Facebook, now in the sixth year of existence, has overtaken Google to become the most visited site on the internet. According to the company's statistics,¹ there are currently over 500 million active users, of whom half log on during any given day. Every month sees three billion photos posted and every day sees 60 million status updates. The average user has 130 friends and spends just under an hour a day on the site. These are about the last figures you will encounter in reading this book. While we can all sit amazed by such statistics, this volume looks to the other end of the spectrum—the particular individuals, their friends and their families who use the site. It is an anthropological enquiry into the consequences of social networking for ordinary people. How have their lives been changed by the experience of using Facebook? What impact does it have on the relationships they really care about? Does Facebook approximate some kind of community? How does it change the way we see ourselves? Why are people seemingly so unconcerned with this loss of privacy?

One problem is the tendency to assume the origins of the site will necessarily dictate its future. We know that Facebook was invented for use by students in colleges. Yet that fact barely impinges upon the contents of this book. 2010 was the year in which we could start to see why Facebook might eventually have more importance

for an elderly person who is housebound, and has no other means of effective socialization, than for a student. So the focus will be on what Facebook seems to be becoming rather than what it initially has been. Because Facebook started in the US, most of the research on its impact has been within the US. But today it is a global site where over 70 per cent of its users live outside the US and research needs to encompass this increasing diversity.

There are good reasons to view Facebook through an anthropological lens. After all, one definition of anthropology might be that while other academic disciplines treat people as individuals, anthropology has always treated people as part of a wider set of relationships. Indeed, prior to the invention of the internet, it was the way the individual was understood in anthropology that might have been termed a social networking site. So a new facility actually called a social networking site ought to be of particular interest to an anthropologist. On 21 April 2010, Mike Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, announced at the F8 conference a new phase in the development of the site. The words he used were ‘we are building toward a web where the default is social.’2 Given that for a century we have imagined that participation in community and social relations was in decline, this reversal of previous trends seems both astonishing and particularly relevant to the premise and future of anthropology.

Anthropology has a rather peculiar way of engaging with global phenomena. As Facebook has spread, it has also become increasingly diverse. So, from an anthropological perspective, it could be said that there is no longer any such thing as Facebook. There are only the particular genres of use that have developed for different peoples and regions. This volume is set in Trinidad, a place chosen specifically to dislodge the assumption that however people in the UK or the US use Facebook, that is Facebook. Trinidad is sufficiently distinctive to force us to engage with the comparative dimensions of Facebook’s emergent heterogeneity. The intention is that for most readers this displacement from their usual setting will actually make this book more, rather than less, effective at helping them consider the impact also on their own lives. Although Trinidad is the setting, the focus is on particular individuals whose dilemmas and concerns will be familiar to most of

us. They help us to appreciate the effects Facebook can have on a marriage, understand what teenagers do all day long and how we decide whether information on Facebook should be regarded as a kind of truth about another person or just a facade.

Trinidad is a Caribbean island within sight of Venezuela. It is one of the two islands that make up the state of Trinidad and Tobago. Since this research is limited to Trinidad, it refers to Trinis rather than the common local expression of Trinbagonian. Trinidad is just under 5,000 sq. km, i.e. you can drive around it in a day. The indigenous population was largely wiped out by Spanish colonists. After subsequent French and British rule, it became independent in 1962. The population of around 1.3 million is composed of around 40 per cent descended from former African slaves, 40 per cent descended from former South Asian indentured labourers, with the remainder having widespread origins, including China, Madeira and Lebanon.

I have been carrying out fieldwork in Trinidad intermittently over twenty years and have written three previous volumes about the island. This book is based on a year’s observation of Trinis on Facebook itself, in addition to spending two months in December 2009 and January 2010 carrying out fieldwork within Trinidad. The study of Facebook arose alongside a larger research project, carried out with Mirca Madianou of Cambridge University, on the impact of new media on long-distance communication. Current figures\(^3\) give a Facebook penetration in Trinidad of 26 per cent, of which 54 per cent are female. One analysis of these figures\(^4\) suggests that, taking users as a proportion of persons with internet access, Trinidad may be second in the world after Panama. During fieldwork, Facebook was found to be ubiquitous amongst those of high school and college age, with the exception of very low income areas.

The first part of this book consists of twelve portraits. These are all based on research but, with one exception, I have made extensive changes in detail and combined materials from different participants within individual portraits in order to protect the anonymity of those who participated in the study. The writing style

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is taken more from short story composition than from academic genre. It includes an element of travelogue and is intended to be an enjoyable read. For those who are engaging with this book largely for academic purposes, this may require some patience. The second part of the book is more analytical and uses the material from the first part to draw academic conclusions, though I hope this part also remains both readable and of interest to a non-academic readership. This section starts with a brief discussion of what makes Facebook Trinidadian. There follows an attempt to address Facebook in its more general and global aspects through 15 tentative theses about what Facebook may be turning out to be. Finally the book ends with a more theoretical excursion, an extended comparison between Facebook and a classic anthropological study of an island off the coast of New Guinea. By the nature of this social networking beast, we can assume that these observations will become outdated as Facebook evolves or is replaced. What remains is an anthropological study of people as social networking sites.

Why Trinidad?

On opening the pages and realizing that this is a volume principally about Facebook in Trinidad, the casual reader might be forgiven for assuming that it must therefore also be a book about some version of globalization or Americanization. That Trinidad is some poor peripheral island buffeted by the storms that emanate from the great powers. So the ‘real’, the ‘proper’ Facebook is that which we find in the US, where it was invented, while other places are reduced to inauthentic copies. This is a common perspective, especially in cultural studies and sociology, but I have always viewed anthropology as a place where things could and should be seen differently.

My own stance was made clear in the previous books I have published about Trinidad. The most obvious precedent was a book about the internet. Our starting point was that there is no

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5 The focus remains on users. For a study of the company itself and a history of Facebook, the most authoritative guide to date is Kirkpatrick, D. (2010), *The Facebook Effect*. London: Virgin Books.

such thing as the internet. Different people were using different combinations of web-surfing, emailing, instant messaging and so forth. The internet was whatever any particular group of users had made it into. No one population was more ‘proper’ or ‘authentic’ than any others. For an anthropologist studying in Trinidad, the internet itself was something created by what Trinidadians do online. From which point we then try and understand why each place produces the internet that we find there. My starting point is that Trinidad is the centre of the world, not some inauthentic periphery. Similarly, I once published a paper called Coca-Cola: A Black Sweet Drink from Trinidad because the meaning and connotations of this drink, how it is mixed with rum, how its distinction from red sweet drinks reflects the local ethnic differences within Trinidad – these are what makes the drink significant for Trinidad, not its origins in the US. The advantage of this approach is firstly to contest overgeneralization. In another book, I showed how even business itself operates in quite specific ways in Trinidad that are not exactly as predicted in business-school models. But this also showed that the word capitalism is used too glibly. That various forms of business and finance often work in ways that conflict with each other. The book also made the point that the biggest transnational companies in Trinidad were in fact Trinidadian and dominated much of the Caribbean, even selling into Florida.

These are the reasons why in this volume I will often refer to Fasbook, the local term, rather than Facebook. While Mark Zuckerbeg may have created an interface called Facebook, it is the creativity of Trinidadians that produces Fasbook. As it happens, I have always been in awe of the creativity and intelligence of Trinidadians. The conversation between two Trinis strikes me as likely to be more articulate, funny and profound than in any other country I have been in (Trinis are not modest, a lot of them would say just the same thing). When Trinis migrated in recent decades to the UK, it was almost invariably as lawyers, doctors and other professionals. They expect to be more successful than the local population and they usually are. This too can be misleading since there are really two Trinidads. There are those Trinis who pass the early highly competitive examinations and are trained in one of the prestige high schools. These children

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generally score so well in exams that they expect to be offered a full scholarship to a US college of their choice if they should want one. Most of the extraordinary array of internationally known Trinidadian intellectuals, such as C. L. R. James or V. S. Naipaul came from such schools and, as those names show, they come equally from the populations of African and Indian origin. The majority of the population, however, do not make it into these schools and don’t have the same opportunities in life – although, having spent much time working in low-income communities of squatters, I still find them more impressive in terms of general knowledge and entrepreneurial activity than their equivalent from any other country I know.

This is one of the reasons I tend to study new communication technologies in Trinidad. I anticipate that Trinidadian usage will not just be distinctive but also in some ways ahead of the game. That while innovation in Facebook as infrastructure will come from the company, ideas about what one can do with Facebook may arise first in a place such as Trinidad. There are historical reasons why Trinidad has a particular grasp on the possibilities of being modern. This is partly because the very rupture created by slavery and indentured labour created a subsequent sense of freedom that was different from the conservatism that emerged from more gradual changes in class and the peasantry in other regions. It has also done no harm that Trinidad was not just one of the world’s first oil-producing countries but used the money to invest in educational infrastructure. So, to conclude, I am hoping that, given the time lag it takes for publishing a book, some of the already apparent trends described here for Trinidad may well match those starting to become evident in slower-moving places such as London or Los Angeles. We shall see.