

## **The Globalization of On-Screen Sociability: Social Media and Tethered Togetherness**

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Social media have rapidly spread across the globe, and much has been written about how they promote civic engagement and commercial opportunities. Less has been written about their most common function: for socializing. This article examines the most popular social media and how they have become embedded in everyday life in four countries: the United States, Sweden, India, and China. The uses of social media take many different forms across countries and cultural settings; this article asks whether there are also commonalities between them. Even though social media are used most intensively among younger (and in India and China, affluent urban) populations, common patterns in everyday uses are emerging. These include reinforcing bonds by means of sharing an ever greater amount of visual content and constant tetheredness to others and to information. Globalization is mainly associated with macro social change, but social media allow us to also recognize globalizing patterns in multimodal micro interactions in everyday life.

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The Internet has brought with it a number of new technologies for sociability. Social network sites are foremost among these, but they also include texting, photo sharing apps, and videoconferencing. “Social media” has become a general label for these tools, and we can stick with this label, though “technologies for online sociability” would be more accurate but also more cumbersome. Using social media for sociability can be separated from other online activities, such as leisure or entertainment, which entail passive and solitary consumption of content. Social media, in contrast, always involve a level of active mutual engagement. Online sociability is also distinct from information seeking, commercial activity, and the use of online media for politics—though there are overlaps between all of these, as, for example, when entertaining content about politics is shared. Still, online sociability now occupies much of our free time, so we can ask: Apart from the diversity of practices, are there any general or global patterns emerging in this new aspect of everyday social life?

This article focuses on the most popular social media, and especially the most well-established social network sites. These include Facebook and Twitter (and their Chinese equivalents), but I also discuss other social media as long as they are used for personal rather than institutional purposes. The

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scope is limited to the socializing function of these sites, even if, again, the boundaries with advertising, entertainment, politics, and news are blurred at the margins (and I will return to these blurring boundaries below). Research on social media and sociability is at an early stage: Surveys tell us how many users of social media there are, and studies detail particular aspects of social media or specific groups of users. But as yet, few studies examine the uses of social media as they have become embedded in everyday life (the main exceptions will be discussed below). The perspective that has done most to theorize this embeddedness is the domestication-of-technologies approach (Haddon, 2011), but this approach will be complemented here by a comparative-historical perspective on technologies for sociability as well as theories of ritual interaction and connected presence. These perspectives depart from theories of mass or interpersonal communication, and the article begins with a discussion of why social media are unlike traditional media.

The article will proceed as follows: First, I develop a theory or conceptual framework for how social media are different from traditional media. Next, I define the bounds of social media uses that are discussed here and give an overview of how social media have spread in the four countries under consideration. A later section discusses some dimensions of the stratified uses of social media and how social divides are evident amid the cohesiveness that is fostered by online sociability. Social media also entail a shift to visual copresence, and a section examines sociability through the lens of photo and video sharing. The conclusion gauges the extent to which tethered togetherness has become globalized, and where it fits into and has transformed everyday uses of information and communication technologies.

### **Social Media as Tethered Togetherness**

Social media such as Facebook entail that people spend a good deal of time monitoring what others are doing, but there is no established social science terminology for this activity. From the side of the user's Facebook page (to stay with Facebook for the moment), we have the online presentation of the self (a concept from the sociology of face-to-face interaction), and from the side of those they are displaying themselves to, we have "audiences" (a concept from media research). But overcoming this divide between face-to-face and mediated interaction also suggests a possible solution to bridging the gap between these research traditions, which is to make the two sides symmetrical: to consider the presentation of the self as a form of mediated communication, and to treat how audiences receive this self-presentation as a form of receiving a personal address rather than as a media message. If we do this, we notice immediately that a user's Facebook page is a mediated front stage, a means of presenting the self in a communicative format (via text, image, and video/voice); so for self-presentation, media work is needed. On the other side, the "audience" interprets the mediated and staged self in terms of participating in an interaction that is like a face-to-face encounter rather than passively watching a performance. This is so unless the audience has no interaction with the person posting (as when a Facebook post is aimed at an "imagined audience" [Litt & Hargittai, 2016] but the post is never read). In this case, however, there is, in fact, no effect of the medium except on the person posting. In short, we can treat the social media users as media performers or actors on the "sender" side, and the audience or "receivers" as being onstage and facing or listening to the performer or actor. Put differently, social media always involve interaction and social selves, never one-way communication.

If we frame social media interaction in this way, we have different dramatic encounters taking place and linking people: people engaging in mediated, though asynchronous, encounters where they manage the impressions about themselves ("news" about oneself and how one sees the world) and responses by their audiences (posting a reply), and so there is bidirectional impression management in a ritual of social (here, sociable) interaction. Notice that there is no backstage, as in Goffman's work, since both the self that one "gives off" (see Baym, 2015), and how the audience responds by affirming that they recognize the self that is given off, take place in public (though, as we shall see, access is stratified). This, again, puts the audience onstage and makes it active: Posts typically take the form of affirming the other, or affirming that people agree with or recognize how the other person presents him- or herself. In short, the audience becomes active, while the performer elicits this activity. Further, the performer cares about how the audience responds, monitoring the response to her or his self-presentation.

A different way to put all this is that there is selectivity on both sides—in terms of how we present ourselves (this cannot be done in the same way as in traditional interpersonal communication, since we write, for example, to one person or speak to them; nor in mass communication, where self-presenters play a predefined role, as with a news anchor or movie actor) and in terms of the audience for this self-presentation (people monitor and respond in a more selective fashion; again, this is less possible in interpersonal communication and in mass communication). Even when social media encounters expand, they are hemmed in by limited attention—on both sides. At the same time, anyone who uses social media is devoting more attention and more time to online as opposed to face-to-face sociability (not entirely, because of multitasking, but this, too, has limits). Online sociable interaction, which is becoming more frequent, can thus be treated as a mediated encounter, defined by a shared, though often asynchronous, focus of attention.

This way of thinking about social media combines Goffman (Meyrowitz, 1985) and Durkheim (Ling, 2012), whereby online sociability is pushing society—or at least our freely disposable time devoted to socializing—toward greater organic solidarity in that our mediated roles (self-presentations and how these self-presentations are perceived) are becoming more complex and differentiated. Indeed, the increasing multiple interdependencies between people in various differentiated roles are the defining feature of Durkheim's "organic solidarity" (even if he discussed this in relation to the realm of work rather than sociability). These encounters are also becoming routine or everyday rituals, tethering us more to one another, which can be seen as a Weberian cage—though it is a "rubber" rather than an "iron" cage since socializing online is part of our freely disposable or leisure time and creates emotional solidarity rather than impersonal or "cold" constraints (Schroeder, 2007; Schroeder & Ling, 2014). The notion of caging is nevertheless apt, because these mediated relations are inescapable—they are the norm—even if, again, it is a rather pleasant cage. The space of the encounter is a "third place" (Oldenburg, 1989)—neither work nor home—but it also less public than third places, because social media are confined to small groups of more sustained relationships. In short, social media uses constitute tethered togetherness.

### The Spread of Social Media

Against this background, we can chart the rise and current shape of mediated sociability in four countries, which have been selected primarily because they fit well with the comparative method of examining the most dissimilar cases among developed democracies (the United States and Sweden) and of models of developing countries (India and China) (Schroeder, 2015). Sociability via media is, of course, not new. In the early days of the telephone, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it was thought that this new technology would be used for very important political and business communications by only a few important people. Instead, as Fischer (1992) has documented, and contrary to these expectations, the telephone first became widespread when ordinary people wanted to keep one another company over distances. Even phones only extended existing forms of mediated sociability; they added to and complemented letter writing as a means of mediated sociability (Licoppe & Smoreda, 2006).

Jumping forward, the main difference with social media is not so much new devices or technologies but that they extend this sociability still further by adding multimodality to one-to-one voice and text—now there is also image and asynchronous, anywhere connectedness, not just to a single person in a single location. Social media, as mentioned, are an extension of social network sites. Ellison and boyd's (2013) definition of social network sites—that there should be a unique profile with user-generated content as well as content by other users, that the system should enable traversable connections between users, and users interact via a stream of their content—can also serve here for social media more broadly, though it needs to be limited for the purposes of this article to personal, rather than institutional, uses. And one aspect that this definition leaves out is that social network sites have become a routine, taken-for-granted (Ling, 2012) part of everyday life. In contrast to stationary phones and to PC-based e-mail, with mobile phones, our sociability is “always on” (Baron, 2008), with people often saying that they check their devices first thing when they wake up and last thing before going to bed, and mobiles being constant companions during the day that they would feel lost without.

Today Facebook dominates globally, but Facebook was not the first, or the dominant, social network site to start with. In Sweden, Lunarstorm, with the same functionality of Facebook, was popular among the majority of young Swedes in the late 1990s, even before Facebook was launched (though Facebook has now eclipsed all other sites in Sweden). In India, Orkut was the dominant social network site before it was displaced by Facebook. And in China, Facebook has been banned, though China has had various social network sites and social media, including an early site, Renren, that was quite similar to Facebook in being centered on university students. Among the four countries here, China is the only country where Facebook is not the main social network site. In China, WeChat is the most popular site, but China is also unique in that there has been much competition among several sites, especially between QQ and SinaWeibo. Even in China, however, the main function of social media is online sociability. Miller et al. (2016) detail that there is a rich variety in what people post. But for young—and in India and China, affluent—people, social media have become the dominant means of mediated togetherness, by time spent and number of “contacting episodes.”

Facebook is the main social media site in Sweden, the United States, and India. According to Statista (<http://www.statista.com/statistics/>), in 2014, Sweden had more than 5 million active Facebook

users (in a population of just under 10 million), the United States had just over 150 million (in a population of almost 320 million), and India had almost 110 million (in a population of more than 1.25 billion). According to the Pew Research Center (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015), 70% of online Americans use the site, 45% several times a day. In Sweden, the same proportion of online Swedes (70%) use the site, almost half use it daily, and Swedes use social media for almost an hour per day (Findahl & Davidsson, 2015). For India, there are no figures for how often Facebook is used (that I am aware of). In China, WeChat is the most popular social media site, with more 650 million monthly active users, 90% using it every day, 50% using it for more than one hour, and 61% opening WeChat more than 10 times per day (Tencent, 2016). Although these numbers are interesting, what is more important are the changes in ways of life that social media have given rise to.

Everywhere social media are proliferating and becoming more differentiated. From the original function of connecting "friends" (university classmates), these sites now connect more and less outward-facing groups (for example, some use them within the family, some for presenting the family to the world at large); for different socializing purposes (WhatsApp for messaging, Pinterest and Instagram for sharing hobbies and photos, and YouTube for sharing videos). Beyond social media, there are other tools for sociability, such as Skype for video communication. And beyond sociability (which is outside the scope of this article), there is even greater differentiation: for work, with LinkedIn; journalists forming separate cliques with their own followings on Twitter, celebrities becoming marketers and advertisers on Twitter and YouTube, and many more.

Greater differentiation leads to denser, more frequent, and more multiplex or multimodal sociability, where multimodality also includes sharing content. From the perspective of the social media platforms, proliferation is a problem, because these platforms want the exclusive uses of their product to be as multipurpose as possible so that users spend as much time and attention as possible on one platform (or several if they are controlled by the same company, as with Google+ and YouTube). Some platforms are more successful in this than others; for example, QQ and WeChat combine many functionalities. And at the same time that platforms do their best to lock users in, China has seen a rapid migration of people from one set of platforms to others. This may seem to contradict the fact that platforms have many functions, but in China, people use several social media in a complementary way, and it is not yet clear whether some will fall by the wayside.

The fact that the number of social media is growing, and that content is therefore ever more differentiated, is compatible with the trend whereby a few top social media sites still dominate. Differentiation and concentration are not mutually exclusive (though we can note, again, that, in all four countries, digital technologies are increasingly market oriented. China is an outlier in this respect with its separate sphere of social media companies and distinct social media platforms, both of which are strongly shaped by the state). For content, too, the spread of niche content and how people may "select" content does not conflict with the fact that people spend most of their time or devote most of their attention to limited types of content. In a similar vein, devices are proliferating, but the fact that mobile phones can, for some, accommodate all social media or Internet (and communication) uses is compatible with this proliferation: this kind of device convergence or de-differentiation, again, is compatible with differentiation and divergence in types of content and modalities and uses.

This brings us to a major divide, however, which segues into the next section but still belongs to the topic of the spread of social media: Napoli and Obar (2015) call it the creation of a “mobile underclass.” In India and China (of the countries discussed here), social media are commonly a person’s first experience of the Internet, via smartphones. What is more, smartphones—not computers—are the most common way to access the Internet in the two countries. Yet Napoli and Obar detail how smartphone access to the Internet is inferior to computer-based access: The disadvantages include that fewer sites with lesser functionality are available, that screen size and a smaller keyboard entail shorter and less “immersive” sessions, that downloads are slower, and that users often stay within the “walled gardens” of apps. Napoli and Obar discuss this divide in the abstract; Donner (2015) discusses the same phenomenon from the point of view of extensive study on the ground, including in India and China. He notes that, even with extensive mobile access, in these and other countries, where for large parts of population data plans represent a major expenditure, there is a “metered mindset” whereby people use social media only sparingly. At the same time, he cautions against the idea that the more restricted uses in the developing should be seen as inferior, because many noninstrumental uses of the mobile Internet can be seen as equally important as those that are used for economic activity and the like. Nevertheless, in Sweden and the United States, most people have access to the Internet and social media sites via computers, too, and mobile access is added to other ICT uses (including tablets) rather than restricted to mobiles. This divide deserves more extensive discussion; suffice it to say in this context that the denser and more intensive sociability via social media remains hemmed in in India and China, a sociotechnical divide quite apart from lower Internet penetration rates.

### **Sociability and Social Divides**

Sociability is about belonging to groups: family, friends, and acquaintances. For the sites that Miller et al. (2016) have examined across several countries, their participants “generally assumed that people seek to show the best or idealised versions of themselves to their peers, at least on public platforms” (p. 156). Belonging is thus also about aspirations, and so groups try to set themselves apart. Here we can take some brief examples before we turn to the broader issue of belonging versus divides. One group that has been studied in detail are the professionals who work in Silicon Valley at high-tech companies, including, of course, social media companies. In her book *Status Update*, Marwick (2013) shows how this group pays an extraordinary amount of attention to its online self-presentation in order to enhance status within the relevant social circles and beyond. Marwick argues that this is a requirement of the new neoliberal mode of capitalism, where an entrepreneurial self needs to be fashioned.

But it is not clear that this “tribe” of social media users is so different from other groups, such as the farmers studied by Oreglia (2013) in China who seek social status by gaining points in the online game Farmville, which also chimes with their occupation. Status seeking, as Miller et al. (2016) found, or conforming to the norms of one’s social group, is common across social media around the world. On social media, people affirm belonging or status online—which, in the case of Silicon Valley professionals, happens to be the “hip” culture of the high-tech world. But status seeking is on display everywhere on social media—for example, in the luxury clothes and celebrities found on the Facebook pages of poor urban India youth (Rangaswamy, Challugulla, Young, & Cutrell, 2013) or the fantasies of consumption, including sports cars and luxury weddings and interiors posted on QQ among urban and rural Chinese

(Miller et al., 2016). This status seeking, rather than being a sign of selfish materialism, can be seen as a sign of "belonging," not just in consumerist capitalist societies but also in Asia (Trentmann, 2016).

It might be thought that in Sweden, a society known for its egalitarianism, such status seeking and stratification would be absent. But Sweden has a wealthy stratum just like other societies, and it is revealing how social media reflect these divisions. To cite one example, Holmqvist (2015) provides a detailed account of Sweden's most elite suburb, Djursholm, on the outskirts of Stockholm. Djursholm is known throughout Sweden as the home of its business, political, and cultural elite. Holmqvist discusses a blog from 2011–2012 that was maintained by a homemaker under the name of Housewife@Villa Drott with 828 posts. The blog is a diary of an opulent lifestyle of a very well-to-do household, with the self-described housewife narrating and sharing photos of the consumption of healthy foods, her exercise and weight regime, exotic holidays, and the splendors of her environment. The blog reads as if it belongs in a lifestyle magazine about the rich and famous.

This blog ([www.djursholmsfru.se](http://www.djursholmsfru.se)) provoked a strong reaction on other blogs, with one blogger (<https://www.flashback.org/t1647478>) accusing the woman of "living in a bubble." Others weighed in to defend or criticize whether it is appropriate to celebrate wealth in such a public forum. Holmqvist argues that this is a case of Durkheimian boundary maintenance around an exclusive lifestyle, but it can equally be seen as an example of how consumerist status aspirations have found a place online. The example also demonstrates that stratification and social cohesion are not necessarily at odds, at least online. Sweden's egalitarianism is affirmed by this Durkheimian boundary maintenance, just as the aspirations of Silicon Valley professionals affirm the American status order even as these elites try to set themselves apart.

Everywhere, according to Miller et al. (2016), people need to arrange their social relations online, putting people into different groups in different social media platforms and organizing various kinds of relationships with them. Although this is a leisure activity, it can also be burdensome, as Nippert-Eng (2010) has documented. She says that people learn how to "manage demands" (see also Burchell, 2015), which includes giving priority access to oneself for different people or groups via various channels (and ignoring or blocking undesired and spam contacts altogether). This "management" creates a hierarchy or stratified order of access, as with off-line relations. And it takes substantial effort to maintain different front and backstages, though with social media, the only backstage is when sites are kept private for certain groups. Maintaining this order of access has become so routine that it is often invisible to participants themselves, even if it is evident to the social scientist.

Other social divides include gender and age. Here it can suffice to mention that in India and China, according to Miller et al. (2016), social media use is highly gendered, with families upholding ideals of femininity and virtue. The same applies to the gendered use of mobile phones, though Doron and Jeffrey (2013) found that restrictions of mobile media by women and girls were balanced by the way that their uses also undermined traditional gender roles. For young people in India and China (as in the United States and Sweden in the early days of social media), Facebook afforded status among urban youth (for India, see Kumar, 2014), as does the number of friends. And these urban youths post pictures of sport idols and cinema stars that they would like to be associated with, just as older people might post pictures

of family and children and grandchildren. To sociologists of culture, it is no surprise that status is differentiated by age and gender, off-line and online.

In India and China, there is still a major divide between urban and rural. In the urban factory town setting that was studied by Miller et al. (2016), where rural migrants were two-thirds of the population, there was a strong segregation, both online and off-line, between migrants and the original population of the town, which used to be mainly engaged in agriculture before the rapid growth of factories and the arrival of migrants. Yet this kind of "snobbery" is not confined to the "locals." Migrants from rural China also delete their former friends and ties from home, because they want to distance themselves from their origins and aspire to the better, new, "modern" lives of their destinations. Similarly with the migrant women in China studied by Oreglia (2013): "The Internet was," she says, "in many ways, the safest place to explore their new-found urban identity—away from the reproaches of their families who were suspicious of the freedom these women had found in the city, but also away from the criticism and the instructions to 'improve themselves' that they constantly received from urban residents" (p. 111). The situation is similar in India, where mobile phone use is slowly allowing younger people to shift away from customary divides in rural households (Doron & Jeffrey, 2013). Across all these divides, boundaries are being maintained around the groups that one socializes with, while social media also reinforce the cohesion within these status groups.

### **Visual Copresence**

Most social media users post pictures, and many also post videos, though far less is known about this more recent phenomenon. Duggan (2013) found that over half of American Internet users had posted photos, and over a quarter posted videos they had taken themselves. The phenomenon is widespread around the world: Miller et al. (2016) report that, "in many of our field sites, posting on social media is overwhelmingly visual" (p. 155). One reason why posting photos has become so popular, apart from the fact that mobile phones have cameras and make taking pictures easy, is that photos enable people with lower levels of literacy to express themselves more easily and powerfully (Miller et al., 2016). The same applies, of course, to mobile voice communication in India, for example, which enables those with lower literacy to communicate (Doron & Jeffrey, 2013). It can be added that leaving voice messages is a very popular function on WeChat, so it is not only visual communication that overcomes low literacy.

What kind of visual material do people post? Hu, Manikonda, and Kambhampati (2014) examined the content of photos among personal (rather than institutional) users of Instagram and found that almost half were either selfies or photos of "friends," with roughly half in each of these two categories. The other six categories, in descending order of popularity, were "activities" (outdoor and indoor, such as landmarks and concerts), "captioned" photos (i.e., memes with text), "gadget," "food," "fashion," and "pet." Users could be grouped by which of these types they posted most frequently, but in terms of the number of followers that this gained them, none of the groups stood out. Miller et al. argue that selfies are far from narcissistic. In the English field site, for example, young people post five times as many photos of themselves in groups than alone. On Instagram, in contrast, photos posted are "usually" of individuals, so different social media also vary by the type of content posted. The photos also differ by whether they are



shared within groups, as among the young people in England that Miller studied and who avidly used Twitter, or if, as with Instagram, the content is more directed at the world-at-large or outward facing.

Instead of narcissism, then, video self-presentation, unless it is for entertainment or commercial gain, is part of sociability. The survey carried out by Malik, Dhir, and Nieminen (2016) found that photo sharing on Facebook was carried out mainly with "an intention to gain popularity and attention" or "seeking affection" (p. 134). People frequently post photos of social occasions, which include both special events and mundane everyday life. They seek to share these occasions, not just cementing their bonds with these photos but generating a sense of being together online. Licoppe (2004) wrote some time ago of "connected" presence, as applied to mobile phones and phatic communication, but this notion can just as well be applied to posting and sharing photos. For photo sharing, Ito and Okabe (2005) speak of "intimate visual copresence," which points toward visual togetherness.

The same applies to YouTube and other means of video-mediated communication. Lange (2007), for example, describes how some of those who post YouTube videos use this channel as they would a social media site, posting for only a small circle of friends and family and engaging in bidirectional exchanges (as opposed to celebrity posters who broadcast in one direction, though they may also engage with their fans via comments). Postigo (2014), examining video game commenters, notes that commenters mainly engage sociably with those who subscribe to their channels and that they need to avoid excessive commercialism so as not to alienate them. Cunningham, Craig and Silver (2016) similarly talk about YouTube and other social media as "connected viewing," where having a site that brings commercial gain may not necessarily be in tension with socializing with one's audience or fans. Skype is often seen as an instrumental mode of communication, but Kirk, Sellen, and Cao (2010), studying video-mediated communication in the home, found that it was mainly motivated by a desire for "closeness."

To be sure, with posting images and videos, there is a need to be careful about what is made public. Lange (2007) discovered, for example, that people posting for their social circles conceived of ways to tag YouTube such that only those for whom the videos were intended would be likely to find them. Since the focus here is on sociability rather than on policy issues, it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the extensive literature about the suitability of posting certain photos on Facebook and other social media sites. But for being together online, photos and videos provide an easier and often richer way of conveying sociability and reinforcing social bonds. For visual social media, too, the main function is reinforcing cohesiveness, even if here, too, there are divides: Displaying photos on social media used to be regarded as tech-savvy and, in China and India, as "modern," but the practice is rapidly becoming domesticated and commonplace, including the appropriate norms.

### **Alone and Together**

The increasing use of social media has prompted debates about whether being online is fragmenting society and isolating people. What is telling is that when this concern is aired, it always applies to others, never to those who write about the topic. Yet the concern is understandable, because the decline of sociability or of social cohesion has also been a perennial worry in terms off-line life, especially in America (Putnam, 2001). Many studies have found, however, that there has been no such

decline in sociability (Fischer, 2011, 2014; Hall & Lindholm, 2001). Fischer (2014), for example, argues that there has been no overall increase in social isolation in the United States. He illustrates the point by noting that people may have fewer family dinners at home; instead, they eat out together more. And he argues that surveys show that people report less loneliness overall and that people who use the Internet “increase the volume of their meaningful social contacts” (p. 24). The Internet is a social technology, whereas books and TV are asocial, though they can be highly social, too, if we think of reading groups and “water cooler” conversations about TV programs—or sharing YouTube links. As Miller et al. (2016) argue, the idea that socializing online takes away from off-line socializing is misleading: There is much more to talk about off-line if one can talk about online content, and this was also true of television.

There are also moral panics about whether social media are causing a decline of face-to-face togetherness, as with Turkle’s (2012) *Alone Together*. She argues that we learn less about ourselves and one another as we interact more and more with and through technology. However, this can partly be explained by the bias that humans (and researchers) have for seeing face-to-face interaction as the gold standard for social interaction. This is misleading, as Walther (1996) demonstrated some time ago. He argued that we can, in fact, learn more about one another in a mediated environment with fewer social cues, though it takes longer—as, for example, when we get to know a stranger online via text. This can take time, but mutual self-disclosure in words can be more revealing because it is devoid, for example, of the social cue of appearance.

The question, then, is whether Walther’s finding from experimental social psychology also applies to mediated togetherness in everyday life. Clearly, online sociability is different from face-to-face encounters: We can choose what we pay attention to, though not entirely, since, for example, there are expectations about paying attention to one another even in asynchronous mediated interaction, and also in groups as opposed to pairwise online and off-line interaction. Sociability requires reciprocity, unlike mass-mediated communication. In social media, unless mutual attention is paid, there is no bond or shared emotional mood, which is a prerequisite of both off- and online sociability. This is also why, as mentioned earlier, the notion of an audience is misleading for social media: Unless there is active engagement, unlike with solitary or one-way engagement with mass media, there can be no sociability. An audience makes sense for social media when the aim is to address the “public,” as with online celebrity or civic engagement or marketing—in other words, for purposes other than reinforcing personal bonds. Social media for sociability, in contrast, are aimed at an intimate sphere in which personal relations are affirmed.

To understand sociability in this way, we can consider how, even when mass media content is consumed together—say, on a couch—it is the common mood and shared attention that is the sociable element, not the content itself. Consider further how, if social media are used for self-promotion or for the promotion of products, this detracts from their sociableness. Social media must be regarded as authentic, as personal, in order to count as part of socializing. Finally, we can think about the post on social media that receives no comment or feedback. Without receiving attention or a reply, the person posting may feel lonely or left out. The mutuality of sociability thus explains a difference between social media and face-to-face encounters: The former are more diffuse since they are episodic; the latter sustain the emotional or intimacy as long as there is physical copresence and a common focus of attention. But episodic mediated interaction also sustains ties, and larger groups can equally sustain a shared mood, as with face-to-face

interaction, though there are limits online in this regard just as there are with off-line interaction—for example, in large crowds. Nevertheless, online, these ties and moods are also dispersed across time, whereas off-line, they are bounded by space.

The limits in both cases are the boundaries of the groups with whom we have close ties, and a number of studies (Dunbar, 2012) have demonstrated that being online does not increase the small group of a handful or two of people that we have intimate relations with, nor the larger groups we socialize with (up to 150) or the even larger number of up to some 2,000 whom we know by name. Apart from the number of people we interact with socially, the geographic reach of online sociability should also not be exaggerated. Ling, Bjelland, Sundsøy, and Campbell (2014) have shown, for example, that our regular and most frequent contact via mobile phones, both text and voice, is with a small number of people. They analyzed mobile call records in Norway for a three-month period from the dominant mobile operator in the country and found that most connections are with a small group close by: “The mobile phone . . . is used in the maintenance of everyday routines with a relatively limited number of people in a relatively limited physical sphere of action . . . the stronger is our tie . . . the closer they are likely to be geographically” (p. 288). Social media may no doubt expand sociability geographically beyond the text and voice of the mobile phone, but like mobile phone interactions, they mainly add to the frequency and density of online interactions.

With frequent and multiple interactions, there are also limits, apart from the size of the sociable group, in terms of the time spent on these interactions. Lomborg (2015) notes, for example, that with smartphones, people are constantly checking and devoting only partial attention to content, and managing these interactions takes continuous effort. Along the same lines, Burchell (2015), studying daily smartphone habits, says there is “an expanded realm for communication . . . without focus on any single interaction” (p. 48). Monitoring others via social media—or “listening,” as Crawford (2009) puts it—has become a routine part of everyday life, and it is simultaneously and paradoxically a way of taking time out from everyday life—in other words, making time for sociability—if by *everyday* we mean work or other tasks one is engaged in.

There is yet another limit: Although social media posts can be posted to anyone, social network site users imagine that they have more and less circumscribed types of audiences. In a study by Litt and Hargittai (2016), in over half the posts, participants said they were addressing an “abstract” audience of anyone. However, just under half the posts had a target audience in mind, and most of these were addressed to “personal ties.” Importantly, when they were addressing an “abstract” audience, “they at times were focused more on the act of self-presentation and their rationales for sharing the content, rather than on the receiving audience” (p. 7). When they had a more targeted audience in mind, on the other hand, “they tended to have more audience goals, and were focused on the end-receiving audience” (p. 7). Put differently, social media users expect more from their closer groups.

Over time, the expectations of social network sites about reciprocity have become settled. Brandtzaeg (2012), in one of the few longitudinal studies of social network sites, found that those who use social networks for socializing increase over time, as opposed to those who use them for debating, lurking, and sporadic use. It is true that some social media sites focus more on self-presentation than on

socializing. For example, Naaman, Boase, and Lai (2010) analyzed and categorized the posts of a sample of personal Twitter users (as opposed to organizations) and found that the largest message category was "Me Now" (45%)—that is, giving an indication of what the user is doing now. Other categories such as "information sharing" (22%) were less common, so Naaman, Boase, and Lai could also divide the users by the proportion of messages posted into the more common "Meformers" and the less common "Informers." Yet giving an account of one's state can also be a way of reaching out, or, again, fostering "connected" presence (Licoppe, 2004). And it may simply be that Facebook is comparatively more social than Twitter, or that different social media have different kinds of sociability depending on the group that uses them—since Miller (2016) found Twitter uses among English teenagers more intensely social than their Facebook uses.

The moral panic or worry about a decline in togetherness is partly explained by attitudes to new technologies, which often hark back to a golden age of small-scale togetherness (no cars, no large and supposedly impersonal cities, no television, and the like). Of course, for young people, learning how to present oneself to a larger public may bring with it many difficulties and anxieties, as boyd (2014) has documented for American teens. But online togetherness is often experienced as helpful (Rainie & Wellman, 2012) and rewarding and pleasurable too, just as face-to-face interaction can also bring a mixture of experiences. Further, interacting with technology should not be confused with how attention is being colonized by marketing or other forms of information overload (which, in fact, people do not, on the whole, experience as overload; see Hargittai, Neumann, & Curry, 2012). Instead, it can be argued that social media enhance togetherness, because, unlike traditional mass media, they are not consumed passively. And if they displace traditional media, they are just as likely to take away from one-directional and solitary uses of media. Much writing about social media and the Internet has focused on deviant behavior, such as bullying and issues requiring policy interventions, especially privacy. Again, while this research focuses on important issues, it should not reflect on or deflect from the vast bulk of social uses. Durkheim saw society in terms of an increase in ever more differentiated solidarity, which can now be extended to mediated solidarity. The fact that "deviance," in the Durkheimian sense, accompanies this process should not be surprising.

### **Globalizing Social Media Sociability?**

Are the uses of social media evincing any common or global patterns? Among the countries examined here, China is special in having social media platforms that are separate from the rest of the world. However, it is not the platforms that are important, but what people do with them. Further, it is important not to exaggerate the significance of this isolation for sociability. In the urban and rural Chinese settings studied by Miller et al. (2016), few people care about the "Great Firewall," unlike in the West, where this topic dominates discussion of the Chinese Internet. One reason why Western discussion takes this form is that little is known about Chinese social media, because few outside of China have social media accounts on Chinese platforms, just as few Chinese have Western social media accounts, though they have often heard about them. The fact that Chinese do not have access to the largest websites worldwide is important for activists and professionals, but it is mainly a matter of curiosity for the ordinary people studied by Miller et al., who know about the large American Internet companies and regard their commercial success with envy, but who are also proud of their own "national champions" among Internet

companies. In any event, the main difference between online sociability in India and China and in Sweden and the United States is that social media use in India and China is mobile-centric. And, as Ling (2012) has argued, being available on mobile phones has become the norm everywhere.

The growing uses of social media do not erase cultural differences. Miller et al. (2016) highlight how the uses of social media represent different social norms in different cultures: men posing with beer and women with wine in England, or the different types of inspirational messages that are often tied to different religious and cosmological traditions in India and China. What is equally remarkable, however, is how much homogeneity there is in this diversity: Social media present an idealized self and an idealized or desired lifestyle everywhere. Urban youth in India and China, for example, perhaps at the other extreme of the American tech entrepreneurs and Sweden's powerful elite discussed above, express their aspirations on social media just as much as others do, although these aspirations may take a different form.

Everyday sociability takes many forms on social media, yet it is structured in similar ways by the affordances of social media. The interface layout, for example, shapes how people present themselves in their profiles, and it structures the chronology of updates and how others engage with the site. Yet despite diversity of content, there is a similarity of form and of the types of content. For example, there is much diversity in how often people post, but the amount of time spent on social media, as we have seen, is growing everywhere. Similarly, shared moods, connected presence, and the expression of aspiration can be found everywhere. Sociability via social media has become a daily ritual, and while ritual has so far been mainly used in the study of mobile phones (Ling, 2012) and of mass communication (Rothenbuler, 1998), it applies equally to everyday habits of managing online togetherness. The many interactions or mediated encounters differ from face-to-face interactions mainly in how they are episodic (when to engage in them can be, to some extent, chosen). Hence, online interactions are also more diffuse, even though the frequent affirmation of ties, or the attention devoted to them, is also limited to an intimate sphere. Sociability via social media complements sociability via traditional technologies and displaces other mass and interpersonal media uses rather than displacing face-to-face sociability. The frequency and density and modality of connected presence is expanding, tethering us more to one another in ritualized exchanges.

As with other information and communication technologies (Rantanen, 2004), social media are becoming globalized, but they are also being domesticated in diverse ways. At the same time, more frequent exchanges are common everywhere, and these interactions are becoming part of everyday life. Companies like Facebook dominate across the globe (and Tencent is dominant in China), which is why ideas about globalization focus on production and consumption at the macro level (Tomlinson, 1999). And globalization is also correctly regarded as driven by the domination of a few global media companies, including social media: In India and in Sweden, only 2 of the top 10 websites are Indian and Swedish, respectively (<http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries>), and the rest are American or global, such as Wikipedia (again, China is the exception). Yet sociability is driven by user content, not commercial or institutional content. On the micro level of everyday sociability, social media everywhere, or at least in the countries discussed here, have reinforced a more complex and differentiated sociable solidarity and have

led to online togetherness becoming more visual, more frequent, and more dense; an ever more homogeneously diverse way of life.

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