Научна критика и полемика

Discussion and Polemics

Ethnographic Journey into the *Heart* of Smartphone

Daniel Miller, Laila Abed Rabho, Patrick Awondo, Maya de Vries**,** Marília Duque**,** Pauline Garvey**,** Laura Haapio-Kirk, Charlotte Hawkins**,** Alfonso Otaegui**,** Shireen Walton**,** Xinyuan Wang. 2021. *The Global Smartphone: Beyond a Youth Technology*. London: UCL Press, 295 pp.

 A long-awaited book in the world of digital anthropology, *The Global Smartphone: Beyond a Youth Technology*, has arrived on our screens at the beginning of May 2021.[1] Published by UCL Press, this is the first book deriving from a global comparative five-year research project Anthropology of Smartphones and Smart Ageing *(ASSA)* (2017–2021)[2] carried out by ten researchers led by Daniel Miller, professor of anthropology at University College London (UCL). Through participation and simultaneous 16-month fieldwork among people between the ages of 45 and 70 on ten field sites worldwide (Brazil, Cameroon, Chile, China, Ireland, Italy, Japan, East Jerusalem, Uganda, Trinidad), this research team explored fundamental changes in people's everyday life, relationships, health, care, and surveillance, or phenomena like "death of distance" or "death of proximity", associated with the global rise of smartphones.

 The book in front of us sums the experience of this long-term fieldwork and offers a synthesis of the field findings and theoretical conclusions derived thereof. The main part consists of nine chapters – *Introduction, What people say about smartphones, The smartphone in context, From apps to everyday life, Perpetual opportunism, Crafting, Age and smartphones, The heart of the smartphone: LINE, WeChat and WhatsApp* and *General and theoretical reflections* – showing the scope and range of the topics covered. Additionally, it holds *Chapter summaries, List of figures, List of abbreviations, List of contributors, Series Foreword* and *Acknowledgements*, and *Appendix - methodology and content, Bibliography*, and *Index.* It should be added that the book takes a multimedia approach and offers innovative technical terms. Apart from illustrations in the form of field photographs, it contains drawings, illustrative comics, screenshot, as well videos that complement the text, bringing us closer to the field findings.

---

[1] The publication of the book was followed by a three-week online course "An Anthropology of Smartphones: Communication, Ageing and Health" with open access. Also, access to this book, as well as other books in the series is open and free.

[2] https://www.ucl.ac.uk/anthropology/assa/ (Accessed September 9, 2021).

Talking about the significance of the book *The Global Smartphone: Beyond a Youth Technology* it is twofold, both methodologically and theoretically. Like in the earlier series of books created within the project on the interplay of people and social media *Why We Post*[3], in this book Miller and his contributors once again attempt to restore faith in ethnography as a research method that defines social anthropology. It should be noted that ethnography is an open-ended inductive practice of long-term living with people and among the people we research with, with the primary purpose to acquire an understanding of local knowledge, values, and practices, that are crucial for disciplinary identity (Howell 2018, 2). Although its survival was called into question with the emergence of postmodern critique and the Writing Culture debate (Clifford & Marcus 1986) at the end of the last century, the book shows that the time of ethnography has not passed. Instead, ethnography persists as a proud figure of the discipline and the primary method of knowing otherness, from Malinowski, through Geertz, to contemporary fieldwork, be it digital or not.[4]

As Margaret Mead once said: "What people say, what people do, and what they say they do are entirely different things".[5] Therefore, working in the field and applying the principle based on long-term fieldwork in a physical and digital environment, Miller and his team had the opportunity not only to talk to people but also to observe and spend time with them. As a result, the theoretical concepts in the book are illustrated with individual examples – portraits and narratives of interlocutors from the field – producing a humanising effect. By exploring the use of technology in context and researching "from below", they had the opportunity to identified contradictions in practices related to digital technologies and what people think about them, as well the discourses on digital technologies, mainly dictated by moral and political debates. Thanks to these insights, general and theoretical arguments in the book are nuanced and, depending on the field site, they reveal "irregularities", i.e., exceptions to conclusions and rules, adding a unique value to the insight offered by ethnographic research. Furthermore, the study strikes a perfect balance between those examples and generalisation and abstraction, allowing us to label this type of knowledge creation as *theory from below*.

In addition to the importance of the book and the project itself for the revitalisation of ethnography as a method, by virtue of field insights, Miller and his research team offer a conceptual and theoretical approach to a smartphone. According to them, a smartphone is not only a material object but also the "transportal home" i.e., a place where we live (Miller et al. 2021, 219–220). The meaning of home in this conceptualisation is multifaceted and not merely metaphorical. Instead, the research team shows that the transportal home shares many qualities that are similar to the physical home. Just as we have different rooms for different activities in the house, a smartphone has applications for leisure activities: catching up on the news, doing research, chatting and gossiping, or planning the next meal. Just like we do our homes, we also clean and arrange it. With all this in mind, a smartphone becomes essential

---

[3] https://www.ucl.ac.uk/why-we-post/ (Accessed September 9, 2021).

[4] https://anthrodendum.org/2018/02/03/we-have-never-been-digital-anthropologists/ (Accessed September 23, 2021).

[5] https://www.britishscienceassociation.org/blog/life-online-the-new-authentic (Accessed September 13, 2021).

especially in the context of life in the contemporary, mobile world, where we are often physically away from home under the pressure of migration, education, or work. Smartphones and the internet, therefore, cure that home fragility through the "death of distance," while at the same time being capable of producing "death of proximity" (Miller et al. 2021, 219–220) with the physical environment, as the book reveals.

Applying a holistic approach and research based on empathic respect for people's resourcefulness and crafting, by watching, listening, and learning from how people use their devices every day, how they adapt and create content, the researchers went on to conduct even more profound analyses. Following their findings further, we can call applications "the heart of a smartphone" because it is where life is happening. The examples show that for many users in this research applications represent the most important aspect of a smartphone. Applications such as maps, weather forecast, radio, music players, or camera, help people in their daily routine and activities, expand their capacity to know things better and help them become more organised. Simultaneously, a smartphone becomes an instrument for expressing people's devotion to those they care about most – children, parents, partners, and best friends, which is why the authors dubbed it a "relational smartphone" (Miller et al. 2021, 181).

As the examples from the field indisputably show, becoming a domestic space not only for the young but for people of all ages, smartphones have changed our relationship with the world around us. Looking at everyday and intimate use, the authors notice not only that a smartphone connects us to the world and others around us, but also that it has become a part of us. Thus, intimacy with a *machine* is not achieved by trying to look like people, but by complementing human capacities and cognitive functions, which is why it has moved "beyond anthropomorphism" (Miller et al. 2021, 229). The concept is highly reminiscent of Miller's concept of objectification (Miller 2010 (1988)) used to describe the mutual constitution of people and things. In this case, application algorithms learn from our behaviour, while we transform devices by downloading and creating content. Consequently, applications can change the user's behaviour, resulting in an intimate relationship in which the device completes and extends the person, compelling Miller and his contributors to conclude that a smartphone is "smart from below" (Miller et al. 2021, 250).

Even though this study differs from the mainstream discussion and critique of digital technologies, the critical remark is not left out. On the contrary, the authors do not portray smartphones in either good or bad light, instead putting them into context. Thereby, they notice contradictions that inevitably appear in any technology-focused research. The discourse about technology, and thus about smartphones, remains ambivalent at all times, simultaneously highlighting pros and cons, that is, the benefits smartphones bring and the problems they cause. This is, perhaps, most clearly evident in the parts that explore the relationship between care, surveillance, and capitalism. Using specific examples, the authors demonstrate that smartphones are both a surveillance instrument and a care instrument, making care and surveillance two sides of the same coin that cannot be separated. This relationship between surveillance and care could surely be documented before the pandemic, but the outbreak of the COVID-19 during the fieldwork has drawn further attention to these relations. For instance, applications and surveillance systems introduced during the pandemic in China, Japan, or Israel show that smartphones have the potential to rescue from and serve as a precursor to dystopia, raising questions which we will try to answers in the future.

As we can see, *The Global Smartphone: Beyond a youth technology* opens a broader range of issues and topics and although of particular interest for researchers engaged in digital technologies, it can be helpful for anyone dealing with contemporary anthropology, including non-academic readers. The study, conducted in a contemporary context and dealing with both contemporary and timeless disciplinary and human issues, is reminiscent of classical ethnographic studies, which offer guidance on what it means to deal with present-day anthropology.

References

Abidin, Crystal. 2018. "We Have Never Been Digital Anthropologist". Blog Anthrodendum. https://anthrodendum.org/2018/02/03/we-have-never-been-digital-anthropologists/ (Published: February 3, 2018; Accessed September 23, 2021).

Clifford, James & George E. Marcus, eds. 1986. *Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Howell, Signe. 2018. "Ethnography." In *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Anthropology*, eds. F. Stein, S. Lazar, M. Candea, H. Diemberger, J. Robbins, A. Sanchez & R. Stasch. https://www.anthroencyclopedia.com/printpdf/262

Miller, Daniel. 2010 (1988). *Stuff.* Cambridge: Polity.

Xinyuan, Wang. 2020. "Life online: the new authentic?" British Science Association. https://www.britishscienceassociation.org/blog/life-online-the-new-authentic (Published: August 4, 2020; Accessed September 13, 2021).

<div align="right">Sonja Radivojević</div>

Градска свакодневица у прошлости: архивски рад и примарни извори у контексту антрополошких истраживања

Драгана Радојичић, *Архив и антропологија сећања.* Етнографски институт САНУ, Метроон: извори за етнологију и антропологију, књ. 1, Београд 2020, 241 стр.

Теренски рад представља једно од дистинктивних обележја антрополошке методологије и истраживачку активност у којој се генерише највећи број примарних података. Познато је да се антрополози брижљиво и студиозно припремају за теренски рад, да се у највећој мери држе постављеног теоријско-методолошког оквира истраживања, али и да динамика теренског рада учини да се почетни истраживачки планови у мањој или већој мери модификују. Са теренских истраживања враћамо се са материјалом прикупљеним на основу више десетина структурисаних интервјуа, али често се деси да су кључна запажања и важна открића настала управо током оних активности које претходно нису биле планиране (Eriksen 2004, 42–52). Даље, у временима када се етнологија доминантно перципирала као наука о прошлости и развијала као једна од помоћних историјских наука, етнолози су незаобилазно користили архивску грађу у својим истраживањима. Како се наша наука теоријски и методолошки развијала