



THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Teacher pack

Designed to support the knowledge and skills required for the
OCR A Level Sociology course.

OCR

Oxford Cambridge and RSA

An OCR endorsed
supplementary resource



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This pack builds upon the highly successful major research project, UCL Why We Post (www.ucl.ac.uk/why-we-post) which focuses on the uses and consequences of social media. It specifically aims to engage teachers and students using a range of relevant contemporary social research activities. The activities are designed to support the knowledge and skills required for the OCR A Level Sociology course, particularly the digital social world content of the specification in interesting new ways. In particular these activities seek to address the gap between learning *about* social research through textbooks, notes and teacher led pedagogy rather than learning about real research experience first-hand. This project also draws on the topic of social media which is both highly topical and relevant to students' own lives and is therefore accessible and familiar. These recently updated research based activities, now in their second year are facilitated by The University of Hong Kong.

This project specifically supports particular areas of the specification (Component 3a), however there are clear links to other themes and issues within the A level course (see the links to the specification on p6 and 7). This project provides opportunities for a range of differentiated teaching and learning styles thus suits students from a range of backgrounds, abilities and aptitudes.

Furthermore, the project furnishes students with the skills to think reflectively about their own use of social media in a global context. Finally, it provides students with opportunities for learning how to be autonomous learners and develop the kinds of skills which are undoubtedly useful for employment and university as well as developing effective interpersonal skills.

Why We Post

Why We Post (2016) was a large research project undertaken by a team of nine of anthropologists at University College London, including Dr Tom McDonald. Funded by the European Research Council, the research set out to examine the impact of social media in a range of sites around the world. The research focuses on a wide range of themes, including education and young people, work, business, online and offline relationships, gender, inequality, politics, visual images and individualism. Each of the anthropologists spent fifteen months living and working in their respective fieldsites which include China, Chile, Italy, Britain, Trinidad, Turkey,

India and Brazil. A range of research methods were used including the ethnographic method and surveys. This research is unusual in the fact that it seeks not just academic engagement but also wider public participation, meaning it is highly accessible for A level sociology students.

The results of this research challenge much existing knowledge and research around social media. For example, among other things, the project finds that social media is not making us more individualistic and it is not making the world more homogenous. In fact, social media tends to be quite conservative and reflects the people using it rather than reflecting the platform itself. In other words, social media is not changing people, it is providing an alternative method of expressing existing values and attitudes already in existence.

The research led to a range of open access resources including eleven highly accessible ethnographic books, over one hundred short films, a free online learning course, a website summarising the research and key findings. The project has already enjoyed considerable success, for example the books, including the comparative edition *How the World Changed Social Media* (2016, UCL Press) which has been downloaded over 98,000 times.

Sharing this pack

If you've enjoyed using these materials, we would be delighted if you could share it with your colleagues or other teachers who you think might find them useful. All our teaching materials from this project are provided under a *Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 International* licence, which means that you are free to copy and redistribute these materials, and also to edit, transform and build upon them! However, please note that you can't sell these materials, or use them for commercial purposes.



| Aims | Objectives |
|--|--|
| To enhance students' knowledge and understanding of social research which can be applied to component 3a. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To understand the research methodology and design, strengths and weaknesses • To understand the research aims and findings • To understand how this research can be linked to concepts and issues relating to the impact of social media • To understand and appreciate a range of different cross-cultural uses of new social media in a global context. |
| To improve knowledge and content for the exam | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To apply knowledge of the research to key debates on the A level course including theoretical debates, concepts and methodology • To evaluate the research and findings and consider its contribution to the debate about the impact of social media • To be able to adapt and use the research in exam questions. |
| To provide students with the opportunity to become autonomous learners through self-directed and group learning activities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students are able to explore and respond to the WWP project through activities • Students to reflect on their own experiences of social media and compare these with others both immediately and in Hong Kong • Students should begin to consider their own cultural assumption and values. |
| To allow students experiential learning opportunities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students are able to explore different learning styles, visual, electronic and online learning, collaborative learning • Students have the opportunity to explore comparative student experiences in Hong Kong • Students are able to creatively produce resources which reflect their own use of social media in cultural context and share these collaboratively with students in Hong Kong. |
| To be able to apply this research to a range of core themes and issues across the A level course | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Socialisation, culture and identity • Power, stratification and identity • Understand how to use this research in a number of different ways synoptically. |



- A range of accessible, fun and interactive resources, designed specifically for the OCR A Level Sociology specification, free of charge and adaptable to suit specific settings, along with support from the project team.
- Participation provides students with the knowledge and skills necessary to reach their full potential.
- This project introduces students to university research and academia in an accessible and interesting way thus raising aspirations/widening students' horizons.
- Students considering university/research gain valuable insight into the research process.
- Students are able to develop skills of synopsis, making links between different areas of the A Level course.
- Students can build upon existing knowledge of concepts, themes and issues, for example consolidating knowledge of research methods.
- Different learning styles are explored providing students opportunities to engage with a range of written, kinaesthetic, visual and audio based resources.
- Students enhance their research skills and interpersonal skills through group work and collaboration with Hong Kong based students.
- Highlighted opportunities for exploring British Values, Equality and Diversity issues.
- A range of differentiated teaching and learning activities.
- Pastoral opportunities; students provided with the opportunity to discuss issues connected with the use of new social media and consider their own use of new social media in relation to personal safety and good practice online.
- Teaching staff have the opportunity to update knowledge and engage with recent research.
- Visiting speaker (an experienced Senior Examiner and teacher trainer) from the research team to support both teachers and students throughout as well as a group skype with Dr McDonald from the Why We Post research team.
- The resources can be used throughout the A Level Sociology course or at different points in the course to suit the setting and students.
- These resources work well if students are used to working independently and also within a flipped learning model.



This project is relevant to a number of different areas of the OCR Sociology A level specification, including the methods section and general themes and debates but more particularly, Component 3: Debates in Contemporary Society.

Component 3, Section A: Globalisation and the digital social world

| Key question | Content | Learners should |
|---|---|--|
| 1. What is the relationship between globalisation and digital forms of communication? | Definitions of globalisation | Be aware of the problems with defining globalisation |
| | Developments in digital forms of communication in a global society: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● digital revolution ● global village ● networked global society ● media convergence ● social media ● virtual communities ● digital social networks | |
| | Applying sociological theories to digital forms of communication: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Marxism ● feminism ● postmodernism | Consider how developments in digital communication are related to social capital. Have an overview of how developments in digital forms of communication have been theoretically interpreted. |
| 2. What is the impact of digital forms of communication in a global context? | The impact of digital forms of communication on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● people's identity ● social inequalities ● relationships | consider people's identity and social inequalities in relation to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● social class ● gender ● age |
| | The impact of digital forms of communication on culture: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● conflict and change ● cultural homogenisation ● cultural defence/ 'glocalisation' | Consider both the positive and negative impacts of digital forms of communication. |



S-1 Introduction

This section introduces the student pack, and students can expect to learn in the project.

S-2 What is social media?

Once students have been introduced to the project through the powerpoint, they are asked to consider what social media is and how it can be defined. This activity is designed to encourage students to consider their own definition, other accepted definitions (see the PowerPoint) and to consider problems with defining social media.

This is followed by a group based activity asking students to make notes on a range of social media platforms used in the UK, on how they are used, and in what ways they offer new/different forms of communication possibilities.

S-3 How do sociologists research Social Media?

This section provides students with an opportunity to consider the potential challenges and possibilities presented when carrying out social research into social media. Students are asked a range of questions about the specific nature of research in this field, and encouraged to apply existing methodological knowledge.

This questions once answered could lead into a whole group discussion about how sociological research in changing and the new issues related to online based research. Teachers may want to develop this into a discussion which explores the issues with operationalising the impact of social media on peoples lives, both in the UK and beyond.

Students can then summarise the challenges of researching social media in their own words, using as many relevant concepts as possible.

S-4 Why We Post

This section provides an introduction to the research project, Why We Post through a range of video and written information on the research website. Students themselves can explore the website and find out about the research, guided by a range of questions. Going further, students can then summarise the strengths and weaknesses of the research. This is a good opportunity for teachers to check students' knowledge of research methods.

S-5 Results of the empirical research

Once students have a good understanding of the rationale and methodology of the research, the next step is for them to explore the major findings or discoveries. These are organised clearly into sections on the website and students can select these and explore them in more detail using the video, images, anecdotal and written evidence.

In order for students to develop their application skills they are presented with a range of concepts they can choose to apply to relevant material in the discoveries. The key thing here to remind students is that there is no right or wrong and that they should each have their own ideas/ways of applying concepts. The worksheet suggests students take four discoveries of their choice and apply concepts to these.

The concepts are differentiated into 'simpler' and more 'challenging' to allow for some differentiation.

S-6 Comparative findings: interpreting the survey results

In this section, students use a range of findings to consider the reasons for cross cultural variation in patterns relating to the use of social media. This allows students to apply existing knowledge and develop their global awareness of cultural practices. Once again students can use the table of concepts to help inform their discussions. There are a range of tables and graphs to annotate and discuss.

Students should be encouraged to consider their observations and the reasons for the patterns in the context of local and global values and attitudes. For example, why might some contexts prize privacy over others?

S-7 Explaining the results theoretically and conceptually

In this section three new concepts are introduced which arose from the research. These can be explained by the teacher or explored online.

Scalable sociability: a new way of understanding how people relate to each other on social media

The project concludes that the key to understanding how people relate to each other is through 'scalable sociality.' Before social media, there were mainly private and public media. Social networking sites started with platforms such as Facebook as a way of broadcasting to a defined group rather than to the general public, in a sense scaling downwards from public broadcast.

By contrast, some of the recent social media such as WhatsApp are taking private communications such as telephones and messaging services that were mainly one-to-one and scaling upwards. Often these now also form groups, though generally smaller ones. Also, these are generally not a single person's network. All members of the group can post equally to all the others.

If we imagine two parameters - one consisting of the scale from private to public and the other from the smallest group of two up to the biggest group of public broadcast - then as new platforms are continually being invented they encourage the filling of niches and gaps along these two scales. As a result, we can now have greater choice over the degree of privacy or size of group we may wish to communicate with or interact with. This is what is meant by scalable sociality. What people actually do is always a result of local norms and factors. In each society where fieldwork was conducted, researchers saw entirely different ways of organising of these scales to suit local needs.

For example, in the South Indian site these mainly reflect traditional groups such as caste and family. In the factory China site an entirely new society of floating workers create largely new norms of group interactivity including their first experience of true privacy. While in the rural Chinese site the main difference is that it is possible to now include strangers on the one hand and to extend various social 'circles' on the other. In the English site people specialise in the exact level of sociality that is neither too close, nor too distant. Nonetheless, all of these are variants that can be understood as exploiting this new potential given by social media for an unprecedented scalable sociality.

The theory of Polymedia

Social media provide a new range of possibilities for creating and maintaining relationships which did not exist before. Polymedia is a theory which suggests it is important to explore how people choose to use these new affordances.

This theory relates to the idea that to understand the use and impact of social media, you need to understand the reasons why people choose a particular platform and how they choose to use it to form and maintain relationships. One social media platform therefore cannot be understood without understanding others that coexist. Therefore, the ways people engage with social media is important and illuminating.

Content migration

This concept relates to the ways that content moves from one platform to another. For example, how memes might be shared on Twitter and then Facebook. It also relates to the process by which communication moved between

on and online life. Exploring these processes reveals a great deal about the nature of relationships and values and changes over time as social media itself evolves.

S-8 Ethnographic evidence

In this section, students have the opportunity to explore a summary of an ethnographic text based on Tom McDonald's research in rural China. Throughout the summary there is information provided on the context and the use of social media which in many ways is quite different to the UK and in some ways strikingly similar. This gives students the chance to explore how an ethnographic account reads as well as providing detail on the process of research for the author. The extract gives a brief description of the different types of social media available in rural china as well as the political context and the constraints on access to non-Chinese social media.

Following the reading there are a set of questions and activities. Students are encouraged to compare their own experience of social media with the rural Chinese context.

S-9 Developing exam skills

In this section students are able to develop their exam skills with a range of activities both on and offline. These can be introduced and explained by teachers or, alternatively students may choose to work through these independently. These include:

- Concept grids
- Application activities
- Fill the gaps
- The application of theoretical perspectives to the findings of the Why We Post project
- Applying evidence for and against the role of social media in creating homogeneity vs cultural diversity
- Applying the findings of Why We Post to explore both positive and negative effects of social media on relationships



There are two ways to approach the delivery of these resources depending upon institution specific requirements.

1. Teach the resources as a continuous programme, lasting approximately 1 week.

This method of delivery enables students to engage in skills and content work, encouraging synoptic thinking and drawing from a range of different areas of the course. A visiting speaker from the project can be arranged in advance. A selection of activities can be used from the project or adapted by teachers as suits.

2. Use the teaching resources individually as naturally occurring throughout the course.

Teachers can draw from the resources in the pack according to the topic being taught, there are resources which stand alone or work in combination. This way the project can be referred to throughout the course. For example, when teaching methods, core themes, identity and social inequalities as well as component 3a.



The resources produced for this project are collaborative and draw from the following people.

Laura Pountney



Laura has been teaching Sociology for 15 years, she currently teaches Sociology at Colchester Sixth Form College. She is a senior Examiner of Anthropology for a major exam board and has authored a number of recent textbooks on Anthropology and Sociology. Laura also runs student revision courses and teacher INSET and writes articles for the *Sociology Review*. Laura became involved with the Why We Post project as an editor.

Tom McDonald



Tom is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Sociology, The University of Hong Kong. He received his PhD in Anthropology from University College London in 2013. As part of the Why We Post project, he spent 15-months living in a small rural Chinese town investigating how social media use was transforming the Chinese countryside.

Candy Hiu Wa Chan



Candy teaches Liberal Studies at a leading secondary school in Hong Kong. She is also an e-learning co-ordinator. She has a Bachelor's degree in Sociology from The Chinese University of Hong Kong, and an MSc from The London School of Economics and Political Science.

Daniel Miller



Daniel Miller is a Professor of Material Culture at the Department of Anthropology, University College London. He is Principle Investigator on the UCL Why We Post project. He has written/edited 39 books.



Why We Post

<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/why-we-post>

Why We Post books (free to download)

<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/ucl-press/why-we-post>

Department of Sociology, The University of Hong Kong

<http://sociology.hku.hk>

OCR A Level Sociology Specification:

<http://www.ocr.org.uk/Images/170212-specification-accredited-a-level-gce-sociology-h580.pdf>