Book review

Elisabetta Costa, Social media in Southeast Turkey: Love, kinship and politics. London, England: University College London Press, 2016. ISBN 9789106345233: 194 pp., £35 (pbk).

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Some of the most refreshing work on social media has been done by (media) anthropologists, who, with their characteristic emphasis on cultural contexts and meanings and locality have provided us with detailed accounts of how to understand social media in particular (digital) environments (Miller, 2011; Pink et al., 2016; Postill & Pink, 2012). One of the latest additions in this area is Elisabetta Costa’s Social media in Southeast Turkey, an ethnographic study of social media in Mardin. Her study is part of the large-scale anthropological research project and eponymous book series Why we post, led by Daniel Miller and including no less than nine ethnographic studies on social media across the globe. To fully appreciate the findings of Costa’s book and grasp its theoretical underpinnings, it is advisable to consult the first book of the series, How the world changed social media (Miller et al., 2016). Not only does that volume outline the central topics and comparative findings of the larger project, it also situates the study within a decade of academic debate about social media, culture and social change.

Despite being part of this much wider project, Social media in Southeast Turkey can be enjoyed for its own merits. Rather than focusing on the metropolitan centers or “global cities” where social media and digital technologies are believed to be the driving forces behind social and cultural change, this book takes us to the smaller and more peripheral multicultural city of Mardin. Through a detailed, personal and highly reflexive report, Costa introduces us to this unique place: a multi-ethnic and multi-religious city near the Turkish–Syrian border, which has been shaped by recent neoliberal politics, urbanization, and ethno-political conflict. A mid-size city of about 87,000 inhabitants, Mardin is located in the middle of the predominantly Kurdish region. The population consists of Arabs and Kurds but also Syriac Orthodox, Catholic Armenians, Turks and, recently, Syrian and Yezidi refugees. During her 15 months of fieldwork, Costa maintained close relations with around 10 families and over 100 individuals. She carried out around 100 in-depth interviews, conducted participant observations, and surveyed 250 people using two questionnaires.

She adopts an unexpected perspective on the interrelations between social media and social life. Instead of focusing on the coexistence between Mardin’s ethnic minorities in relation to (post-)conflict, the study predominantly focuses on “the impacts of social media on gender differences that can be found in Muslim societies, and how social media is entangled with processes of urbanisation and economic development” (p. 12). Moreover, the media ecology of Mardin she describes does not simply consist of related and converging platforms (as in the polymedia environment developed by Madianou & Miller, 2012). Rather, she describes a media ecology in which social media have deeply social meanings and consists of “contrasts that are fundamentally social” (p. 48). Those contrasts are mainly linked to tensions between social media’s private and public spaces and characteristics. Unlike many previous studies, visuals are consistently present in the book—not merely as illustrations, but also as actual data gathered during the fieldwork. Along with many personal stories of her participants, visuals ranging from family photographs to political memes provide a rich insight into everyday life and social media in Mardin.

In Social Media in Southeast Turkey, Costa explores the productive intellectual space that exists at the crossroads of media studies and anthropology. Focusing on classical anthropological themes such as kinship, lineages, and tribes and studying them through a lens of social media, she offers new insights into the dynamics and consequences of social media within particular cultural contexts. Tellingly, the study allows Costa to further explore some of the theoretical issues within the field of media anthropology, as she has done in a recent paper critiquing the notions of affordances and context collapse (see Costa, 2017).

In sum, this is a highly recommended book that will broaden readers’ horizons on social media and its uses and consequences in a distinct cultural context. A stimulating and vivid read, it will invite both social media scholars and anthropologists to see the relations between social media and social life in a new light. Because of the particular nature of this research project, readers who intend to explore these issues further from a theoretical point of view, are recommended to consult the other books of the series.
Interview with the Author

KS: You make use of the concept “scalable sociality” when describing how people in Mardin navigate between the public and private spaces of social media. Can you explain how this concept was developed within the Why we post project and why it is so significant to understand the particularity of your findings?

EC: Let me first explain the overall way of working, which was rather particular. After having conducted 12 months of individual fieldwork, all researchers in the project returned to London. We shared a house for a month, during which we were discussing and comparing our findings, which was very intense and productive. After that, we returned to our fieldwork for another three months and then all went to London again to write our monographs, still having group meetings about once a week. It was during these meetings that we were discussing how social media cannot be seen as one type of space, and that social media in our studies are not simply a set of different platforms, but that the number and type of people that inhabit these online spaces is crucial. Rather than being able to make cross-platform comparisons, we realized that what actually made a difference were the number and type of people inhabiting these online places and the level of privacy. The concept of scalable sociality could convey the different scales of social media, as it points at the number of people that inhabit them and the level of privacy people experience. I believe this concept was particularly relevant for my study in Mardin, as all my findings are about the contradictory consequences of social media. The social change brought about by social media are, in fact, not linear, exactly because there are these different scales. People in Mardin in particular had very specific conceptions of public and private space, so making use of this concept also allows me to highlight the continuity between the online and the offline.

KS: Your book is part of a series of nine media ethnographic studies within a broader project. Can you share your experience of negotiating between this study as an individual study and a comparative work? To what extent was the comparative element present during the individual fieldwork?

EC: I believe that, as a project, we found the right balance between a large-scale project and individual ethnographies. The idea was that we covered similar topics. Every month during the fieldwork, we would write a brief report on a certain topic, for instance kinship and social media. These macro topics later became titles of most of the project’s book chapters, including those in my book. At the same time, these topics were broad enough to give sufficient space for exploring interesting aspects that emerged in distinct local settings. The comparison was part of the research process in the sense that we were in touch during the fieldwork at least once a month. We read each other’s reports, which was very inspiring and led to a continuous exchange of ideas.

KS: Social media in Southeast Turkey focuses on the city of Mardin, which you call a peripheral location. After you conducted your fieldwork, the Turkish-Syrian border region in which Mardin is situated became increasingly central in the regional conflict (notably since the siege of nearby Kobane by Islamic State in September 2014). How do you look back on the changes that the city has undergone in the past years and how should we see your book in light of these changes?

EC: In hindsight, the major difference was that I could actually do the research in 2013-2014. This would not have been possible in the following years. The peace process between Kurds and the Turkish government collapsed in 2015 and it would have been more difficult to get the research permits and to talk to people because of the political situation. Later, when writing the book, the situation in the region changed continuously, so it was a challenge to keep up with all the changes and to make the book as durable as possible. In terms of findings, however, I do not believe it would have made a significant difference. People in Mardin were talking very little about politics at the time in public spaces online and offline. The fights going on in the border region may not have changed so much to the actual findings. Mardin is also particular of course because it has such a big Arabic presence. Therefore the town is peripheral in relation to the Kurdish conflict too. Then, the media that reported from the region are interested in the conflict, but not so much in the daily lives of people in Mardin.

KS: Equally connected to the evolving conflict in the region, particularly in Syria, is the increase of forced migration. To what extent was forced migration a significant element in your study?

EC: Mardin was inhabited by a significant number of Syrians who fled their homes with the beginning of the conflict. Yet, the focus of my research were the
old inhabitants of the town, e.g. (Turkish) Kurds and (Turkish) Arabs. Syrians would have deserved a new separate research. Then, during my last months in Mardin, there was an increased presence in the region of Yezidi refugees, mainly after the occupation of Mosul in Summer 2014. It did not seem to change the lives of people in Mardin significantly, nor the way in which they related to social media. Of course, forced migration was present throughout the fieldwork because many Kurds, including from the Mardin region, had to migrate for political reasons, especially since the 1980s. Many of the participants had up to a couple of hundred relatives on Facebook, including relatives that had migrated to other cities in Turkey or to Europe during or after the 1980s. It is fascinating to see some links and parallels with current discussions on forced migration and social media. It was interesting to observe how people in their 20s started getting in touch with second or third degree cousins because of Facebook. This really transforms understandings of kinship. And although it is perhaps not about political activism in the classical sense, there was a highly political dimension to it. The use of Facebook to stay in touch with Kurdish relatives was even described by one of the participants as a tool against assimilation.

KS: Your book combines different disciplinary perspectives, notably those of anthropology and media studies. What has this combination taught you about the way in which we study social media today?

EC: As an anthropologist, I would really like to highlight the importance of social, cultural and political contexts. I really advocate for long-term research that concentrates on everyday lives and local particularities. Besides its empirical focus on contexts, this book also tries to counterweight the research on social media, which has been focusing heavily on Western settings or urban areas. There is little research on social media in different parts of the world. While there has been a significant move to de-westernize media studies about two decades ago, that discussion somehow has not been picked up so much in this fuzzy field of social media. I hope my book can contribute to that discussion.

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