

it's
complicated

the social lives of
networked teens

danah boyd

Published with assistance from the foundation established in memory of Philip Hamilton McMillan of the class of 1894, Yale College.

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6 inequality

can social media resolve social divisions?

In a school classroom in Los Angeles, Keke sat down, crossed her arms defensively, and looked at me with suspicion. After an hour of short, emotionless responses to my questions about her daily life and online activities, I hit a nerve when I asked the black sixteen-year-old to explain how race operated in her community. I saw her fill with rage as she described how gang culture shaped her life. “We can’t have a party without somebody being a Blood or somebody being a Crip and then they get into it and then there’s shooting. Then we can’t go to my friend’s house because it’s on the wrong side of [the street]. You know what I’m saying? It’s the Mexican side.” Los Angeles gang culture forces her to think about where she goes, who she spends time with, and what she wears.

We can’t go places because of gangs. . . . We can’t go to the mall, can’t be a whole bunch of black people together. . . . I hate not being able to go places. I hate having to be careful what color shoes I’m wearing or what color is in my pants or what color’s in my hair. . . . I just hate that. It’s just not right.

When each color represents a different gang, the choice to wear red or blue goes beyond taste and fashion.

Although Keke understood the dynamics of gang culture in her community and was respected by the gang to which members of her

family belonged, she despised the gangs' power. She hated the violence. And she had good reason to be angry. Only a few weeks before we met, Keke's brother had been shot and killed after crossing into the turf of a Latino gang. Keke was still in mourning.

Though almost sixty years had passed since the US Supreme Court ruled that segregation of public high schools is unconstitutional, most American high schools that I encountered organized themselves around race and class through a variety of social, cultural, economic, and political forces. The borders of school districts often produce segregated schools as a byproduct of de facto neighborhood segregation. Students find themselves in particular classrooms—or on academic tracks—based on test scores, and these results often correlate with socioeconomic status. Friend groups are often racially and economically homogenous, which translates into segregated lunchrooms and segregated online communities.

The most explicit manifestation of racial segregation was visible to me in schools like Keke's, where gangs play a central role in shaping social life. Her experiences with race and turf are common in her community. The resulting dynamics organize her neighborhood and infiltrate her school. When I first visited Keke's school, I was initially delighted by how diverse and integrated the school appeared to be. The majority of students were immigrants, and there was no dominant race or nationality. More than other schools I visited, classrooms looked like they were from a Benetton ad or a United Nations gathering, with students from numerous racial backgrounds sitting side by side. Yet during lunch or between classes, the school's diversity dissolved as peers clustered along racial and ethnic lines. As Keke explained,

This school is so segregated. It's crazy. We got Disneyland full of all the white people. . . . The hallways is full of the Indians, and the people of Middle Eastern descent. . . . The Latinos, they all lined up on this side. The blacks is by the cafeteria and the quad. Then the outcasts, like the uncool Latinos or uncool Indians. The uncool whites, they scattered.

Every teen I spoke with at Keke's school used similar labels to describe the different shared spaces where teens cluster. "Disneyland" was the section in the courtyard where white students gathered, while "Six Flags" described the part occupied by black students. When I tried to understand where these terms came from, one of Keke's classmates—a fifteen-year-old Latina named Lolo—explained, "It's just been here for, I think, generations. (Laughs) I'm sure if you're a ninth grader, you might not know until somebody tells you. But I did know 'cause my brother told me." Those same identifiers bled into nearby schools and were used when public spaces outside of school were identified. No one knew who created these labels, but they did know that these were the right terms to use. Each cohort had to learn the racial organization of the school, just as they had to learn the racial logic of their neighborhoods. They understood that flouting these implicit rules by crossing lines could have serious social and physical consequences.

Although Keke's experience of losing a family member to gang violence is uncommon, death is not that exceptional in a community where gun violence is pervasive. Gang members may know one another at school, but the tense civility they maintain in the hallways does not carry over to the streets. Teens of different races may converse politely in the classroom, but that doesn't mean they are friends on social media. Although many teens connect to everyone they know on sites like Facebook, this doesn't mean that they cross unspoken cultural boundaries. Communities where race is fraught maintain the same systems of segregation online and off.

What struck me as I talked with teens about how race and class operated in their communities was their acceptance of norms they understood to be deeply problematic. In a nearby Los Angeles school, Traviesa, a Hispanic fifteen-year-old, explained, "If it comes down to it, we have to supposedly stick with our own races. . . . That's just the unwritten code of high school nowadays." Traviesa didn't want to behave this way, but the idea of fighting expectations was simply too exhausting and costly to consider. In losing her brother, Keke knew

those costs all too well, and they made her deeply angry. “We all humans,” she said. “Skin shouldn’t separate nobody. But that’s what happens.” Although part of Keke wanted to fight back against the racial dynamics that had killed her brother, she felt powerless.

As I watched teens struggle to make sense of the bigotry and racism that surrounded them in the mid- to late 2000s, the American media started discussing how the election of Barack Obama as the president of the United States marked the beginning of a “postracial” era. And because social media supposedly played a role in electing the first black US president, some in the press argued that technology would bring people together, eradicate social divisions in the United States, and allow democracy to flourish around the world.¹ This utopian discourse did not reflect the very real social divisions that I watched emerge and persist in teens’ lives.²

The Biases in Technology

Society has often heralded technology as a tool to end social divisions. In 1858, when the Atlantic Telegraph Company installed the first transatlantic cable, many imagined that this new communication device would help address incivility. As authors Charles Briggs and Augustus Maverick said of the telegraph: “This binds together by a vital cord all the nations of the earth. It is impossible that old prejudices and hostilities should longer exist, while such an instrument has been created for an exchange of thought between all the nations of the earth.”³ New communication media often inspire the hope that they can and will be used to bridge cultural divides. This hope gets projected onto new technologies in ways that suggest that the technology itself does the work of addressing cultural divisions.

As I describe throughout this book, the mere existence of new technology neither creates nor magically solves cultural problems. In fact, their construction typically reinforces existing social divisions. This sometimes occurs when designers intentionally build tools in prejudicial ways. More often it happens inadvertently when creators fail to realize how their biases inform their design decisions or when

the broader structural ecosystem in which a designer innovates has restrictions that produce bias as a byproduct.

In 1980, technology studies scholar Langdon Winner published a controversial essay entitled, “Do Artifacts Have Politics?” In it, he points to the case of urban planner Robert Moses as an example of how biases appear in design. In the mid-twentieth century, Moses was influential in designing roads, bridges, and public housing projects in New York City and neighboring counties. In planning parkways on Long Island, Moses designed bridges and overpasses that were too low for buses and trucks to pass under. Buses, for example, could not use the parkway to get to Jones Beach, a major summer destination. Winner argues that these design decisions excluded those who relied on public transportation—the poor, blacks, and other minorities and disadvantaged citizens—from getting to key venues on Long Island. He suggests that Moses incorporated his prejudices into the design of major urban infrastructures.

This parable is contested. Responding to Winner’s essay, technology scholar Bernward Joerges argues in “Do Politics Have Artefacts?” that Moses’s decisions had nothing to do with prejudice but rather resulted from existing regulatory restrictions limiting the height of bridges and the use of parkways by buses, trucks, and commercial vehicles. Joerges suggests that Winner used haphazard information to advance his argument. Alternatively, one could read the information that Joerges puts forward as reinforcing Winner’s broader conceptual claim. Perhaps Robert Moses did not intentionally design the roadways to segregate Long Island racially and socioeconomically, but his decision to build low overpasses resulted in segregation nonetheless. In other words, the combination of regulation and design produced a biased outcome regardless of the urban planner’s intention.

Companies often design, implement, and test new technologies in limited settings. Only when these products appear in the marketplace do people realize that aspects of the technology or its design result in biases that disproportionately affect certain users. For example, many image-capture technologies have historically had difficulty capturing

darker-skinned people because they rely on light, which reflects better off of lighter objects. As a result, photography and film better capture white skin while transforming black skin in unexpected ways.⁴ This same issue has reemerged in digital technologies like Microsoft's Kinect, an interactive gaming platform that relies on face recognition. Much to the frustration of many early adopters, the system often fails to recognize dark-skinned users.⁵ In choosing to use image capture to do face recognition, the Kinect engineers built a system that is technically—and thus socially—biased in implementation. In other technologies, biases may emerge as a byproduct of the testing process. Apple's voice recognition software, Siri, has difficulty with some accents, including Scottish, Southern US, and Indian.⁶ Siri was designed to recognize language iteratively. Because the creators tested the system primarily in-house, the system was better at recognizing those American English accents most commonly represented at Apple.

The internet was supposed to be different from previous technologies. Technology pundits and early adopters believed that the internet would be a great equalizer—where race and class wouldn't matter—because of the lack of visual cues available.⁷ But it turns out that the techno-utopians were wrong. The same biases that configure unmediated aspects of everyday life also shape the mediated experiences people have on the internet. Introducing their book *Race in Cyberspace*, scholars Beth Kolko, Lisa Nakamura, and Gilbert Rodman explain that “race matters in cyberspace precisely because all of us who spend time online are already shaped by the ways in which race matters offline and we can't help but bring our own knowledge, experiences, and values with us when we log on.”⁸

Cultural prejudice permeates social media. Explicit prejudice bubbles up through the digital inscription of hateful epithets in comments sections and hatermongering websites, while the social networks people form online replicate existing social divisions. Some youth recognize the ways their experiences are constructed by and organized around cultural differences; many more unwittingly calcify existing structural categories.

How American teens use social media reflects existing problems in society and reinforces deep-seated beliefs. This may seem like a let-down to those who hoped that technology could serve as a cultural panacea. But the implications of this unfulfilled potential extend beyond disappointment. Because prominent figures in society—including journalists, educators, and politicians—consider social media to be a source of information and opportunity, our cultural naïveté regarding the ways social and cultural divisions are sewn into our mediated social fabric may have more damaging costs in the future. In order to address emerging inequities, we must consider the uneven aspects of the social platforms upon which we are building.

Social media—and the possibility of connecting people across the globe through communication and information platforms—may seem like a tool for tolerance because technology enables people to see and participate in worlds beyond their own. We often identify teens, in particular, as the great beneficiaries of this new cosmopolitanism.⁹ However, when we look at how social media is adopted by teens, it becomes clear that the internet doesn't level inequality in any practical or widespread way. The patterns are all too familiar: prejudice, racism, and intolerance are pervasive. Many of the social divisions that exist in the offline world have been replicated, and in some cases amplified, online. Those old divisions shape how teens experience social media and the information that they encounter. This is because while technology does allow people to connect in new ways, it also reinforces existing connections. It does enable new types of access to information, but people's experiences of that access are uneven at best.

Optimists often point out that all who get online benefit by increased access to information and expanded connections, while pessimists often point to the potential for increased levels of inequality.¹⁰ Both arguments have merit, but it's also important to understand how inequalities and prejudices shape youth's networked lives. Existing social divisions—including racial divisions in the United States—are not disappearing simply because people have access to technology. Tools that enable communication do not sweep away

distrust, hatred, and prejudice. Racism, in particular, takes on new forms in a networked setting. Far from being a panacea, the internet simply sheds new light on the divisive social dynamics that plague contemporary society.

The internet may not have the power to reverse long-standing societal ills, but it does have the potential to make them visible in new and perhaps productive ways. When teens are online, they bring their experiences with them. They make visible their values and attitudes, hopes and prejudices. Through their experiences living in a mediated world in which social divisions remain salient, we can see and deal realistically with their more harmful assumptions and prejudices.

Racism in a Networked Age

In 1993, the *New Yorker* published a now infamous cartoon showing a big dog talking to a smaller dog in front of a computer monitor.¹¹ The caption reads, “On the Internet, no one knows you’re a dog.” Over the years, countless writers commenting on social issues have used this cartoon to illustrate how privacy and identity operate positively and negatively online. One interpretation of this cartoon is that embodied and experienced social factors—race, gender, class, ethnicity—do not necessarily transfer into the mediated world. As discussed earlier in the chapter on identity, many people hoped that, by going online, they could free themselves of the cultural shackles of their embodied reality.

When teens go online, they bring their friends, identities, and network with them. They also bring their attitudes toward others, their values, and their desire to position themselves in relation to others. It is rare for anyone to be truly anonymous, let alone as disconnected from embodied reality as the *New Yorker* cartoon suggests.¹² Not only do other people know who you are online; increasingly, software engineers are designing and building algorithms to observe people’s practices and interests in order to model who they are within a broader system. Programmers implement systems that reveal similarity or difference, common practices or esoteric ones. What becomes

visible—either through people or through algorithms—can affect how people understand social media and the world around them. How people respond to that information varies.

During the 2009 Black Entertainment Television (BET) Awards, thousands of those watching from home turned to Twitter to discuss the various celebrities at the ceremony. The volume of their commentary caused icons of the black community to appear in Twitter's "Trending Topics," a list of popular terms representing topics users are discussing on the service at any given moment. Beyoncé, Ne-Yo, Jamie Foxx, and other black celebrities all trended, along with the BET Awards themselves. The visibility of these names on the Trending Topics prompted a response from people who were not watching the award ceremony. In seeing the black names, one white teenage girl posted, "So many black people!" while a tweet from a young-looking white woman stated: "Why are all these black people on trending topics? Neyo? Beyonce? Tyra? Jamie Foxx? Is it black history month again? LOL." A white boy posted, "Wow!! too many negros in the trending topics for me. I may be done with this whole twitter thing." Teens were not the only ones making prejudicial remarks. A white woman tweeted, "Did anyone see the new trending topics? I dont think this is a very good neighborhood. Lock the car doors kids." These comments—and many more—provoked outrage, prompting the creation of a blog called "omgblackpeople" and a series of articles on race in Twitter.¹³

Unfortunately, what happened on the night of the BET Awards is not an isolated incident. In 2012, two athletes were expelled from the London Olympics after making racist comments on Twitter.¹⁴ Racism is also not just an issue only on Twitter, where black internet users are overrepresented compared with their online participation on other sites.¹⁵ The now defunct site *notaracistbut.com* collected hundreds of comments from Facebook that began with "I'm not a racist, but . . ." and ended with a racist comment. For example, one Facebook status update from a teen girl that was posted to the site said, "Not to be a racist, but I'm starting to see that niggers don't possess a single ounce

of intellect.” While creators of sites like notaracistbut.com intend to publicly shame racists, racism remains pervasive online.

In countless online communities, from YouTube to Twitter to World of Warcraft, racism and hate speech run rampant.¹⁶ Messages of hate get spread both by those who agree with the sentiment and also by those who critique it. After the critically acclaimed movie *The Hunger Games* came out, countless fans turned to Twitter to comment on the casting of Rue, a small girl described in the book as having “dark brown skin and eyes.” Tweets like “Call me a racist but when I found out rue was black her death wasn’t as sad” and “Why does rue have to be black not gonna lie kinda ruined the movie” sparked outrage among antiracists who forwarded the messages to call attention to them, thereby increasing the visibility of this hostility.¹⁷ On one hand, calling attention to these messages shames those who contributed them. On the other, it incites a new type of hate, which continues to reinforce structural divides.

Annoyed with what she perceived to be a lack of manners among Asian and Asian American students at her school, Alexandra Wallace posted a racist tirade on YouTube mocking students of Asian descent at UCLA in March 2011. The video depicts Wallace, a white blond-haired girl, criticizing Asian students for not being considerate of others. The central message of the video focuses on her complaint that Asian students are rude because they talk on their cell phones in the library. To emphasize her point, she pretends to speak in a speech pattern that she believes sounds Asian, saying, “Ching chong ling long ting tong,” in a mocking tone.

The video—“Asians in the Library”—quickly attracted attention and spread widely, prompting an outpouring of angry comments, reaction videos, and parodies. For example, comedic singer-songwriter Jimmy Wong produced a video in which he sang a mock love song called “Ching Chong!” in response to Wallace’s video. Hundreds of videos—with millions of views—were designed to publicly shame her and others with similar racist attitudes. A college lifestyle blog dug up bikini pictures of Wallace and posted them under the title “Alexandra

Wallace: Racist UCLA Student's Bikini Photos Revealed.”¹⁸ Meanwhile, Wallace—and her family—began receiving death threats, prompting her to drop out of UCLA and seek police protection. As one of her professors explained to the UCLA newspaper, “What Wallace did was hurtful and inexcusable, but the response has been far more egregious. She made a big mistake and she knows it, but they responded with greater levels of intolerance.”¹⁹

Social media magnifies many aspects of daily life, including racism and bigotry. Some people use social media to express insensitive and hateful views, but others use the same technologies to publicly shame, and in some cases threaten, people who they feel are violating social decorum.²⁰ By increasing the visibility of individuals and their actions, social media doesn't simply shine a spotlight on the problematic action; it enables people to identify and harass others in a very public way. This, in turn, reinforces social divisions that plague American society.

Segregation in Everyday Life

In the United States, racism is pervasive, if not always visible. Class politics intertwine with race, adding another dimension to existing social divisions. Teens are acutely aware of the power of race and class in shaping their lives, even if they don't always have nuanced language to talk about it; furthermore, just because teens live in a culture in which racism is ever present doesn't mean that they understand how to deal with its complexities or recognize its more subtle effects. Some don't realize how a history of racism shapes what they observe. Heather, a white sixteen-year-old from Iowa, told me,

I don't want to sound racist, but it is the black kids a lot of times that have the attitudes and are always talking back to the teachers, getting in fights around the school, starting fights around the school. I mean yeah, white kids of course get into their fights, but the black kids make theirs more public and so it's seen more often that oh, the black kids are such troublemakers.

In examining high school dynamics in the 1980s, linguist Penelope Eckert argued that schools are organized by social categories that appear on the surface to be about activities but in practice are actually about race and class.²¹ I noticed this as I went through the rosters of various sports teams at a school in North Carolina. At first, when I asked students about why different sports seemed to attract students of one race exclusively, they told me that it was just what people were into. Later, one white boy sheepishly explained that he liked basketball but that, at his school, basketball was a black sport and thus not an activity that he felt comfortable doing. As a result of norms and existing networks, the sports teams in many schools I visited had become implicitly coded and culturally divided by race. Many teens are reticent to challenge the status quo.

Even in schools at which teens prided themselves on being open-minded, I found that they often ignorantly reproduced racial divisions. For example, in stereotypical fashion, teens from more privileged backgrounds would point to having friends of different races as “proof” of their openness.²² When I asked about racial divisions in more privileged schools or in schools situated in progressive communities, I regularly heard the postracial society mantra, with teens initially telling me that race did not matter in friend groups at their school. And then we’d log in to their Facebook or MySpace page and I would find clues that their schools were quite segregated. For example, I’d find that friend networks within diverse schools would be divided by race. When I’d ask teens to explain this, they’d tell me that the divisions I was seeing were because of who was in what classes or who played what sport, not realizing that racial segregation played a role in those aspects of school life, too.

While on a work trip in Colorado, I met a group of privileged teens who were in town because their parents were at the meeting I was attending. Bored with the adult conversations, I turned to the teens in a casual manner. I started talking with Kath, a white seventeen-year-old who attended an east coast private school renowned for its elite student body and its phenomenal diversity program. Our casual

conversation turned to race dynamics in schools; she was a passionate, progressive teen who took the issue of race seriously. Curious to see how this played out in her community, I asked her if we could visit her Facebook page together. I offered her my computer, and she gleefully logged into her account. Given the small size of her school, I wasn't surprised that she was friends with nearly everyone from her grade and many students from other grades. I asked her to show me her photos so that we could look at the comments on them. Although her school had recruited students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, most of those who had left comments on her profile were white. I pointed this out to her and asked her to bring up profiles of other students in her grade from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. In each case, the commenters were predominantly of the same broad racial or ethnic background as the profile owner. Kath was stunned and a bit embarrassed. In her head, race didn't matter at her school. But on Facebook people were spending their time interacting with people from similar racial backgrounds.

When I analyzed friending patterns on social network sites with youth, I consistently found that race mattered. In large and diverse high schools where teens didn't befriend everyone in their school, their connections alone revealed racial preference. In smaller diverse schools, the racial dynamics were more visible by seeing who commented on each other's posts or who appeared tagged together in photographs. Only when I visited schools with low levels of diversity did race not seem to matter in terms of online connections. For example, in Nebraska, I met a young Muslim woman of Middle Eastern descent in a mostly white school. She had plenty of friends online and off, and not surprisingly, all were white. Of course, this did not mean that she was living in a world where ethnic differences didn't matter. Her classmates posted many comments about Middle Eastern Muslim terrorists on Facebook with caveats about how she was different.

Birds of a feather flock together, and personal social networks tend to be homogeneous, as people are more likely to befriend others like

them.²³ Sociologists refer to the practice of connecting with like-minded individuals as *homophily*. Studies have accounted for homophily in sex and gender, age, religion, education level, occupation, and social class. But nowhere is homophily more strongly visible in the United States than in the divides along racial and ethnic lines. The reasons behind the practice of homophily and the resultant social divisions are complex, rooted in a history of inequality, bigotry, oppression, and structural constraints in American life.²⁴

It's easy to lament self-segregation in contemporary youth culture, but teens' choice to connect to people like them isn't necessarily born out of their personal racist beliefs. In many cases, teens reinforce homophily in order to cope with the racist society in which they live. In *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* psychologist Beverly Tatum argues that self-segregation is a logical response to the systematized costs of racism. For teens who are facing cultural oppression and inequality, connecting along lines of race and ethnicity can help teens feel a sense of belonging, enhance identity development, and help them navigate systematic racism. Homophily isn't simply the product of hatred or prejudice. It is also a mechanism of safety. Seong, a seventeen-year-old from Los Angeles, echoed this sentiment when she told me, "In a way we connect more 'cause we see each other and we're like, oh." Familiarity mattered to Seong because, as a Korean immigrant, she feels isolated and confused by American norms that seem very foreign to her. She doesn't want to reject her non-Korean peers, but at times, she just wants to be surrounded by people who understand where she comes from. Still, teens' willingness to accept—and thus *expect*—self-segregation has problematic roots and likely contributes to ongoing racial inequality.²⁵

Race-based dynamics are a fundamental part of many teens' lives—urban and suburban, rich and poor. When they go online, these fraught dynamics do not disappear. Instead, teens reproduce them. Although the technology makes it possible *in principle* to socialize with anyone online, in practice, teens connect to the people that they know and with whom they have the most in common.

MySpace vs. Facebook

In a historic small town outside Boston, I was sitting in the library of a newly formed charter school in the spring of 2007. One of the school's administrators had arranged for me to meet different students to get a sense of the school dynamics. Given what I knew about the school, I expected to meet with a diverse group of teens, but I found myself in a series of conversations with predominantly white, highly poised, academically motivated teens who were reluctant to talk about the dynamics of inequality and race at their school.

After I met a few of her peers, Kat, a white fourteen-year-old from a comfortable background, came into the library, and we started talking about the social media practices of her classmates. She made a passing remark about her friends moving from MySpace to Facebook, and I asked to discuss the reasons. Kat grew noticeably uncomfortable. She began simply, noting that "MySpace is just old now and it's boring." But then she paused, looked down at the table, and continued. "It's not really racist, but I guess you could say that. I'm not really into racism, but I think that MySpace now is more like ghetto or whatever." Her honesty startled me so I pressed to learn more. I asked her if people at her school were still using MySpace and she hesitantly said yes before stumbling over her next sentence. "The people who use MySpace—again, not in a racist way—but are usually more like ghetto and hip-hop rap lovers group." Probing a little deeper, Kat continued to stare at and fiddle with her hands as she told me that everyone who was still using MySpace was black, whereas all of her white peers had switched to Facebook.²⁶

During the 2006–2007 school year, when MySpace was at its peak in popularity with American high school students, Facebook started to gain traction. Some teens who had never joined MySpace created accounts on Facebook. Others switched from MySpace to Facebook. Still others eschewed Facebook and adamantly stated that they preferred MySpace. The presence of two competing services would not be particularly interesting if it weren't for the makeup of the participants on each site. During that school year, as teens chose

between MySpace and Facebook, race and class were salient factors in describing which teens used which service. The driving force was obvious: teens focused their attention on the site where their friends were socializing.²⁷ In doing so, their choices reified the race and class divisions that existed within their schools. As Anastasia, a white seventeen-year-old from New York, explained in a comment she left on my blog:

My school is divided into the “honors kids,” (I think that is self-explanatory), the “good not-so-honors kids,” “wangstas,” (they pretend to be tough and black but when you live in a suburb in Westchester you can’t claim much hood), the “latinos/hispanics,” (they tend to band together even though they could fit into any other groups) and the “emo kids” (whose lives are alllllways filled with woe). We were all in MySpace with our own little social networks but when Facebook opened its doors to high schoolers, guess who moved and guess who stayed behind. . . . The first two groups were the first to go and then the “wangstas” split with half of them on Facebook and the rest on MySpace. . . . I shifted with the rest of my school to Facebook and it became the place where the “honors kids” got together and discussed how they were procrastinating over their next AP English essay.

When I followed up with Anastasia, I learned that she felt as though it was taboo to talk about these dynamics. She stood by her comment but also told me that her sister said that she sounded racist. Although the underlying segregation of friendship networks defined who chose what site, most teens didn’t use the language of race and class to describe their social network site preference. Some may have recognized that this was what was happening, but most described the division to me in terms of personal preference.

My interviews with teens included numerous descriptive taste-based judgments about each site and those who preferred them. Those who relished MySpace gushed about their ability to “pimp out” their profiles with “glitter,” whereas Facebook users viewed the resultant profiles

as “gaudy,” “tacky,” and “cluttered.” Facebook fans relished the site’s aesthetic minimalism, while MySpace devotees described Facebook profiles as “boring,” “lame,” “sterile,” and “elitist.” Catalina, a white fifteen-year-old from Austin, told me that Facebook is better because “Facebook just seems more clean to me.” What Catalina saw as cleanliness, Indian-Pakistani seventeen-year-old Anindita from Los Angeles labeled “simple.” She recognized the value of simplicity, but she preferred the “bling” of MySpace because it allowed her to express herself.

In differentiating Facebook and MySpace through taste, teens inadvertently embraced and reinforced a host of cultural factors that are rooted in the history of race and class. Taste is not simply a matter of personal preference; it is the product of cultural dynamics and social structure. In *Distinction*, philosopher Pierre Bourdieu describes how one’s education and class position shape perceptions of taste and how distinctions around aesthetics and tastes are used to reinforce class in everyday life. The linguistic markers that teens use to describe Facebook and MySpace—and the values embedded in those markers—implicitly mark class and race whether teens realize it or not.

Just as most teens believe themselves to be friends with diverse groups of people, most teens give little thought to the ways in which race and class connect to taste. They judge others’ tastes with little regard to how these tastes are socially constructed. Consider how Craig, a white seventeen-year-old from California, differentiated MySpace and Facebook users through a combination of social and cultural distinctions:

The higher castes of high school moved to Facebook. It was more cultured, and less cheesy. The lower class usually were content to stick to MySpace. Any high school student who has a Facebook will tell you that MySpace users are more likely to be barely educated and obnoxious. Like Peet’s is more cultured than Starbucks, and Jazz is more cultured than bubblegum pop, and like Macs are more cultured than PC’s, Facebook is of a cooler caliber than MySpace.

In this 2008 blog post entitled “Myface; Spacebook,” Craig distinguished between what he saw as highbrow and lowbrow cultural tastes, using consumption patterns to differentiate classes of people and describe them in terms of a hierarchy. By employing the term “caste,” Craig used a multicultural metaphor with ethnic and racial connotations that runs counter to the American ideal of social mobility. In doing so, he located his peers in immutable categories defined by taste.

Not all teens are as articulate as Craig with regard to the issue of taste and class, but most recognized the cultural distinction between MySpace and Facebook and marked users according to stereotypes that they had about these sites. When Facebook became more broadly popular, teens who were early adopters of Facebook started lamenting the presence of “the MySpace people.” Again, Craig described this dynamic:

Facebook has become the exact thing it tried to destroy. Like Anikin Skywalker, who loved justice so much, and he decided to play God as Darth Vader, Facebook has lost its identity and mission. It once was the cool, cultured thing to do, to have a Facebook, but now its the same. Girls have quizzes on their Facebooks: “Would you like to hook up with me? Yes, No” without a shred of dignity or subtlety. Again, I must scroll for 5 minutes to find the comment box on one’s Facebook. The vexation of bulletins of MySpace are now replaced by those of applications. It alienated its “cultured” crowd by the addition of these trinkets.

From Craig’s perspective, as Facebook became popular and mainstream, it, too, became lowbrow. The cultural distinction that existed during the 2006–2007 school year had faded, and now both sites felt “uncivilized” to Craig. He ended his post with a “desperate” plea to Google to build something “cultured.”

In differentiating MySpace and Facebook as distinct cultural spaces and associating different types of people with each site, teens used technology to reinforce cultural distinctions during the time in

which both sites were extraordinarily popular. These distinctions, far from being neutral, are wedded to everyday cultural markers. In constituting an “us” in opposition to “them,” teens reinforce social divisions through their use of and attitudes toward social media. Even as teens espouse their tolerance toward others with respect to embodied characteristics, they judge their peers’ values, choices, and tastes along axes that are rooted in those very characteristics.

The racial divide that these teens experienced as they watched their classmates choose between MySpace and Facebook during the 2006–2007 school year is one that happens time and again in technology adoption. In some cases, white teens use different technologies than teens of color. For example, Black and Latino urban youth embraced early smartphones like the Sidekick, but the device had limited traction among Asian, white, and suburban youth. In other cases, diverse populations adopt a particular tool, but practices within the service are divided along race and class lines. Such was the case in 2013 on both Facebook and Twitter, where teens’ linguistic and visual conventions—as well as their choice of apps—were correlated with their race.²⁸

People influence the technology practices of those around them. Because of this, the diffusion of technology often has structural features that reflect existing social networks. As teens turn to social media to connect with their friends, they consistently reproduce networks that reflect both the segregated realities of everyday life and the social and economic inequalities that exist within their broader peer networks. Teens go online to hang out with their friends, and given the segregation of American society, their friends are quite likely to be of the same race, class, and cultural background.

Networks Matter

The fact that social media reproduces—and makes visible—existing social divisions within American society should not be surprising, but it does challenge a persistent fantasy that the internet will dissolve and dismantle inequalities and create new opportunities to bring people