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REVIEWS

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Getting Your Porridge Right is Difficult: Social Media as the Key to Understand the English

The Review of *Social Media in an English Village (Or How to Keep People at Just the Right Distance)* by Daniel Miller (London: UCL Press, 2016)

'That porridge is too hot! That porridge is too cold! That porridge is just right!' – this is what Goldilocks, one of the title characters of a well-known English tale 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears', says after trying three consecutive bowls of porridge at the house of the three bears. Goldilocks seems to be a fussy girl for whom choosing the perfect, neither too hot nor too cold bowl of porridge is a priority. While Daniel Miller's *Social Media in an English Village Or How to Keep People at Just the Right Distance* recognizes the omnipresence of various forms of social media in one of the studied English villages, the Glades, it also gives its readers a sense of what is so typically English about the use of social media there. The book is a part of the eleven-title series which are devoted to the presentation of the standing of social media in different parts of the world including, among others, such countries as Brazil, China or India. Daniel Miller, a Professor of Anthropology at the University College London, spent eighteen months with the villagers of the Glades on his ethnographic study, thanks to which he may offer the audience an exhaustive account of the 'Englishness' with respect to the use of different platforms such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. Under the guise of studying the significance of social media in an English village, the book provides an insight into the nature of the English. What constitutes a considerable asset of this book is that it presents social media from the anthropological perspective which is believed to be

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increasingly significant nowadays. Anthropology allows one to treat humans not as individuals, but to analyse their behaviours in terms of the relationships formed between them. Miller's analysis of social media proves that the English have persistently protected the borderline between their private and public domains against intruders, but at present it is the social media that encroach on the cherished zone. I strongly agree with the messages conveyed by Miller and think that his book is a must-read for anyone willing to understand not only the social media landscape, but also communication trends in the English language.

The book consists of seven chapters, each offering a substantial comment on the phenomenon of social media and their use by males and females representing various age groups ranging from school pupils to fatally ill hospice patients. The first chapter provides necessary background information concerning the study itself, including such issues as setting, community or housing. The following chapter illustrates the presence and abundance of different forms of social media and goes on explaining key terms such as *genre, polymedia* or *affordances,* which are crucial to the discussion of the problem of social media. The third chapter entitled 'Crafting the look' employs quite an innovative stance towards the analysis of social media. Namely, the author provides readers with visual input enclosing seventy-nine pictures obtained from the participants. Then, Miller continues with the analysis of social media by turning his readers' attention to social relationships and the issues of kinship, development of Internet and 'Goldilocks strategy', and these are the main ideas touched upon in chapter four. Chapters five and six discuss the influence of platforms on school pupils and hospice patients as well as their potential with respect to such vital social issues as religion, commerce or politics. The last chapter discusses the extent to which social media in the Glades are typically English and concludes with some predictions concerning the English society if the present state of affairs it to be maintained.

The first thing which drew my attention while reading *Social Media in an English Village* is the extent and time span of Miller's study in the Glades' surroundings. Observing the residents of this site for eighteen months combined with a detailed account of interviews and results from surveys make his analysis a reliable and trustworthy source of reference for anyone interested in the nature of social media in general as well as the inclinations of the English people living in a village. Interacting with all sorts of representatives of the Glades community enabled him to provide an objective coverage of various and sometimes conflicting attitudes towards social media. The book takes the readers to the Glades and familiarizes them with such characters as, for instance, Claudia who as a caring mother of three accepts the influence that social media have on her offsprings, or Jo, who, torn between time spent at university and work, regards social media as the only way to keep up-to-date.

The style of writing in Miller's recently published work is also worth commenting on. Anyone, no matter if he or she is an academic or an undergraduate, will easily comprehend the message he conveys through his work. It is written in an accessible style so that everyone can benefit from his findings. Moreover, those interested in theoreti-

cal issues can follow the notes at the end of the book and find the desired references. What I find particularly appealing is the inclusion of the definitions of the key terms reappearing throughout the book, but in different contexts. On reading *Social Media in an English Village*, one does not get a sense of being overwhelmed by a multitude of information concerning the issue of social media, but harmoniously proceeds from one chapter to another, which are supplemented with introductory and concluding sections.

One cannot separate textual input from its visual complement in the course of the analysis of social media. This is what Miller does while providing his book with several dozens of pictures taken from such platforms as Facebook and Instagram. While analysing them, he notices a set of patterns characterizing each set of photos, which proves that pictures can serve as a valuable source of knowledge about social media.

It is undeniable that Facebook, Twitter or Instagram are household names and the theme of social media is a fashionable one. Due to the fact that so many people are the users of social media, *Social Media in an English Village* touches upon an extremely broad and all-encompassing topic. The potential of these platforms in education, improvement in the well-being of hospice patients, as well as the queries on the potential negative influence of social media on human beings are some of the issues relevant to most of the people – this is the last argument in favour of referring to the book in question.

On the other hand, in spite of the fact that the book offers an exhaustive comment on the use of social media by people in the Glades, I do not feel that my curiosity as far as the contrast between different strata of the English society when it comes to their use of social media is fully satisfied. I do not mean to diminish the author's effort put into the preparation or conduct of the research because, as I have noted earlier, it is impressive. On getting deeper into the book, one gets to know that, for instance, boys are more inclined to be directly involved in quarrels whereas girls tend to be withdrawn and bear grudges against others in a more indirect fashion. In my consideration, however, juxtaposing manual workers with white-collar and educated ones with respect to their use of social media would be intriguing. Such a contrast could indicate whether the education gained at the university may contribute to the increased willingness to protect one's privacy, or, maybe, just the opposite.

Miller equips his readers with a broad knowledge of how the English perceive and use social media on a daily basis and what the driving forces are that make them do so. In my estimation, one of Miller's most compelling principles is the above-mentioned 'Goldilocks strategy', according to which the English people do not want to be either too distant or too close with each other. They, in fact, struggle to maintain harmony between their public and private worlds, which, nowadays, turns out to be a daunting task due to the spread of social media which bridges this gap. Since I encountered the book *Social Media in an English Village,* I have known that there is something extraordinary about it. The book has definitely lived up to my expectations and changed the way I think about social media. The book made me realize that social media is not, in fact, dividing and separating people so that they become alienated from each

other in the surroundings of their homes. It is an opposite situation in which people are closer than never before while sharing the same platform. Joining Daniel Miller in his journey around the Glades and discovering a new face of social media has been a truly illuminating and recommendable experience.