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The internet in everyday life I: sociability

Nowadays, much of our online time, apart from looking for information, is spent socializing.[1] In everyday (as opposed to workaday) life, this is no longer via email, but via sites such as Facebook and Twitter. 'Social media' has become the commonly accepted label for these technologies, which can be used here to refer to media for interpersonal (rather than institutional) active mutual engagement. This also sets them apart from passive or one-way use of entertainment media, and from the broader term 'digital media', which also includes searching for and using information that is one-directional. Miller et al. (2016) describe in rich detail how new media are used in different ways across the globe – they say 'the world shapes social media' (in other words, contexts shape their uses), and I shall draw on this work. But I will ask: are there also common patterns; in other words, do social media also shape our world, or our everyday lives?

Currently, social media are used most intensively among younger and, in India and China, affluent urban populations. It is difficult to know what to make of the difference between this and the usage among older, rural and poorer users. As in Sweden and America, these differences will fade over time, but as we shall see (we have already seen some examples), there continue to be divides, including in how people socialize via media. However, the argument here will be that the main effect of social media is to reinforce bonds by means of sharing content and fostering constant tetheredness to others and – as will be covered in the next chapter – to information. This online socializing now occupies much of people's free time, and it is distinct from economic online activity (shopping and the like) and from the use of online media for politics (which was covered in chapters 2 and 3) – even if there are also overlaps between all of these; for example, when entertaining content about politics is shared.

Social media for socializing are still changing, but a few are dominant across the globe. These include Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and their Chinese equivalents, but also others such as Pinterest and Instagram.[2] Surveys exist that tell us how many users of social media there are, including studies of particular aspects of social media or specific groups of users. But as yet, few studies have examined the uses of social media as they have become embedded in everyday life (the main exceptions will be discussed below). Fewer still have a global or comparative purview. Yet, as we shall see, for all the difference that, for example, the use of different social media companies in China make, there are some patterns that are quite similar across the globe, or at least among the four countries examined here.

4.1 Tethered togetherness

To understand online socializing, we need first to solve a puzzle that was mentioned in the introdution: that social media are neither broadcast nor interpersonal media. Instead, social media entail that people spend a good deal of time monitoring what others are doing. Here we can take Facebook as an example: from the side of the user's Facebook page, 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). One way to think about bridging this divide between the two research traditions and between face-to-face and mediated interaction 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 (broadcast) 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/video and 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 and 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. This means that we can treat 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.

Now, 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 bi-directional 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, 105–19), 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 can be stratified). This, again, puts the audience on stage 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 responses to his or her 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 as in mass communication where self-presenters play a pre-defined role, as with a news anchor or movie actor), and also 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). In other words, 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 multi-tasking, 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 – towards greater solidarity inasmuch as 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 form the defining feature of Durkheim's 'organic solidarity' (even if he discussed this in relation to the realm of work, rather than sociability, as here). These encounters are also becoming routine or everyday rituals, tethering us more to each other, which can be seen as a Weberian cage. It is, though, 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 and Ling 2014). 'Caging', or 'tethering', is nevertheless apt since 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 is also less public than third places (such as Oldenburg's hairdressers, parks or pubs) since social media are confined to small groups of more sustained relationships. In short, social media uses constitute tethered togetherness.

4.2 The spread of social media

Against this background, we can briefly examine mediated sociability from a comparative and historical perspective. Sociability via media is, of course, not new. In the early days of the telephone, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, it was thought that this new technology would be used for very important political and business communications by only a few significant people. Instead, as Fischer (1992) has documented, and contrary to these expectations, the telephone first became widespread when ordinary people wanted to keep each other 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 and Smoreda 2006). Jumping forward, the main difference with regard to social media is not so much the new devices or technology, but that they extend this sociability still further. They add multimodality to one-to-one voice and text – and now, also images and moving images, plus asynchronous anywhere connectedness, not just to a single person in a single location. Social media have proliferated since the early days of social network sites and they have become a routine or taken-for-granted part of everyday life (Ling 2012). In contrast to stationary phones and PC-based email, with smartphones, our sociability is 'always on' (Baron 2008): people often report that they check their

devices first thing when they wake up and last thing before going to bed and that they would feel lost without their smartphones, their constant companions during the day.

Nowadays, Facebook dominates globally, but it was not the first, or the dominant, social network site to start with. In Sweden, Lunarstorm, with the same functionality as 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, although there are still tens of thousands of users in mainland China. In any event, China has a variety of equivalents, including an early site, Renren, that was quite similar to Facebook in being centred on university students. But among the four countries here, China is now the only country where Facebook is not the main social network site. In China, WeChat has become the most popular site, but China is also unique inasmuch as there has been much competition between several different sites, and especially QQ and Sina Weibo. 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 terms of 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, America and India. According to Statista, in 2014 (http://www.statista.com) Sweden had more than 5 million active Facebook users (in a population of just under 10 million), the United States just over 150 million (in a population of almost 320 million) and India almost 110 million (in a population of more than 1.25 billion). According to Pew (Duggan et al. 2015), 70 per cent of online Americans use the site, 45 per cent several times a day. In Sweden, the same proportion of online Swedes (70 per cent) use the site, and almost half use it daily (Findahl and Davidsson 2015, 40), with Swedes using social media for almost an hour per day (2015, 48). There are no figures on frequency of Facebook usage for India (that I am aware of). In China, WeChat is the most popular social media site, with more than 650 million monthly active users, 90 per cent of whom use it every day, 50 per cent of whom use it for more than one hour, and 61 per cent of whom open it more than 10 times a day (Tencent 2016). While these numbers are interesting, what is more important is their significance in terms of the way they change daily life.

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) and for different socializing purposes (WhatsApp for messaging, Pinterest and Instagram for sharing hobbies and photos, and YouTube for sharing video). Beyond social media, there are other tools for sociability, such as Skype for video communication. And apart from sociability (which lies beyond the scope here), there is even greater differentiation: there are social media for work, such as LinkedIn; journalists forming separate cliques with their own followings on Twitter; or 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. It can be added that from the perspective of the social media companies, proliferation is a problem, since these companies want their products to be as multipurpose as possible so that users spend time on their network exclusively (or several, if they are controlled by the same company; for instance, Google+ and YouTube). Here, too, there is a competition for limited attention. Some platforms are more successful in this than others; for example, QQ and WeChat combine many functionalities.

Networks do their best to lock users in so that all of their relationships stay on the same network, but China has seen a migration of people from one set of networks to others. This may seem to contradict the fact that networks have many functions, but in fact, in China people use several social media in a complementary way, and it is not yet clear whether some will fall by the wayside. In any event, despite competition for attention (or lock-in to one network), unlike in politics, this is not a zero-sum game: people can use several networks and spend more time. The limit here is the amount of time people spend socializing.

The number of social media is growing, and content is therefore ever more differentiated, but this is compatible with the trend whereby a few top social media sites dominate: differentiation and concentration are not mutually exclusive. But in all four countries, digital technologies are increasingly market-oriented. China is something of an outlier in this respect, with its different nationally specific social media companies. These are more strongly subject to influence by the state in terms of political and social control (see chapter 2), though here, as elsewhere, they emerged in competitive market conditions (Pan 2016). Differentiation also applies to content, but people don't 'select' open-endedly: they pay attention to limited types of content. And while devices are also proliferating, different functionalities can be combined on devices such as

smartphones: device convergence or de-differentiation is compatible with differentiation and divergence in types of content and modalities and uses.

In short, there is simply more mediated sociability. Yet there is also a major divide: Napoli and Obar (2015) say that a 'mobile underclass' is being created. In India and China (of the countries discussed here), social media are commonly the first experience of the internet, via smartphones. And smartphones also continue to be the most common way to access the internet in the two countries, rather than computers. Yet what Napoli and Obar show is that smartphone access to the internet is generally inferior to computer-based access: the disadvantages include the fact 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 (based on a review of studies); Donner (2015) discusses it 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 the population, data plans represent a major expenditure, there is a 'metered mindset' whereby people use social media only sparingly.[3] At the same time, he cautions against the idea that the more restricted uses in the developing world should be seen as inferior: many non-instrumental uses of the mobile internet can be seen as equally important as those used for economic activity and the like. Nevertheless, in Sweden and America, 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 will continue to play a role even if it also shrinks over time (Schroeder 2015). Suffice it to say here 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.

4.3 Sociability and social divides

Sociability is about belonging to groups: family, friends and acquaintances. For the sites that Miller et al. examined across several countries, their subjects 'generally assumed that people seek to show the best or idealised versions of themselves to their peers, at least on public platforms' (2016, 156). Belonging is thus also about aspirations, and so groups try

to set themselves apart. Aside from the sociotechnical divide between mobile-only social media users and those who use various devices, what kinds of social divides or forms of stratification are there in social media uses?

One group that has been studied in detail is the professionals who work in Silicon Valley at high-tech companies, including of course social media companies. In her book *Status Update* (2013), Marwick shows how this group pays an extraordinary amount of attention to its online self-presentation in order to enhance its 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. Put differently, capitalism is shaping how this elite group sets itself apart in terms of the 'idealized version' of its appearance.

But it is not clear that this kind of self-presentation is unique to neoliberal capitalism. Take, for example, 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) show, or conforming to the norms of one's social groups, 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 Indian youth (Rangaswamy et al. 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, 168–9). 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, 399).

It might be thought that in Sweden, a society known for its egalitarianism, such status seeking and stratification would be less common. Nevertheless, Sweden also has a wealthy stratum just like other societies, and it is revealing how social media reflect these divisions. To give just one example: Holmqvist has given 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 (2015, 41 ff.) discusses a blog from 2011–12 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 splendours of her environment. The blog reads as if it belongs in a lifestyle magazine about the rich and famous.

This blog (www.djursholsmsfru.se, as it then was) provoked a strong reaction on other blogs, with one blogger (https://www.flashback.org/t1647478) accusing 'housewife' of 'living in a bubble'. Others weighed in to defend or criticize the appropriateness of celebrating wealth in such a public forum. Holmqvist argues that this is a case of Durkheimian boundary maintenance around an exclusive lifestyle, but it could equally be seen simply as an expression of online consumerism. This example also shows 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 hierarchical status order wherein these elites set themselves apart.

Everywhere, according to Miller et al. (2016), people need to arrange their social relations online, putting people into different groups on different social media platforms and organizing various kinds of relationships with them. While 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' (2010, 179; 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 offline relations. And it takes substantial effort to maintain different front and back stages, though with social media, the only back stage is when sites are kept private for certain groups. Maintaining this order of access has become so routine that it is often invisible to the 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: 117–18), 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 on 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 America and Sweden in the early days of social media), social media use affords 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 with whom they would like to be

associated, 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, offline and online.

In India and China, there is still a major divide between urban and rural. In the urban factory town setting studied by Wang (2016), where rural migrants made up two-thirds of the population, there was a strong segregation, both online and offline, 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, since 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: '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' (2013, 111). In India, too, mobile phone use is slowly allowing younger people to shift away from customary divides in rural households (Doron and Jeffrey 2013: esp. 183). Across all these divides, we can see boundaries being maintained around the groups with which one socializes, while social media also reinforce the cohesion within these status groups.

4.4 Visual co-presence

Most social media users post pictures and many also post videos, though far less is known about this more recent phenomenon (but see Miller and Sinanan 2017). Duggan (2013) found that over half of American internet users had posted photos and over a quarter had posted videos they had taken themselves. But the phenomenon is widespread around the world: Miller et al. report that 'in many of our field sites, posting on social media is overwhelmingly visual'(2016, 155). One reason why posting photos has become so popular, apart from the fact that mobile phones have cameras and this makes taking pictures easy, is that photos enable people with lower levels of literacy to express themselves more easily and powerfully (Miller et al. 2016, 170). The same applies, of course, to mobile voice communication in India, for example, which enables those with lower literacy to communicate (Doron and Jeffrey 2013). It can be

added that leaving voice messages has been a very popular function on WeChat, so it is not only visual communication that overcomes low literacy (or the effort of typing).

What kind of visual material do people post? Hu et al. (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. It can be added that Miller et al. argue that selfies are far from narcissistic: in the English field site, for example, young people post five times as many of themselves in groups than alone (2016, 156). On Instagram, in contrast, photos posted are 'usually' of individuals (Miller 2016, 82), so different social media also vary by the type of content posted. Along similar lines, they also differ in terms of 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 (Miller 2016, 84).

Instead of narcissism, then, visual self-presentation, unless it is for entertainment or commercial gain, is part of sociability. The survey carried out by Malik et al. found that photo sharing on Facebook was carried out mainly with 'an intention to gain popularity and attention' or for 'seeking affection' (2016, 134). People frequently post photos of social occasions, which include both special events but also mundane everyday life. They seek to share these occasions, not just cementing their bonds through these photos, but also generating a sense of being together online. Licoppe (2004) spoke 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) therefore speak of 'intimate visual copresence', which points towards visual togetherness.[4]

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 bi-directional 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 need to avoid excessive commercialism so as not to alienate them. Cunningham et al. (2016) similarly talk about YouTube and other social media as being 'connected viewing', where having a site that brings commercial gain may not necessarily be in tension with socializing with one's audience or fans. Or again, although Skype is often seen as an instrumental mode of communication, Kirk et al. (2010), studying video-mediated communication in the home, found that it was mainly motivated by a desire for 'closeness'. And the same applies to messaging apps like WhatsApp, which are similarly mainly used for everyday togetherness or solidarity, and less so for instrumental reasons such as arranging to meet up and the like (see O'Hara et al. 2014).

To be sure, with regard to posting images and video, 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 on 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, we can leave to one side the extensive literature about the suitability of posting certain photos on Facebook and other social media sites. But we can see that for being together online, photos and video provide an easier and often richer way of conveying sociability and reinforcing social bonds. For visual social media, also, the main function is reinforcing cohesiveness, even if here, too, there are divides. And while displaying photos on social media used to be regarded as tech-savvy and, in China and India, as 'modern', it too is rapidly becoming domesticated and commonplace, including the appropriate norms.

4.5 Alone or 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 seems to apply to others, not to those who write about the topic. Yet it is understandable that this should be a concern, since the decline of sociability or of social cohesion has also been a perennial worry in terms of offline life, especially in America (Putnam 2001). Many studies have found, however, that there has been no such decline in sociability (Hall and Lindholm 2001; Fischer 2011; 2014). Fischer (2014), for example, argues that there has been no overall increase in social isolation in America: he illustrates the point by

noting that although people may have fewer family dinners, instead they eat out – together – more. And he argues that surveys show people report less loneliness overall and that people who use the internet 'increase the volume of their meaningful social contacts' (2014, 24). The internet is a social technology, whereas books and TV could be seen as more asocial, though they can be highly social too if we think of reading groups and 'water cooler' conversations about TV programmes – or sharing YouTube links. As Miller et al. (2016) argue, the idea that socializing online takes away from offline socializing is misleading: there is much more to talk about offline if one can talk about online content, something 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 *Alone Together* (2012). She argues that we learn less about ourselves and each other as we interact more and more with and through technology. However, this can partly be explained by the bias that human beings (and researchers) have for seeing face-to-face interaction as the gold standard for social interaction. This is misleading, as Walther (1996) showed some time ago: he argued that we can in fact learn more about each other 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 since it is devoid of, for example, the social cues 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 each other even in asynchronous mediated interaction, and also in groups as opposed to pairwise online and offline 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, if understood 'passively', 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 are the sociable elements, 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 emotion or intimacy as long as there is physical co-presence 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 offline interaction – for example, in large crowds. Nevertheless, online, these ties and moods are also dispersed across time, whereas offline, they are bounded by space.

The limits in both cases are the boundaries of the groups with whom we have close ties. A number of studies (Dunbar 2012) have demonstrated that being online does not increase the size of the small group, consisting of a handful or two, of people with whom we have intimate relations, nor the larger groups with whom we socialize (up to 150) or the even larger number of up to some 2,000 that we know by name. Apart from the number of people with whom we interact socially, the geographic reach of online sociability should also not be exaggerated: Ling et al. (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 analysed mobile call records from the dominant mobile operator in Norway over a three-month period 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' (2014, 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, aside 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, 48), studying daily smartphone habits, says there is 'an expanded realm for communication . . . without focus on any single interaction'. 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 practical tasks in which one is engaged.

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' (2016, 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' (2016, 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. Brandtzæg (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: so, for example, Naaman et al. (2010) analysed 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 per cent) – that is, giving an indication of what the user is doing now. Other categories such as 'information sharing' (22 per cent) were less common, and so Naaman et al. 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 more social compared to 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, 199–214) has documented for American teens. Yet for teens this was also the case before the internet. And online togetherness is often experienced as helpful (Rainie and 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 et al. 2012). Instead, it can be argued that social media enhance togetherness since, 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 behaviour, 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.

4.6 Globalizing sociability

Do the uses of social media evince any common or global patterns? Among the countries examined here, China is unique in having social media that are separate from the rest of the world. However, it is not the social media platforms that are important, but what people do with them, and aside from the issue of state control, this means Chinese users are not so different from others. Further, it is important not to exaggerate the significance of the isolation of China in terms of 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 less is known about Chinese social media, since 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 the Chinese do not have access to the largest websites worldwide is important for activists and professionals, but mainly it is 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 as against Sweden and America is that social media use in India and China is more mobile-centric. And, as Ling has argued (2012), 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 Britain, 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, again, 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 end of the extreme from 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. And despite the diversity of interfaces and content, there is a similarity of both form and 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, has grown 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 (Rothenbuhler 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 the sense that they are episodic (when to engage in

them can, to some extent, be 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, density and modality of connected presence is expanding, tethering us more to each other in ritualized exchanges.

Hence, 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 such as Facebook dominate across the globe (and Tencent is dominant in China), which is part of the reason 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 two of the top ten websites are Indian and Swedish respectively (http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries), while the rest are American or global – for instance, Wikipedia (again, China is the exception). Yet sociability is driven by user content, not commercial or institutional content. At 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 led to online togetherness becoming more visual, more frequent and more dense – an ever more homogeneously diverse way of life.

This change in the way of life has been caused by technology; technology has shaped cultural change. This idea is in keeping with the 'realism' that has been argued for in chapter 1, that technoscience transforms the social – including cultural, here socializing – environment. Socializing is also a good place to adopt cultural relativism; the idea that different ways of life – or at least (mediated) sociability – cannot be judged by supra-local norms (Gellner 1992). There is an exception insofar as some disadvantaged members of society, whether by dint of fewer sources or discrimination, depend more on social support via socializing than others. In this case, as with information seeking (as we shall see in the next chapter), media – or here social media – shape our capabilities (Sen 2009). Yet apart from this, again cultural relativism is appropriate for understanding mediated sociability. And more tethered connections, apart from shaping culture, are also one factor shaping how

we are connected to the economy (as when our social relationships are used for marketing) and political changes (as with sharing news). But this connection is an 'orthogonal' one – orthogonal in the sense that political and economic changes and their increasingly mediated nature and our increasingly mediated sociability do not shape each other directly – political changes, for example, do not affect sociability, and vice versa. One of the questions for the next chapter will concern whether the same applies to information seeking.