

**Miller, Daniel and Jolynna Sinanan. 2014. *Webcam*. Cambridge: Polity Press. 220 pp. Pb.: £15.99/\$19.40. ISBN: 9780745671475.**

The first time I used Skype to talk to others was about a decade ago, when I was working on an international project. The experience of the “quadrilateral” exchange was anything but pleasant. Computer speakers kept crackling and beeping, and we could not see each other because the internet connection was so slow. We could only listen to each other as we tried to coordinate our work. The on-line discussion lasted for about an hour, although 15 minutes would have sufficed had it not been for the interruptions. The technology has greatly advanced since then: internet connections are much faster now, and voice communication has been upgraded with video. Skype, which is used regularly by more than 300 million people across the globe, has become an important means of communication, not only for project meetings with dispersed team members but also for private purposes. With the help of a webcam, we can, for example, have a chat with our parents while we are abroad, show friends how our children have grown since the last time we met in person, and wish our partners a good night.

In *Webcam*, anthropologists Daniel Miller and Jolynna Sinanan, both from University College London, focus mainly on everyday communication. They take a sociological approach to “webcamming”, which is a term they use to denote conversations via Skype or any other internet solution for the transfer of sound and video across distances. Although the treatise centres on people and interpersonal relationships, the authors also touch on the technological aspects of communicating in this manner. ‘[P]eople have relationships with people’, they point out in the introductory chapter, ‘and they have relationships with technology, and mostly, we can’t really disentangle the two’ (p. 3). Using letters or short text messages to communicate is, as they say, an entirely different experience than talking over the phone or chatting on Facebook, and webcamming has a particular set of features all its own, which includes both advantages and shortcomings. That is why, according to the authors, the following famous words coined in the 1960s by the philosopher and master of communication theory Marshall McLuhan still ring true: “The medium is the message”.

Miller and Sinanan approach webcamming from different angles, expressed through descriptions and statements provided by people living in the Caribbean, in Trinidad. It is somewhat surprising that the first subject the authors delve into does not deal with interpersonal relationships but with self-consciousness – they explore how we perceive ourselves while Skyping. When people begin using this technology to make video calls, they focus less on the person they are speaking with than on their own image, which is visible to them in a smaller window. The authors explain that the presence of this smaller image is a pivotal and fascinating moment in the history of humanity, because it allows us, for the first time ever, to observe ourselves “live” during an ordinary conversation, and lets us see how others see us at that very moment. Because of this somewhat narcissistic initial experience and a not uncommon self-absorbed fascination with our own image, Skype users often prepare themselves for the call, physically more so than mentally. They put on nicer clothes, fix their hair, and apply makeup. They can avoid any potential

embarrassment by unplugging the camera and using voice communication only, but then the person on the other side of the call might suspect that something is wrong and that the caller that is not visible is hiding something important. Being visually unavailable and present in voice only is, in line with McLuhan's words, a message in itself.

The eye of a webcam also represents encroachment upon privacy. That can be unsettling, but it helps maintain intimacy and a sense of closeness, which is most evident in cases where people who live in different parts of the world leave their cameras switched on all day, which can sometimes make them feel as if they live together. The authors add that some take this always-on intimacy further and use Skype to convey expressions of love or as a tool for cybersex (e.g. using a live video connection for simultaneous masturbation). Despite including both picture and sound, however, such activity is still (for now) not as intense or satisfying as a physical relationship can be. Geographical distance can make the desire and need for actual contact even stronger. 'The downside ... is that the more you talk to them, the more you just want to be next to them or to be in their arms,' says an interviewee from Trinidad, thus summarising the essence of intimacy without physical presence.

Webcamming also has an important impact on the sense of place, especially on the concept of home. Physical space is not necessarily what connects two people, which is particularly apparent when we look at couples going through a divorce. Even if spouses live together, their lives can bypass each other. At the same time, the computer has become the "space" in which partners who live apart from each other can meet, touch base and see if their relationship is still intact. The more jealous types can use the camera to check whether or not their partner really is alone in the apartment or if they are where they said they would be during the online date. People also use computer cameras to show others how they decorated their apartments and to show off their luxurious hotel rooms, and some take their laptops outside, to the garden, to ask for horticultural advice. In short, physically remote spaces are beginning to intertwine and spill into each other because of Skype and other similar technologies. That supports the thesis that space is no longer the main determinant of social relationships and that, in various ways, space has been upgraded and replaced by online networks.

As the authors set out in one of the chapters, people use Skype to maintain not only romantic relationships but also family ties. Parents can use a camera to check up on their children, who are studying abroad and make sure they have not lost too much weight. Grandparents often see their grandchildren for the first time on a computer screen. They turn to the screen again to fawn over their grandchildren's first steps and, later, chat with the youngsters on a regular basis. Webcamming makes it possible for an entire family to meet up for important events such as birthdays and holidays, have breakfast together, and exchange good wishes. Miller and Sinanan predict that such long-distance group celebrations could, for example, replace Christmas cards, which have already lost much of their value because of mobile phones and email. The minimal unit of sociability that sustains family ties and the bonds of friendship could thus become a festive get-together on Skype, which would fundamentally transform the tradition of giving greeting cards and well-wishing, although not necessarily for the worse.

Many readers will find the final chapter of the book the most interesting, because it focuses on visibility and its socio-cultural consequences. Visibility is the one part of webcamming that provides the sense of an actual presence, which is not something offered by other media. During a phone call, a caller is free to pick his nose or type chat messages to a third person via Facebook, whereas webcamming does not let us do such things, since the person on the other side can see our every move. There is another aspect to visibility, however: it allows users to distort reality, as in the case of “amateur” pornographic videos, where it is often unclear if the pleasure is genuine or faked. ‘Compared to the photograph or the phone,’ explain the authors, ‘a webcam seems both more truthful, pushing the possibilities of evidence, and at the same time more false, extending the potential for faking, which makes the tension between truth and its opposite that more exquisite’ (p. 166).

*Webcam* makes for essential reading, for it presents modern communication technology from a human, everyday perspective and describes its transformative social impact. The subject-matter of the book is firmly embedded in the local context of Trinidad and the authors have thus provided a solid epistemological and methodological starting point for any researcher intent on researching webcamming in other locations. The only weak point of the book is its structure. The authors experimentally open with the concluding chapter, in which they present a somewhat underdeveloped theory of attainment. They use the theory to explain how technologies become an integral part of society and how they define us as people. Although Miller and Sinanan start by clearly laying out these concepts, they then intertwine them with ethnographical examples in a way that is not entirely clear. The classic structure would be more appropriate, with conclusions drawn on the basis of ethnographical findings and new knowledge presented at the end of the treatise. Despite this shortcoming, the book is so well-written and cogent that it is sure to become part of the “iron repertoire” of all anthropologists dealing with media and communication technologies. Professionals and students in the field of communication and media studies will also find themselves reaching for *Webcam*, because of its breadth and the topical issues that it addresses. The book is also relevant for researchers in the field of computer sciences and informatics, who are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of the “humanisation” of information and communications technologies, and of the fact that these technologies have a profound impact on our lives.

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