Social Networking and Social Science

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Normally this site reports the results of completed research but just for a change this posting is intended to share the trepidations of research that is still to come. I am so used to being turned down for research proposals it came as something of a shock when the largest I had ever applied for said yes. This is funding from the European Research Council for a study of the impact of social networking on seven countries. The particularly positive thing about this is that it is getting harder and harder to fund classic full length ethnography, but this proposal consists of seven full 15 months periods of fieldwork in small towns, which are likely to be in Brazil. China, India, Italy, Trinidad, Turkey and the UK. The other positive aspect is that the team that is funded to do this which consists of myself, four post-doctoral colleagues for three years each and two PhD students for four years is extremely strong. Even the two PhD students have already published papers, and in one case a book, about social networking in their respect countries before starting on their degrees.

But the word trepidation is the right one. I do think that social scientists who obtain extensive funding have a kind of responsibility to ensure that the results of that work are of a scale and significance that similar funding is more, rather than less likely to go to future social science applications. I have seen large academic programmes that I felt quite clearly failed to deliver results I would have felt commensurate with the opportunities they had been granted. I know that I am never likely to be engaged in such an extensive programme again.

Already there are many issues circulating in my head with regard to planning this project. How much should it be based on strict and highly structured comparative work with us all largely doing the same thing in different places? How would that relate to the traditions of autonomy and diversity that are characteristic of anthropology? To be frank the neat thing about social networking, especially as this is in the context of full offline ethnography, is that pretty much anything and everything is now being also channelled through them. This can be a study of memorialisation, kinship, joy, photography, language, the elderly and so forth. Or it can be highly focused on the idea of the social network itself. Does the extensive funding give one an additional applied responsibility to work on applied issues, focusing on the elderly, the impoverished and the housebound (I am inclined to think yes) or is this an unusual opportunity to allow one to soar mainly into intellectual and philosophical ambitions within anthropology (I am inclined to a yes to that too). How does such a huge project relate to new forms of dissemination, online, open-source and so forth? Why has comparative anthropology rarely lived up to its promise? Is this an opportunity to re-think the more fundamental questions of what is anthropology itself, which is something the introduction to the forthcoming Digital Anthropology book (Berg – later this year) I have edited with Heather Horst tries to ask.

The project is for five years, the sustained fieldwork on all projects will begin around March 2013. The final report is not due to 2017. Most of us have got more into the frame of wondering what is happening next year, rather than old socialist five year plans. I am certainly not complaining, but I

don't think this project can be what it might have been without thinking through these implications and responsibilities, and I am happy to do this publically, because all suggestions are very welcome.