use of Facebook at night, amongst her peers, there is no getting away from the conclusion that Facebook creates, maintains and constitutes some kind of community, whatever we mean by that term. And through this common internet life are emerging some of the values that make community so special. On the one hand the deeper knowledge and experience of fellow humanity that breeds care and concern, friendship and reciprocity, in short the formation of what I earlier called ethics. Yet at the same time there is the invasion, the devastation of privacy; the degree to which everyone knows everyone's business. There is the speed with which gossip surges through the network and spills as grimy foam through the doors and onto the carpets of those living far from its source. There are the quarrels and the suspicions and, as

the last portrait has shown, the actual break up of otherwise viable relationships. This looks like the very opposite of those same ethics. It is that which pulls people apart into suspicion and revenge, rather than unites them in common concern.

If we are ever going to understand these contradictions we need to go much more deeply into what is meant when we talk about Facebook as some sort of community. The problem is that the word is used so easily by academics and others, almost none of whom have ever lived in such conditions. So the intention of this enquiry was to exploit the immediate juxtaposition in the lives of people, such as Alana, who were qualified to compare the virtual community of Facebook with the rest of their lives.

This is why much of my conversation with her is not about Facebook but concerned her wider experience. What was it like growing up in and continuing to live in Santa Ana? She is a student at university and used to thinking abstractly about such comparisons and concepts. What does she think community is and what are its consequences? She hasn't the slightest difficulty in appreciating either the meaning or significance of this question. Her answer is clear and unequivocal. Everything I have said about Facebook is true for her and true to her. Yes, it creates these bonds that go well beyond those which you would normally expect from a bunch of classmates. Yes it has a propensity for bacchanal and scandal and she has given me the anecdotes to back that up. But with respect to both aspects, Facebook is not a patch on the real thing.

However much one blames Facebook for malicious or ill-informed gossip, Alana feels it doesn't even start to approach what happens routinely in a small place like Santa Ana. She tells of how, in a community like this, people would look at how their friend's children are growing up, or the youths in the village. They wouldn't take time to get to know them, they would just sit and talk about whether a child is neglected or a youth is into drugs. She says 'Yeh it's much much worse. I think people still have some level of respect on Facebook, well at least the people that I socialize with. They wouldn't blatantly put something very offensive. Whereas if you having a conversation with somebody, they would tell yuh what they think about someone else in confidentiality.... With the older people you would just probably hear an exchange of words but the youths they would start with the words and end up with the fist-fighting and stuff like that. We recently had a stranger that came in. I think he dating a girl out the road and she girl, she pretty young. And she and a guy in the village always had an exchange of words. Like throw talk for one another and stuff like that. So he was passing and something she said and her boyfriend get up and try swing a blade at him. And he hold it and pull it away from his hand. All his ligaments and everything gone. He came out of the hospital about three days ago. His right hand, he can't do anything right now. He have strings and stuff on his hand trying to get it back... yeah terrible'.

As far as she is concerned Facebook is a much safer version of community.

The point can also work in the other direction. People congregate online and help each other with homework. But that doesn't represent the kind of commitment people make to each other in the village. Santa Ana is a place where you can spend the whole day cooking something up for a neighbour who is hosting some communal occasion. On another occasion I joined them for the wake that is celebrated on the first year's anniversary of a death, with food cooked by many neighbours and the community playing cards into the night. In a village such as this, whatever the

internal quarrels there is still the foundation for deep and sustained solidarity in relation to any external threat. When someone is ill or in crisis then you know instinctively what being in a community means, the responsibilities it gives you and the hold it has on you.

Alana notes the extent to which people in Santa Ana itself who used to lime together physically now do so through Facebook. Cousins still do lime by Alana's grandmother's house, although quite often they now sit and talk about FarmVille and then may rush back to actually be part of the game. Given, however, that FarmVille is all about helping each other progress, and friendly competition, there is no sense that they are thereby becoming more individualistic or less communal even if they physically meet a bit less. In any case, the main thing that Facebook is seen as replacing is not the physical liming together but television. Alana hardly ever watches television any more. Television watching here was often quite sociable, but had much less of the intense sociability that is integral to Facebook. Facebook often replicates relationships within the village itself.

When judging the nature of Facebook as community Alana makes a profound observation. That it can only be assessed relative to offline community. She regards her situation, living in Santa Ana, as exceptional in contemporary Trinidad. Precisely because she recognises that she has always lived within community par excellence. In her case, some of the time she spends online is at the expense of co-present socialising 'in the sense that I would spend my free time on the computer rather than walk out the road or go to the beach or something like that'. But she contrasts her experience with a friend who lives in a much more typical settlement within Trinidad, near Tunapuna 'it's more of a small town and you don't really see people going by each other. But she will keep in contact via Facebook'.

When you are living in a place like Santa Ana the community is incredibly intense and her use of Facebook, however sociable, is a means to give herself some sort of break from this intensity. If people in Santa Ana lime together less than they used to and instead turn to Facebook as a kind of milder version of community, it is to achieve some sort of distance. It is because such a close-knit community is simply too intense and invasive. Recently a friend of mine who had lived for a while in London, found the return to Trinidad unbearable, because she felt there was just no privacy, no escape from an entire community that knew her business, and she wasn't even on Facebook. I find that the people I generally mix with in London, simply have no conception how thoroughly claustrophobic and sometimes downright nasty the reality of a community can be.

By contrast, for Alana's friend near Tunapuna there simply isn't enough actual community. She is frustrated at how little she knows or interacts with the people who live close to her. So her experience of Facebook does the opposite. It helps create a bit more social intensity in a situation where people have an insufficiency of direct communication and contact with each other. Facebook is not the dish. It is more like an ingredient that balances the other flavours to give you the best overall mix. In turn it links with other ingredients in cooking up one's social media. For example, a couple starting to get into a more dating-like relationship will complement Facebook with the spice of texting which is more dyadic and personal and, if you were to see their texting, sometimes pretty hot.

When Alana talks about the group being together between midnight and three in the morning she describes it as a group lime. This seems about right. A lime is not the same as a community, but without liming Trinidad would not be the kind of community it is. Even though most liming no longer actually has the spontaneity - the sense that you never know where you are going to end up, and who with - that the ideal of a lime stands for, still it has something of the frisson that comes with that ideal. That is what gives a lime its flavour. More relaxed, more uncertain and more fun than socialising in London by arrangement and with a plan and only with the group you originally set out with. Her Facebook lime has an agreed time, but there is much of the same fun and spontaneity and mixture of different elements.

So for Alana it makes less sense to ask whether Facebook is in and of itself a community. Rather she foregrounds the way in which Facebook is used to balance out the degree of offline community. Alana certainly confirms that for someone who lives in community Facebook is certainly recognisable as sharing many traits she associated with a community. It is extraordinary that, at the start of the twenty-first century we see a dramatic reverse in the general decline in community from the century that had preceded it. And as a site of community we can expect Facebook to have all the contradictions found in the kind of community that Alana lives in. You simply can't have both closeness and privacy. You can't have support without claustrophobia. You can't have friendship without quarrelling. Either everything is more socially intense or none of it. Alana is the expert voice here. She has the authority to pronounce on what, at least for her community is actually like. She has no problem in seeing and articulating these contradictions, and thereby understanding why the most important thing Facebook provides is a means to help complement the offline version and to live with those same contradictions.