it’s complicated

the social lives of networked teens

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The year was 2006, and I was in northern California chatting with teenagers about their use of social media. There, I met Mike, a white fifteen-year-old who loved YouTube. He was passionately describing the “Extreme Diet Coke and Mentos Experiments” video that had recently gained widespread attention, as viewers went to YouTube in droves to witness the geysers that could be produced when the diet soda and mint candy were combined. Various teens had taken to mixing Mentos and Diet Coke just to see what would happen, and Mike was among them. He was ecstatic to show me the homemade video he and his friends had made while experimenting with common food items. As he walked me through his many other YouTube videos, Mike explained that his school allowed him to borrow a video camera for school assignments. Students were actively encouraged to make videos or other media as part of group projects to display their classroom knowledge. He and his friends had taken to borrowing the camera on Fridays, making sure to tape their homework assignment before spending the rest of the weekend making more entertaining videos. None of the videos they made were of especially high quality, and while they shared them publicly on YouTube, only their friends watched them. Still, whenever they got an additional view—even if only because they forced a friend to watch the video—they got excited.

As we were talking and laughing and exploring Mike’s online videos, Mike paused and turned to me with a serious look on his face. “Can you do me a favor?” he asked, “Can you talk to my mom? Can you tell her that I’m not doing anything wrong on the internet?” I didn’t immediately respond, and so he jumped in to clarify. “I
mean, she thinks that everything online is bad, and you seem to get it, and you’re an adult. Will you talk to her?” I smiled and promised him that I would.

This book is just that: my attempt to describe and explain the networked lives of teens to the people who worry about them—parents, teachers, policy makers, journalists, sometimes even other teens. It is the product of an eight-year effort to explore various aspects of teens’ engagement with social media and other networked technologies.

To get at teens’ practices, I crisscrossed the United States from 2005 to 2012, talking with and observing teens from eighteen states and a wide array of socioeconomic and ethnic communities. I spent countless hours observing teens through the traces they left online via social network sites, blogs, and other genres of social media. I hung out with teens in physical spaces like schools, public parks, malls, churches, and fast food restaurants.

To dive deeper into particular issues, I conducted 166 formal, semi-structured interviews with teens during the period 2007–2010. I interviewed teens in their homes, at school, and in various public settings. In addition, I talked with parents, teachers, librarians, youth ministers, and others who worked directly with youth. I became an expert on youth culture. In addition, my technical background and experience working with and for technology companies building social media tools gave me firsthand knowledge about how social media was designed, implemented, and introduced to the public. Together, these two strains of expertise allowed me to enter into broader policy conversations, serve on commissions focused on youth practices, and help influence public conversations about networked sociality.

As I began to get a feel for the passions and frustrations of teens and to speak to broader audiences, I recognized that teens’ voices rarely shaped the public discourse surrounding their networked lives. So many people talk about youth engagement with social media, but very few of them are willing to take the time to listen to teens, to hear them, or to pay attention to what they have to say about their lives,
online and off. I wrote this book to address that gap. Throughout this book, I draw on the voices of teens I’ve interviewed as well as those I’ve observed or met more informally. At times, I also pull stories from the media or introduce adults’ perspectives to help provide context or offer additional examples.

I wrote this book to reflect the experiences and perspectives of the teens that I encountered. Their voices shape this book just as their stories shaped my understanding of the role of social media in their lives. My hope is that this book will shed light on the complex and fascinating practices of contemporary American youth as they try to find themselves in a networked world.

As you read this book, my hope is that you will suspend your assumptions about youth in an effort to understand the social lives of networked teens. By and large, the kids are all right. But they want to be understood. This book is my attempt to do precisely that.
introduction

One evening, in September 2010, I was in the stands at a high school football game in Nashville, Tennessee, experiencing a powerful sense of déjà vu. As a member of my high school’s marching band in the mid-1990s, I had spent countless Friday nights in stands across central Pennsylvania, pretending to cheer on my school’s football team so that I could hang out with my friends. The scene at the school in Nashville in 2010 could easily have taken place when I was in high school almost two decades earlier. It was an archetypal American night, and immediately legible to me. I couldn’t help but smile at the irony, given that I was in Nashville to talk with teens about how technology had changed their lives. As I sat in the stands, I thought: the more things had changed, the more they seemed the same.

I recalled speaking to a teen named Stan whom I’d met in Iowa three years earlier. He had told me to stop looking for differences. “You’d actually be surprised how little things change. I’m guessing a lot of the drama is still the same, it’s just the format is a little different. It’s just changing the font and changing the background color really.” He made references to technology to remind me that technology wasn’t changing anything important.

Back in Nashville, the cheerleaders screamed, “Defense!” and waved their colorful pom-poms, while boys in tuxes and girls in formal gowns lined up on the track that circled the football field, signaling that halftime was approaching. This was a Homecoming game, and at halftime the Homecoming Court paraded onto the field in formal attire to be introduced to the audience before the announcer declared the King and Queen. The Court was made up of eight girls.
and eight boys, half of whom were white and half of whom were black. I reflected on the lack of Asian or Hispanic representation in a town whose demographics were changing. The announcer introduced each member to the audience, focusing on their extracurricular activities, their participation in one of the local churches, and their dreams for the future.

Meanwhile, most of the student body was seated in the stands. They were decked out in the school colors, many even having painted their faces in support. But they were barely paying attention to what was happening on the field. Apart from a brief hush when the Homecoming Court was presented, they spent the bulk of the time facing one another, chatting, enjoying a rare chance to spend unstructured time together as friends and peers.

As in many schools I’ve visited over the years, friendships at this school in Nashville were largely defined by race, gender, sexuality, and grade level, and those networks were immediately visible based on whom students were talking to or sitting with. By and large, the students were cordoned off in their own section on the sides of the stands while parents and more “serious” fans occupied the seats in the center. Most of the students in the stands were white and divided by grade: the upperclassmen took the seats closest to the field, while the freshmen were pushed toward the back. Girls were rarely alone with boys, but when they were, they were holding hands. The teens who swarmed below and to the right of the stands represented a different part of the school. Unlike their peers in the stands, most of the students milling about below were black. Aside from the Homecoming Court, only one group was racially mixed, and they were recognizable mainly for their “artistic” attire—unnaturally colorful hair, piercings, and black clothing that I recognized from the racks of Hot Topic, a popular mall-based chain store that caters to goths, punks, and other subcultural groups.

Only two things confirmed that this was not 1994: the fashion and the cell phones. Gone were the 1980s-inspired bangs, perms, and excessive use of hair gel and hairspray that dominated my high school
well into the 1990s. And unlike 1994, cell phones were everywhere. As far as I could tell, every teen at the game that day in Nashville had one: iPhones, Blackberries, and other high-end smartphones seemed to be especially popular at this upper-middle-class school. Unsurprisingly, the phones in the hands of the white students were often more expensive or of more elite brands than those in the hands of the black students.

The pervasiveness of cell phones in the stands isn’t that startling; over 80 percent of high school students in the United States had a cell phone in 2010.1 What was surprising, at least to most adults, was how little the teens actually used them as phones. The teens I observed were not making calls. They whipped out their phones to take photos of the Homecoming Court, and many were texting frantically while trying to find one another in the crowd. Once they connected, the texting often stopped. On the few occasions when a phone did ring, the typical response was an exasperated “Mom!” or “Dad!” implying a parent calling to check in, which, given the teens’ response to such calls, was clearly an unwanted interruption. And even though many teens are frequent texters, the teens were not directing most of their attention to their devices. When they did look at their phones, they were often sharing the screen with the person sitting next to them, reading or viewing something together.

The parents in the stands were paying much more attention to their devices. They were even more universally equipped with smartphones than their children, and those devices dominated their focus. I couldn’t tell whether they were checking email or simply supplementing the football game with other content, being either bored or distracted. But many adults were staring into their devices intently, barely looking up when a touchdown was scored. And unlike the teens, they weren’t sharing their devices with others or taking photos of the event.

Although many parents I’ve met lament their children’s obsession with their phones, the teens in Nashville were treating their phones as no more than a glorified camera plus coordination device. The
reason was clear: their friends were right there with them. They didn’t need anything else.

I had come to Nashville to better understand how social media and other technologies had changed teens’ lives. I was fascinated with the new communication and information technologies that had emerged since I was in high school. I had spent my own teen years online, and I was among the first generation of teens who did so. But that was a different era; few of my friends in the early 1990s were interested in computers at all. And my own interest in the internet was related to my dissatisfaction with my local community. The internet presented me with a bigger world, a world populated by people who shared my idiosyncratic interests and were ready to discuss them at any time, day or night. I grew up in an era where going online—or “jacking in”—was an escape mechanism, and I desperately wanted to escape.

The teens I met are attracted to popular social media like Facebook and Twitter or mobile technologies like apps and text messaging for entirely different reasons. Unlike me and the other early adopters who avoided our local community by hanging out in chatrooms and bulletin boards, most teenagers now go online to connect to the people in their community. Their online participation is not eccentric; it is entirely normal, even expected.

The day after the football game in Nashville, I interviewed a girl who had attended the Homecoming game. We sat down and went through her Facebook page, where she showed me various photos from the night before. Facebook hadn’t been on her mind during the game, but as soon as she got home, she uploaded her photos, tagged her friends, and started commenting on others’ photos. The status updates I saw on her page were filled with references to conversations that took place at the game. She used Facebook to extend the pleasure she had in connecting with her classmates during the game. Although she couldn’t physically hang out with her friends after the game ended, she used Facebook to stay connected after the stands had cleared.
Social media plays a crucial role in the lives of networked teens. Although the specific technologies change, they collectively provide teens with a space to hang out and connect with friends. Teens’ mediated interactions sometimes complement or supplement their face-to-face encounters. In 2006, when MySpace was at the height of its popularity, eighteen-year-old Skyler told her mother that being on MySpace was utterly essential to her social life. She explained, “If you’re not on MySpace, you don’t exist.” What Skyler meant is simply that social acceptance depends on the ability to socialize with one’s peers at the “cool” place. Each cohort of teens has a different space that it decides is cool. It used to be the mall, but for the youth discussed in this book, social network sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are the cool places. Inevitably, by the time this book is published, the next generation of teens will have inhabited a new set of apps and tools, making social network sites feel passé. The spaces may change, but the organizing principles aren’t different.

Although some teens still congregate at malls and football games, the introduction of social media does alter the landscape. It enables youth to create a cool space without physically transporting themselves anywhere. And because of a variety of social and cultural factors, social media has become an important public space where teens can gather and socialize broadly with peers in an informal way. Teens are looking for a place of their own to make sense of the world beyond their bedrooms. Social media has enabled them to participate in and help create what I call networked publics.

In this book, I document how and why social media has become central to the lives of so many American teens and how they navigate the networked publics that are created through those technologies. I also describe—and challenge—the anxieties that many American adults have about teens’ engagement with social media. By illustrating teens’ practices, habits, and the tensions between teens and adults, I attempt to provide critical insight into the networked lives of contemporary youth.
What Is Social Media?

Over the past decade, social media has evolved from being an esoteric jumble of technologies to a set of sites and services that are at the heart of contemporary culture. Teens turn to a plethora of popular services to socialize, gossip, share information, and hang out. Although this book addresses a variety of networked technologies—including the internet broadly and mobile services like texting specifically—much of it focuses on a collection of services known as social media. I use the term social media to refer to the sites and services that emerged during the early 2000s, including social network sites, video sharing sites, blogging and microblogging platforms, and related tools that allow participants to create and share their own content. In addition to referring to various communication tools and platforms, social media also hints at a cultural mindset that emerged in the mid-2000s as part of the technical and business phenomenon referred to as “Web2.0.”

The services known as social media are neither the first—nor the only—tools to support significant social interaction or enable teenagers to communicate and engage in meaningful online communities. Though less popular than they once were, tools like email, instant messaging, and online forums are still used by teens. But as a cultural phenomenon, social media has reshaped the information and communication ecosystem.

In the 1980s and 1990s, early internet adopters used services like email and instant messaging to chat with people they knew; they turned to public-facing services like chatrooms and bulletin boards when they wanted to connect with strangers. Although many who participated in early online communities became friends with people they met online, most early adopters entered these spaces without knowing the other people in the space. Online communities were organized by topic, with separate spaces for those interested in discussing Middle East politics or getting health advice or finding out how various programming languages worked.

Beginning around 2003, the increased popularity of blogging and the rise of social network sites reconfigured this topically oriented land-
scape. Although the most visible blogging services helped people connect based on shared interests, the vast majority of bloggers were blogging for, and reading blogs of, people they knew. When early social network sites like Friendster and MySpace launched, they were designed to enable users to meet new people—and, notably, friends of friends—who might share their interests, tastes, or passions. Friendster, in particular, was designed as a matchmaking service. In other words, social network sites were designed for social networking. Yet what made these services so unexpectedly popular was that they also provided a platform for people to connect with their friends. Rather than focusing on the friends of friends who could be met through the service, many early adopters simply focused on socializing with their friends. At the height of its popularity, MySpace’s tagline was “A Place for Friends,” and that’s precisely what the service was for many of its users.

Social network sites changed the essence of online communities. Whereas early online community tools like Usenet and bulletin boards were organized around interests, even if people used them to engage with friends, blogs, like homepages, were organized around individuals. Links allowed people to highlight both their friends and those who shared their interests. Social network sites downplayed the importance of interests and made friendship the organizing tenant of the genre.

Early adopters had long embraced internet technologies to socialize with others, but in more mainstream culture, participating in online communities was often viewed as an esoteric practice for geeks and other social outcasts. By the mid-2000s, with the mainstreaming of internet access and the rise of social media—and especially MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter—sharing information and connecting to friends online became an integrated part of daily life for many people, and especially the teens who came of age during this period. Rather than being seen as a subcultural practice, participating in social media became normative.

Although teens have embraced countless tools for communicating with one another, their widespread engagement with social media
has been unprecedented. Teens who used Facebook or Instagram or Tumblr in 2013 weren’t seen as peculiar. Nor were those who used Xanga, LiveJournal, or MySpace in the early to mid-2000s. At the height of their popularity, the best-known social media tools aren’t viewed with disdain, nor is participation seen to be indicative of asocial tendencies. In fact, as I describe throughout this book, engagement with social media is simply an everyday part of life, akin to watching television and using the phone. This is a significant shift from my experiences growing up using early digital technologies.

Even though many of the tools and services that I reference throughout this book are now passé, the core activities I discuss—chatting and socializing, engaging in self-expression, grappling with privacy, and sharing media and information—are here to stay. Although the specific sites and apps may be constantly changing, the practices that teens engage in as they participate in networked publics remain the same. New technologies and mobile apps change the landscape, but teens’ interactions with social media through their phones extend similar practices and activities into geographically unbounded settings. The technical shifts that have taken place since I began this project—and in the time between me writing this book and you reading it—are important, but many of the arguments made in the following pages transcend particular technical moments, even if the specific examples used to illustrate those issues are locked in time.

**The Significance of Networked Publics**

Teens are passionate about finding their place in society. What is different as a result of social media is that teens’ perennial desire for social connection and autonomy is now being expressed in networked publics. Networked publics are publics that are restructured by networked technologies. As such, they are simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined community that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice.⁵
Although the term *public* has resonance in everyday language, the construct of a public—let alone publics—tends to be more academic in nature. What constitutes a public in this sense can vary. It can be an accessible space in which people can gather freely. Or, as political scientist Benedict Anderson describes, a public can be a collection of people who understand themselves to be part of an *imagined community*. People are a part of multiple publics—bounded as audiences or by geography—and yet, publics often intersect and intertwine. Publics get tangled up in one another, challenging any effort to understand the boundaries and shape of any particular public. When US presidents give their State of the Union speeches, they may have written them with the American public in mind, but their speeches are now accessible around the globe. As a result, it’s never quite clear who fits into the public imagined by a president.

Publics serve different purposes. They can be political in nature, or they can be constructed around shared identities and social practices. The concept of a public often invokes the notion of a state-controlled entity, but publics can also involve private actors, such as companies, or commercial spaces like malls. Because of the involvement of media in contemporary publics, publics are also interconnected to the notion of audience. All of these constructs blur and are contested by scholars. By invoking the term *publics*, I’m not trying to take a position within the debates so much as to make use of the wide array of different interwoven issues signaled by that term. Publics provide a space and a community for people to gather, connect, and help construct society as we understand it.

Networked publics are publics both in the spatial sense and in the sense of an imagined community. They are built on and through social media and other emergent technologies. As spaces, the networked publics that exist because of social media allow people to gather and connect, hang out, and joke around. Networked publics formed through technology serve much the same functions as publics like the mall or the park did for previous generations of teenagers. As social constructs, social media creates networked publics that allow people to see themselves as a
part of a broader community. Just as shared TV consumption once allowed teens to see themselves as connected through mass media, social media allows contemporary teens to envision themselves as part of a collectively imagined community.

Teens engage with networked publics for the same reasons they have always relished publics; they want to be a part of the broader world by connecting with other people and having the freedom of mobility. Likewise, many adults fear networked technologies for the same reasons that adults have long been wary of teen participation in public life and teen socialization in parks, malls, and other sites where youth congregate. If I have learned one thing from my research, it’s this: social media services like Facebook and Twitter are providing teens with new opportunities to participate in public life, and this, more than anything else, is what concerns many anxious adults.

Although the underlying structure of physical spaces and the relationships that are enabled by them are broadly understood, both the architecture of networked spaces and the ways they allow people to connect are different. Even if teens are motivated to engage with networked publics to fulfill desires to socialize that predate the internet, networked technologies alter the social ecosystem and thus affect the social dynamics that unfold.

To understand what is new and what is not, it’s important to understand how technology introduces new social possibilities and how these challenge assumptions people have about everyday interactions. The design and architecture of environments enable certain types of interaction to occur. Round tables with chairs make chatting with someone easier than classroom-style seating. Even though students can twist around and talk to the person behind them, a typical classroom is designed to encourage everyone to face the teacher. The particular properties or characteristics of an environment can be understood as affordances because they make possible—and, in some cases, are used to encourage—certain types of practices, even if they do not determine what practices will unfold. Understanding the affordances of a particular technology or space is important because it sheds light on
what people can leverage or resist in achieving their goals. For example, the affordances of a thick window allow people to see each other without being able to hear each other. To communicate in spite of the window, they may pantomime, hold up signs with written messages, or break the glass. The window’s affordances don’t predict how people will communicate, but they do shape the situation nonetheless.

Because technology is involved, networked publics have different characteristics than traditional physical public spaces. Four affordances, in particular, shape many of the mediated environments that are created by social media. Although these affordances are not in and of themselves new, their relation to one another because of networked publics creates new opportunities and challenges. They are:

- persistence: the durability of online expressions and content;
- visibility: the potential audience who can bear witness;
- spreadability: the ease with which content can be shared; and
- searchability: the ability to find content.

Content shared through social media often sticks around because technologies are designed to enable persistence. The fact that content often persists has significant implications. Such content enables interactions to take place over time in an asynchronous fashion. Alice may write to Bob at midnight while Bob is sound asleep; but when Bob wakes up in the morning or comes back from summer camp three weeks later, that message will still be there waiting for him, even if Alice had forgotten about it. Persistence means that conversations conducted through social media are far from ephemeral; they endure. Persistence enables different kinds of interactions than the ephemerality of a park. Alice’s message doesn’t expire when Bob reads it, and Bob can keep that message for decades. What persistence also means, then, is that those using social media are often “on the record” to an unprecedented degree.

Through social media, people can easily share with broad audiences and access content from greater distances, which increases the
potential *visibility* of any particular message. More often than not, what people put up online using social media is widely accessible because most systems are designed such that sharing with broader or more public audiences is the default. Many popular systems require users to take active steps to limit the visibility of any particular piece of shared content. This is quite different from physical spaces, where people must make a concerted effort to make content visible to sizable audiences.8 In networked publics, interactions are often public by default, private through effort.

Social media is often designed to help people spread information, whether by explicitly or implicitly encouraging the sharing of links, providing reblogging or favoriting tools that repost images or texts, or by making it easy to copy and paste content from one place to another. Thus, much of what people post online is easily *spreadable* with the click of a few keystrokes.9 Some systems provide simple buttons to “forward,” “repost,” or “share” content to articulated or curated lists. Even when these tools aren’t built into the system, content can often be easily downloaded or duplicated and then forwarded along. The ease with which everyday people can share media online is unrivaled, which can be both powerful and problematic. Spreadability can be leveraged to rally people for a political cause or to spread rumors.

Last, since the rise of search engines, people’s communications are also often *searchable*. My mother would have loved to scream, “Find!” and see where my friends and I were hanging out and what we were talking about. Now, any inquisitive onlooker can query databases and uncover countless messages written by and about others. Even messages that were crafted to be publicly accessible were not necessarily posted with the thought that they would reappear through a search engine. Search engines make it easy to surface esoteric interactions. These tools are often designed to eliminate contextual cues, increasing the likelihood that searchers will take what they find out of context.

None of the capabilities enabled by social media are new. The letters my grandparents wrote during their courtship were persistent.
Messages printed in the school newspaper or written on bathroom walls have long been visible. Gossip and rumors have historically spread like wildfire through word of mouth. And although search engines certainly make inquiries more efficient, the practice of asking after others is not new, even if search engines mean that no one else knows. What is new is the way in which social media alters and amplifies social situations by offering technical features that people can use to engage in these well-established practices.

As people use these different tools, they help create new social dynamics. For example, teens “stalk” one another by searching for highly visible, persistent data about people they find interesting. “Drama” starts when teens increase the visibility of gossip by spreading it as fast as possible through networked publics. And teens seek attention by exploiting searchability, spreadability, and persistence to maximize the visibility of their garage band’s YouTube video. The particular practices that emerge as teens use the tools around them create the impression that teen sociability is radically different even though the underlying motivations and social processes have not changed that much.

Just because teens can and do manipulate social media to attract attention and increase visibility does not mean that they are equally experienced at doing so or that they automatically have the skills to navigate what unfolds. It simply means that teens are generally more comfortable with—and tend to be less skeptical of—social media than adults. They don’t try to analyze how things are different because of technology; they simply try to relate to a public world in which technology is a given. Because of their social position, what’s novel for teens is not the technology but the public life that it enables. Teens are desperate to have access to and make sense of public life; understanding the technologies that enable publics is just par for the course. Adults, in contrast, have more freedom to explore various public environments. They are more likely—and more equipped—to compare networked publics to other publics. As a result, they focus more on how networked publics seem radically different from other publics, such as those that unfold at the local bar or through church.
Because of their experience and stage in life, teens and adults are typically focused on different issues. Whereas teens are focused on what it means to be in public, adults are more focused on what it means to be networked.

Throughout this book, I return to these four affordances to discuss how engagement with networked publics affects everyday social practices. It’s important to note, however, this is not how teenagers themselves would describe the shifts that are under way. More often than not, they are unaware of why the networked publics they inhabit are different than other publics or why adults find networked publics so peculiar. To teens, these technologies—and the properties that go with them—are just an obvious part of life in a networked era, whereas for many adults these affordances reveal changes that are deeply disconcerting. As I return to these issues throughout the book, I will juxtapose teens’ perspectives alongside adults’ anxieties to highlight what has changed and what has stayed the same.

**New Technologies, Old Hopes and Fears**

Any new technology that captures widespread attention is likely to provoke serious hand wringing, if not full-blown panic. When the sewing machine was introduced, there were people who feared the implications that women moving their legs up and down would affect female sexuality.¹⁰ The Walkman music player was viewed as an evil device that would encourage people to disappear into separate worlds, unable to communicate with one another.¹¹ Technologies are not the only cultural artifacts to prompt these so-called moral panics; new genres of media also cause fearful commentary. Those who created comic books, penny arcades, and rock-and-roll music have been seen as sinister figures bent on seducing children into becoming juvenile delinquents.¹² Novels were believed to threaten women’s morals, a worry that Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* dramatizes brilliantly. Even Socrates is purported to have warned of the dangers of the alphabet and writing, citing implications for memory and the ability to convey truth.¹³ These fears are now laughable, but when
these technologies or media genres first appeared, they were taken very seriously.

Even the most fleeting acquaintance with the history of information and communication technologies indicates that moral panics are episodic and should be taken with a grain of salt. So too with utopian visions, which prove just as unrealistic. A popular T-shirt designed by John Slabyk and sold on the website Threadless sums up the disillusionment with failed technological utopias:

- they lied to us
- this was supposed to be the future
- where is my jetpack,
- where is my robotic companion,
- where is my dinner in pill form,
- where is my hydrogen fueled automobile,
- where is my nuclear-powered levitating house,
- where is my cure for this disease

Technologies are often heralded as the solution to major world problems. When those solutions fail to transpire, people are disillusioned. This can prompt a backlash, as people focus on the terrible things that may occur because of those same technologies.

A great deal of the fear and anxiety that surrounds young people’s use of social media stems from misunderstanding or dashed hopes. More often than not, what emerges out of people’s confusion takes the form of utopian and dystopian rhetoric. This issue will reappear throughout the book. Sometimes, as in the case of sexual predators and other online safety issues, misunderstanding results in a moral panic. In other cases, such as the dystopian notion that teens are addicted to social media or the utopian idea that technology will solve inequality, the focus on technology simply obscures other dynamics at play.

Both extremes depend on a form of magical thinking scholars call technological determinism. Utopian and dystopian views assume that technologies possess intrinsic powers that affect all people in all situations the same way. Utopian rhetoric assumes that when a particular
technology is broadly adopted it will transform society in magnificent ways, while dystopian visions focus on all of the terrible things that will happen because of the widespread adoption of a particular technology that ruins everything. These extreme rhetorics are equally unhelpful in understanding what actually happens when new technologies are broadly adopted. Reality is nuanced and messy, full of pros and cons. Living in a networked world is complicated.

**Kids Will Be Kids**

If you listen to the voices of youth, the story you’ll piece together reveals a hodgepodge of opportunities and challenges, changes and continuity. As with the football game in Nashville, many elements of American teen culture remain unchanged in the digital age. School looks remarkably familiar, and many of the same anxieties and hopes that shaped my experience are still recognizable today. Others are strikingly different, but what differs often has less to do with technology and more to do with increased consumerism, heightened competition for access to limited opportunities, and an intense amount of parental pressure, especially in wealthier communities. All too often, it is easier to focus on the technology than on the broader systemic issues that are at play because technical changes are easier to see.

Nostalgia gets in the way of understanding the relation between teens and technology. Adults may idealize their childhoods and forget the trials and tribulations they faced. Many adults I meet assume that their own childhoods were better and richer, simpler and safer, than the digitally mediated ones contemporary youth experience. They associate the rise of digital technology with decline—social, intellectual, and moral. The research I present here suggests that the opposite is often true.

Many of the much-hyped concerns discussed because of technology are not new (for example, bullying) but rather may be misleading (for example, a decline in attention) or serve as distractions for real risks (for example, predators). Most myths are connected to real incidents or rooted in data that are blown out of proportion or are deliberately
exaggerated to spark fear. Media culture exaggerates this dynamic, magnifying anxieties and reinforcing fears. For adults to hear the voices of youth, they must let go of their nostalgia and suspend their fears. This is not easy.

Teens continue to occupy an awkward position between childhood and adulthood, dependence and independence. They are struggling to carve out an identity that is not defined solely by family ties. They want to be recognized as someone other than son, daughter, sister, or brother. These struggles play themselves out in familiar ways, as teens fight for freedoms while not always being willing or able to accept responsibilities. Teens simultaneously love and despise, need and reject their parents and other adults in their lives. Meanwhile, many adults are simultaneously afraid of teens and afraid for them.

Teens’ efforts to control their self-presentation—often by donning clothing or hairstyles their parents deem socially unacceptable or engaging in practices that their parents deem risky—are clearly related to their larger effort at self-fashioning and personal autonomy. By dressing like the twenty-somethings they see celebrated in popular culture, they signal their desire to be seen as independent young adults. Fashion choices are one of many ways of forging an identity that is cued less to family and more to friends.

Developing meaningful friendships is a key component of the coming of age process. Friends offer many things—advice, support, entertainment, and a connection that combats loneliness. And in doing so, they enable the transition to adulthood by providing a context beyond that of family and home. Though family is still important, many teens relish the opportunity to create relationships that are not simply given but chosen.

The importance of friends in social and moral development is well documented. But the fears that surround teens’ use of social media overlook this fundamental desire for social connection. All too often, parents project their values onto their children, failing to recognize that school is often not the most pressing concern for most teens. Many parents wonder: Why are my kids tethered to their cell phones
or perpetually texting with friends even when they are in the same room? Why do they seem compelled to check Facebook hundreds of times a day? Are they addicted to technology or simply wasting time? How will they get into college if they are constantly distracted? I encounter these questions from concerned adults whenever I give public lectures, and these attitudes figure prominently in parenting guides and in journalistic accounts of teens’ engagement with social media.

Yet these questions seem far less urgent and difficult when we acknowledge teens’ underlying social motivations. Most teens are not compelled by gadgery as such—they are compelled by friendship. The gadgets are interesting to them primarily as a means to a social end. Furthermore, social interactions may be a distraction from school, but they are often not a distraction from learning. Keeping this basic social dynamic firmly in view makes networked teens suddenly much less worrisome and strange.

Consider, for example, the widespread concern over internet addiction. Are there teens who have an unhealthy relationship with technology? Certainly. But most of those who are “addicted” to their phones or computers are actually focused on staying connected to friends in a culture where getting together in person is highly constrained. Teens’ preoccupation with their friends dovetails with their desire to enter the public spaces that are freely accessible to adults. The ability to access public spaces for sociable purposes is a critical component of the coming of age process, and yet many of the public spaces where adults gather—bars, clubs, and restaurants—are inaccessible to teens.

As teens transition from childhood, they try to understand how they fit into the larger world. They want to inhabit public spaces, but they also look to adults, including public figures, to understand what it means to be grown-up. They watch their parents and other adults in their communities for models of adulthood. But they also track celebrities like Kanye West and Kim Kardashian to imagine the freedoms they would have if they were famous. For better or worse, media narratives also help construct broader narratives for
how public life works. “Reality” TV shows like *Jersey Shore* signal the potential fun that can be had by young adults who don’t need to appease parents and teachers.

Some teens may reject the messages of adulthood that they hear or see, but they still learn from all of the signals around them. As they start to envision themselves as young adults, they begin experimenting with the boundaries of various freedoms, pushing for access to cars or later curfews. Teens’ determination to set their own agenda can be nerve-racking for some parents, particularly those who want to protect their children from every possible danger. Coming of age is rife with self-determination, risk taking, and tough decision-making.

Teens often want to be with friends on their own terms, without adult supervision, and in public. Paradoxically, the networked publics they inhabit allow them a measure of privacy and autonomy that is not possible at home where parents and siblings are often listening in. Recognizing this is important to understanding teens’ relationship to social media. Although many adults think otherwise, teens’ engagement with public life through social media is not a rejection of privacy. Teens may wish to enjoy the benefits of participating in public, but they also relish intimacy and the ability to have control over their social situation. Their ability to achieve privacy is often undermined by nosy adults—notably their parents and teachers—but teens go to great lengths to develop innovative strategies for managing privacy in networked publics.

Social media enables a type of youth-centric public space that is often otherwise inaccessible. But because that space is highly visible, it can often provoke concerns among adults who are watching teens as they try to find their way.

**A Place to Call Their Own**

Sitting in a cafeteria in a small town in Iowa in 2007, I was talking with Heather, a white sixteen-year-old, when the topic of adult attitudes toward Facebook came up. Heather had recently heard that politicians were trying to prohibit teen access to social network sites,
and she was incensed. “I’m really mad about it. It’s social networking. It really is a way to communicate, and if they ban that, it’s really hard to communicate with other people you don’t see that much.” I asked her why she didn’t just get together with her friends in person. The rant that followed made clear that I had touched a nerve. 

I can’t really go see people in person. I can barely hang out with my friends on the weekend, let alone people I don’t talk to as often. I’m so busy. I’ve got lots of homework, I’m busy with track, I’ve got a job, and when I’m not working and doing homework I’m hanging out with the good friends that I have. But there’s some people I’ve kind of lost contact with and I like keeping connected to them because they’re still friends. I just haven’t talked to them in a while. I have no means of doing that. If they go to a different school it’s really hard and I don’t exactly know where everyone lives, and I don’t have everyone’s cell phone numbers, and I don’t have all of their AIM screen names either, so Facebook makes it a lot easier for me. 

For Heather, social media is not only a tool; it is a social lifeline that enables her to stay connected to people she cares about but cannot otherwise interact with in person. Without the various sites and services she uses, Heather—like many of her peers—believes that her social life would significantly shrink. She doesn’t see Facebook as inherently useful, but it’s where everyone she knows is hanging out. And it’s the place to go when she doesn’t know how to contact someone directly. 

The social media tools that teens use are direct descendants of the hangouts and other public places in which teens have been congregating for decades. What the drive-in was to teens in the 1950s and the mall in the 1980s, Facebook, texting, Twitter, instant messaging, and other social media are to teens now. Teens flock to them knowing they can socialize with friends and become better acquainted with classmates and peers they don’t know as well. They embrace social media for roughly the same reasons earlier generations of teens
attended sock hops, congregated in parking lots, colonized people’s front stoops, or tied up the phone lines for hours on end. Teens want to gossip, flirt, complain, compare notes, share passions, emote, and joke around. They want to be able to talk among themselves—even if that means going online.

Heather’s reliance on Facebook and other tools registers an important change in teen experience. This change is not rooted in social media but instead helps explain the popularity of digital technologies. Many American teens have limited geographic freedom, less free time, and more rules. In many communities across the United States, the era of being able to run around after school so long as you are home by dark is long over. Many teens are stuck at home until they are old enough to drive themselves. For younger teens, getting together with friends after school depends on cooperative parents with flexible schedules who are willing or able to chauffeur and chaperone.

Socializing is also more homebound. Often, teens meet in each other’s homes rather than public spaces. And no wonder: increasing regulation means that there aren’t as many public spaces for teens to gather. The mall, once one of the main hubs for suburban teens, is much less accessible now than it once was. Because malls are privately owned spaces, proprietors can prohibit anyone they wish, and many of them have prohibited groups of teenagers from entering. In addition, parents are less willing to allow their children to hang out in malls, out of fear of the strangers teens may encounter. Teens simply have far fewer places to be together in public than they once did. And the success of social media must be understood partly in relation to this shrinking social landscape. Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace are not only new public spaces: they are in many cases the only “public” spaces in which teens can easily congregate with large groups of their peers. More significantly, teens can gather in them while still physically stuck at home.

Teens told me time and again that they would far rather meet up in person, but the hectic and heavily scheduled nature of their
day-to-day lives, their lack of physical mobility, and the fears of their parents have made such face-to-face interactions increasingly impossible. As Amy, a biracial sixteen-year-old in Seattle, succinctly put it: “My mom doesn’t let me out of the house very often, so that’s pretty much all I do, is sit on MySpace and talk to people and text and talk on the phone, cause my mom’s always got some crazy reason to keep me in the house.” Social media may seem like a peculiar place for teens to congregate, but for many teens, hanging out on Facebook or Twitter is their only opportunity to gather en masse with friends, acquaintances, classmates, and other teens. More often than not, their passion for social media stems from their desire to socialize.

Just because teens are comfortable using social media to hang out does not mean that they’re fluent in or with technology. Many teens are not nearly as digitally adept as the often-used assumption that they are “digital natives” would suggest. The teens I met knew how to get to Google but had little understanding about how to construct a query to get quality information from the popular search engine. They knew how to use Facebook, but their understanding of the site’s privacy settings did not mesh with the ways in which they configured their accounts. As sociologist Eszter Hargittai has quipped, many teens are more likely to be digital naives than digital natives.21

The term digital native is a lightning rod for the endless hopes and fears that many adults attach to this new generation. Media narratives often suggest that kids today—those who have grown up with digital technology—are equipped with marvelous new superpowers. Their multitasking skills supposedly astound adults almost as much as their three thousand text messages per month. Meanwhile, the same breathless media reports also warn the public that these kids are vulnerable to unprecedented new dangers: sexual predators, cyberbullying, and myriad forms of intellectual and moral decline, including internet addiction, shrinking attentions spans, decreased literacy, reckless oversharing, and so on. As with most fears, these anxieties are not without precedent even if they are often overblown and misconstrued. The key to understanding how youth navigate social media is to step away
from the headlines—both good and bad—and dive into the more nuanced realities of young people.

My experience hanging out with teenagers convinced me that the greatest challenges facing networked teens are far from new. Some challenges are rooted in this country’s long history of racial and social inequality, but economic variability is increasingly noticeable. American teens continue to live and learn in radically uneven conditions. I visited schools with state-of-the-art facilities, highly credentialed and specialized faculty, and students hell-bent on going to Ivy League colleges. At the other extreme, I also visited run-down schools with metal detectors, a stream of “substitute” teachers standing in for full-time educators, and students who smoked marijuana during class. The explanations for these variations are complex and challenging, and the disparity is unlikely to be addressed in the near future.

Although almost all teens have access to technology at this point, their access varies tremendously. Some have high-end mobile phones with unlimited data plans, their own laptop, and wireless access at home. Others are constrained to basic phones with pay-per-text plans and access the internet only through the filtered lens of school or library computers. Once again, economic inequality plays a central role. But access is not the sole divide. Technical skills, media literacy, and even basic English literacy all shape how teens experience new technologies. Some teens are learning about technology from their parents while other teens are teaching their parents how to construct a search query or fill out a job application.

One of the great hopes for the internet was that it would serve as the great equalizer. My research into youth culture and social media—alongside findings of other researchers—has made it obvious that the color-blind and disembodied social world that the internet was supposed to make possible has not materialized. And this unfortunate reality—the reality of racial tensions and discrimination that long predates the rise of digital media—often seems to escape our public attention.
Meanwhile, we hear a lot about how the online spaces that teens frequent are sinister worlds populated by sexual predators or bullies. But we rarely if ever hear that many teenagers are scarred by the same experiences offline. Bullying, racism, sexual predation, slut shaming, and other insidious practices that occur online are extraordinarily important to address even if they’re not new. Helping young people navigate public life safely should be of significant public concern. But it’s critical to recognize that technology does not create these problems, even if it makes them more visible and even if news media relishes using technology as a hook to tell salacious stories about youth. The very sight of at-risk youth should haunt all of us, but little is achieved if we focus only on making what we see invisible.

The internet mirrors, magnifies, and makes more visible the good, bad, and ugly of everyday life. As teens embrace these tools and incorporate them into their daily practices, they show us how our broader social and cultural systems are affecting their lives. When teens are hurting offline, they reveal their hurt online. When teens’ experiences are shaped by racism and misogyny, this becomes visible online. In making networked publics their own, teens bring with them the values and beliefs that shape their experiences. As a society, we need to use the visibility that we get from social media to understand how the social and cultural fault lines that organize American life affect young people. And we need to do so in order to intervene in ways that directly help youth who are suffering.

Ever since the internet entered everyday life—and particularly since the widespread adoption of social media—we have been bombarded with stories about how new technologies are destroying our social fabric. Amid a stream of scare stories, techno-utopians are touting the amazing benefits of online life while cyber-dystopians are describing how our brains are disintegrating because of our connection to machines. These polarizing views of technology push the discussion of youth’s engagement with social media to an extreme binary: social media is good or social media is bad. These extremes—and the myths they perpetuate—obscure the reality of teen practices
and threaten to turn the generation gap into a gaping chasm. These myths distort the reality of teen life, sometimes by idealizing it, but more frequently by demonizing it.

**How to Read This Book**

The chapters that follow are dedicated to different issues that underpin youth engagement with social media. Many are organized around concerns about youth practices that persist in American society. Each chapter offers a grounded way of looking at an issue. Although the chapters can be read independently, they are collectively organized to flow from individual and familial challenges to broader societal issues. A conclusion summarizes my arguments and offers a deeper analysis of what networked publics mean for contemporary youth.

As a researcher passionate about the health and well-being of young people, I wrote this book in an effort to create a nuanced portrait of everyday teen life in an era in which social media has become mainstream. The questions I ask are simple: What is and isn’t new about life inflected by social media? What does social media add to the quality of teens’ social lives, and what does it take away? And when we as a society don’t like the outcomes of technology, what can we do to change the equation constructively, making sure that we take advantage of the features of social media while limiting potential abuse?

It is much easier to understand myths retrospectively than it is to dismantle them as they are being perpetuated, but this book aims to do the latter. That said, some of the most pervasive anxieties about social media have begun to subside in recent years, as adults have started participating in social media and, especially, Facebook. I am cautiously hopeful that adult engagement will calm some of the most anxious panics. And yet the tropes and stories that I use throughout the book tend to be resurrected with each new technology, while others endure in the face of quite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. As many adults have grown comfortable with Facebook, the
media’s narratives switched to focusing on the scariness of mobile apps like Snapchat and Kik. The story remains the same, even if the site of panic has shifted.

Social media has affected the lives and practices of many people and will continue to play a significant role in shaping many aspects of American society. There are many who lament these developments or wax nostalgic about the pre-internet world. That said, I would be surprised to find anyone who still believes that the internet is going away. Along with planes, running water, electricity, and motorized transportation, the internet is now a fundamental fact of modern life. This does not mean that access to the internet is universal, and some people will always opt out.22 Even in a country as wealthy as the United States, many lack access to sanitation, and some choose to live without electricity. Just because the internet—and social media—is pervasive in American society does not mean that everyone will have access, will want access, or will experience access in the same way.

Contemporary youth are growing up in a cultural setting in which many aspects of their lives will be mediated by technology and many of their experiences and opportunities will be shaped by their engagement with technology. Fear mongering does little to help youth develop the ability to productively engage with this reality. As a society, we pay a price for fear mongering and utopian visions that ignore more complex realities. In writing this book, I hope to help the public better understand what young people are doing when they engage with social media and why their attempts to make sense of the world around them should be commended.

This book is written with a broad audience in mind—scholars and students, parents and educators, journalists and librarians. Although many sections draw on academic ideas, I do not expect the reader to be familiar with the scholarly literature invoked. When necessary for understanding the argument, I provide background in the text. More often than not, I’ve provided numerous touchstones and references in endnotes and an extensive bibliography that can enable those who wish to go deeper or to understand the relevant debates to do so.
Throughout this book, I draw on qualitative and ethnographic material that I collected from 2003 to 2012—and interview data conducted from 2007 to 2010—to provide a descriptive portrait of the different issues that I discuss. Given the context in which I’m writing and the data on which I’m drawing, most of the discussion is explicitly oriented around American teen culture, although some of my analysis may be relevant in other cultures and contexts. I also take for granted, and rarely seek to challenge, the capitalist logic that underpins American society and the development of social media. Although I believe that these assumptions should be critiqued, this is outside the scope of this project. By accepting the cultural context in which youth are living, I seek to explain their practices in light of the society in which they are situated.

The networked technologies that were dominant when I began researching this book are different than those that were popular when I was finishing the manuscript. Even MySpace—once the dominant social network site among youth and referred to throughout this book—is barely a shadow of its former self in 2013. Quite probably, what’s popular when you’re reading this book is different still. As I write this, Facebook is losing its allure as new apps and services like Instagram, Tumblr, and Snapchat gain hold. Social media is a moving landscape; many of the services that I reference throughout this book may or may not survive. But the ability to navigate one’s social relationships, communicate asynchronously, and search for information online is here to stay. Don’t let my reference to outdated services distract you from the arguments in this book. The examples may feel antiquated, but the core principles and practices I’m trying to describe are likely to persist long after this book is published.

Not everyone has equal access to the internet, nor do we all experience it in the same way. But social media is actively shaping and being shaped by contemporary society, so it behooves us to move beyond punditry and scare tactics to understand what social media is and how it fits into the social lives of youth.
As a society, we often spend so much time worrying about young people that we fail to account for how our paternalism and protectionism hinders teens’ ability to become informed, thoughtful, and engaged adults. Regardless of the stories in the media, most young people often find ways to push through the restrictions and develop a sense of who they are and how they want to engage in the world. I want to celebrate their creativity and endurance while also highlighting that their practices and experiences are not universal or uniformly positive.

This book is not a love letter to youth culture, although my research has convinced me that young people are more resilient than I initially believed. Rather, this book is an attempt to convince the adults that have power over the lives of youth—including parents and teachers, journalists and law enforcement officers, employers and military personnel—that what teens are doing as they engage in networked publics makes sense. At the same time, coming to terms with life in a networked era is not necessarily easy or obvious. Rather, it’s complicated.
privacy
why do youth share so publicly?

Many teens feel as though they’re in a no-win situation when it comes to sharing information online: damned if they publish their personal thoughts to public spaces, and damned if they create private space that parents can’t see. Parent-teen battles about privacy have gone on for decades. Parents complain when teens demand privacy by asking their parents to stay out of their bedroom, to refrain from listening in on their phone conversations, and to let them socialize with their friends without being chaperoned. In the same breath, these same parents express frustration when teens wear ill-fitting clothes or skimpy outfits. They have long seen revealing clothing as an indicator of teens’ rejection of privacy. In other words, common and long-standing teen practices have historically been sure signs of teens’ unhealthy obsession with, or rejection of, privacy.

Social media has introduced a new dimension to the well-worn fights over private space and personal expression. Teens do not want their parents to view their online profiles or look over their shoulder when they’re chatting with friends. Parents are no longer simply worried about what their children wear out of the house but what they photograph themselves wearing in their bedroom to post online. Interactions that were previously invisible to adults suddenly have traces, prompting parents to fret over conversations that adults deem inappropriate or when teens share “TMI” (too much information).
While my childhood included “Keep Out” bedroom signs and battles over leather miniskirts and visible bras, the rise of the internet has turned fights over privacy and exposure into headline news for an entire cohort of youth.

Teens often grow frustrated with adult assumptions that suggest that they are part of a generation that has eschewed privacy in order to participate in social media. In North Carolina, I asked “Waffles” about this issue, and he responded with exasperation. “Every teenager wants privacy. Every single last one of them, whether they tell you or not, wants privacy.” Waffles is a geeky white seventeen-year-old teen who spends hours each day interacting with people through video games and engaging deeply in a wide variety of online communities. He balked at the idea that his participation in these networked publics signals that he doesn’t care about privacy. “Just because teenagers use internet sites to connect to other people doesn’t mean they don’t care about their privacy. We don’t tell everybody every single thing about our lives. . . . So to go ahead and say that teenagers don’t like privacy is pretty ignorant and inconsiderate honestly, I believe, on the adults’ part.” Waffles articulated a sentiment that I usually saw expressed through an eye roll: teenagers, acutely aware of how many adults dismiss their engagement in social media, have little patience for adults’ simplistic assumptions about teen privacy.

Although teens grapple with managing their identity and navigating youth-centric communities while simultaneously maintaining spaces for intimacy, they do so under the spotlight of a media ecosystem designed to publicize every teen fad, moral panic, and new hyped technology. Each week, news stories lament the death of privacy, consistently referring to teen engagement with public social media services as proof of privacy’s demise. In her *New York Magazine* article describing people’s willingness to express themselves publicly, Emily Nussbaum articulated a concern about youth that is widespread: “Kids today. They have no sense of shame. They have no sense of privacy. They are show-offs, fame whores, pornographic little loons who post their diaries, their phone numbers, their stupid poetry—for privacy 55
God’s sake, their dirty photos!—online.” Throughout the United States, I heard this sentiment expressed in less eloquent terms by parents, teachers, and religious officials who were horrified by what teens were willing to share. They often approached me, genuinely worried about their children’s future and unable to understand why anyone who cared about themselves and their privacy would be willing to be actively engaged online.

The idea that teens share too much—and therefore don’t care about privacy—is now so entrenched in public discourse that research showing that teens do desire privacy and work to get it is often ignored by the media. Regardless of how many young people engage in privacy practices, adults reference teens’ public expressions as decisive evidence of contemporary teen immodesty and indecency. Meanwhile, technology executives like Facebook’s founder Mark Zuckerberg and Google chairman Eric Schmidt reinforce the notion that today’s teens are different, arguing that social norms around privacy have changed in order to justify their own business decisions regarding user privacy. They cite youth’s widespread engagement with social media as evidence that the era of privacy is over. Journalists, parents, and technologists seem to believe that a willingness to share in public spaces—and, most certainly, any act of exhibitionism and publicity—is incompatible with a desire for personal privacy.

The teens that I met genuinely care about their privacy, but how they understand and enact it may not immediately resonate or appear logical to adults. When teens—and, for that matter, most adults—seek privacy, they do so in relation to those who hold power over them. Unlike privacy advocates and more politically conscious adults, teens aren’t typically concerned with governments and corporations. Instead, they’re trying to avoid surveillance from parents, teachers, and other immediate authority figures in their lives. They want the right to be ignored by the people who they see as being “in their business.” Teens are not particularly concerned about organizational actors; rather, they wish to avoid paternalistic adults who use safety and protection as an excuse to monitor their everyday sociality.
Teens’ desire for privacy does not undermine their eagerness to participate in public. There’s a big difference between being in public and being public. Teens want to gather in public environments to socialize, but they don’t necessarily want every vocalized expression to be publicized. Yet, because being in a networked public—unlike gathering with friends in a public park—often makes interactions more visible to adults, mere participation in social media can blur these two dynamics. At first blush, the desire to be in public and have privacy seems like a contradiction. But understanding how teens conceptualize privacy and navigate social media is key to understanding what privacy means in a networked world, a world in which negotiating fuzzy boundaries is par for the course. Instead of signaling the end of privacy as we know it, teens’ engagement with social media highlights the complex interplay between privacy and publicity in the networked world we all live in now.6

Navigating Conflicting Norms

In 2006, seventeen-year-old Bly Lauritano-Werner wrote a piece for Youth Radio in which she explained what privacy meant to her. She recorded the segment with her mother in order to highlight the generational disconnect that was at the heart of her frustration. The radio piece that aired on National Public Radio reveals a tension between Bly and her mother over the boundaries that underpin privacy. “My mom always uses the excuse about the Internet being ‘public’ when she defends herself. It’s not like I do anything to be ashamed of, but a girl needs her privacy. I do online journals so I can communicate with my friends, not so my mother could catch up on the latest gossip of my life.” When Bly interviews her mother during the segment, her mother claims that she has the right to look at what Bly posts. She argues that she should be able to look “because I have a connection with you. I’m your mom, but also I just feel like it would be more interesting to me than it would be to someone who didn’t know you. . . . You publish it and it’s for general viewing therefore I feel I’m part of the general public, so I can view it.” Much to Bly’s
frustration, her mother believes that she has the right to look precisely because the content is accessible to a broad audience, even though she knows that Bly doesn’t want her mother among that audience.

Although many adults believe that they have the right to consume any teen content that is functionally accessible, many teens disagree. For example, when I opened up the issue of teachers looking at students’ Facebook profiles with African American fifteen-year-old Chantelle, she responded dismissively: “Why are they on my page? I wouldn’t go to my teacher’s page and look at their stuff, so why should they go on mine to look at my stuff?” She continued on to make it clear that she had nothing to hide while also reiterating the feeling that snooping teachers violated her sense of privacy. The issue for Chantelle—and many other teens—is more a matter of social norms and etiquette than technical access.

Erving Goffman—the sociologist described in the previous chapter for his analysis of self-presentation—also wrote about the importance of “civil inattention” in enabling people to respectfully negotiate others in public spaces. For example, even when two people happen to be sitting across from each other on the subway, social norms dictate that they should not stare at each other or insert themselves into the other’s conversations. Of course, people still do these things, but they also feel a social responsibility to avert their eyes and pretend that they cannot hear the conversation taking place. What’s at stake is not whether someone can listen in but whether one should. Etiquette and politeness operate as a social force that challenges what’s functionally possible.

Although Bly and her mother do not find resolution in the three-minute radio segment, Bly accepts that there is nothing she can do to stop her mother from snooping. She concludes instead that journaling sites “are becoming lame” because parents are starting to create their own profiles and use these services to meet strangers, failing to recognize the hypocrisy in their advice about talking to strangers. Made in 2006, Bly’s arguments are specific to the journaling site LiveJournal, but I heard these same sentiments repeated over the
years in reference to numerous other social media sites, especially Facebook. In 2012, when I asked teens who were early adopters of Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram why they preferred these services to Facebook, I heard a near-uniform response: “Because my parents don’t know about it.” The sites of practice change, but many teens get frustrated when adults “invade” teen-centric spaces, and so, in an attempt to achieve privacy, some move on to newer sites and apps to avoid parents and other adults.

Although Bly’s desire to seek freedom from her mother’s gaze prompted her to leave a service she once enjoyed, the increasing popularity of social media—and the challenges brought on by multiple audiences—are forcing other teens to reconsider how they achieve privacy in networked publics more generally. Some are perennially searching for adult-free zones, but this cat-and-mouse game gets tiresome, especially when parents quickly catch on to the “new” site. Much to many adults’ surprise, teens aren’t looking to hide; they just want privacy. As a result, many teens are developing innovative solutions to achieve privacy in public. To get there, they must grapple with the tools that are available to them, the norms that shape social practices, and their own agency.

**Achieving Privacy by Controlling the Social Situation**

Privacy is a complex concept without a clear definition. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis described privacy as “the right to be let alone,” while legal scholar Ruth Gavison describes privacy as a measure of the access others have to you through information, attention, and physical proximity. Taking a structuralist tactic, legal scholar Alan Westin argues that privacy is “the claim of individuals, groups, or institutions to determine for themselves when, how, and to what extent information about them is communicated to others.” These different—but related—definitions highlight control over access and visibility. Although the failure to reach consensus on a definition of privacy may be frustrating to some, legal scholar Daniel Solove argues that each approach to privacy reveals insight into how we manage privacy in everyday life.
Public discourse around privacy often centers on hiding or opting out of public environments, whereas scholars and engineers often focus more on controlling the flow of information. These can both be helpful ways of thinking about privacy, but as philosopher Helen Nissenbaum astutely notes, privacy is always rooted in context. Much of the scholarly conversation around privacy focuses on whether or not someone has—or has lost—privacy. Yet, for the teens that I interviewed, privacy isn’t necessarily something that they have; rather it is something they are actively and continuously trying to achieve in spite of structural or social barriers that make it difficult to do so. Achieving privacy requires more than simply having the levers to control information, access, or visibility. Instead, achieving privacy requires the ability to control the social situation by navigating complex contextual cues, technical affordances, and social dynamics. Achieving privacy is an ongoing process because social situations are never static. Especially in networked publics, the persistent, searchable nature of interactions complicates any temporal boundaries. Comments written weeks ago can easily be fodder for current dramas, and it’s often difficult to discern when a conversation starts and ends in an asynchronous texting channel.

Controlling a social situation in an effort to achieve privacy is neither easy nor obvious. Doing so requires power, knowledge, and skills. First, people must have a certain degree of agency or power within a social situation, which means that they must either have social status or take measures to effectively resist those who are more powerful within that situation. Second, people must have a reasonable understanding of the social situation and context in which they are operating. And third, people must have the skills to manage the social situation in order to both understand and affect how information flows and is interpreted. These prerequisites for achieving privacy can be overwhelming. Furthermore, they are often taken for granted by those questioning why youth don’t do more to manage their privacy.

When teens try to achieve privacy in networked publics, they often struggle with these foundational elements. In social settings
where parents lurk over teens’ shoulders under the guise of making sure their children are safe, teens often lack the agency necessary to control the social situation. The dynamics of mediated social situations—including invisible audiences, collapsed contexts, and persistent content—further complicate things, making it incredibly difficult for teens to imagine the boundaries of these mediated social situations. Finally, it’s hard to develop the skills to manage how information will flow within a social situation when the underlying affordances change regularly. For example, when sites like Facebook repeatedly alter their privacy settings, developing the necessary skills to manage how visible content should be becomes, if not next to impossible, then incredibly labor-intensive. Given all of this, teens cannot easily control the flow of information on social media. Some teens understand this intuitively; others struggle with this because popular rhetoric focuses so heavily on access and control. The most creative teens often respond to the limitations they face by experimenting with more innovative approaches to achieving privacy in order to control the social situation. This typically involves working around technical affordances, reclaiming agency, and using novel strategies to reconfigure the social situation.

**Public by Default, Private Through Effort**

The default in most interpersonal conversations, even those that take place in public settings, is that interactions are private by default, public through effort. For example, when two people are chatting in a café, they can assume a certain level of privacy. Parts of the conversation may get recounted later, but unless someone within hearing range was surreptitiously recording the conversation, the conversation most likely remains somewhat private due to social norms around politeness and civil inattention. There are many examples of people violating this norm, including Linda Tripp’s decision to record Monica Lewinsky’s confession and paparazzi using long-range cameras to capture celebrities from afar. However, these are seen as violations because most people do not assume that their conversation
will be publicized if they understand the social situation to be intimate.

In a mediated world, assumptions and norms about the visibility and spread of expressions must be questioned. Many of the most popular genres of social media are designed to encourage participants to spread information. On a site like Facebook, it is far easier to share with all friends than to manipulate the privacy settings to limit the visibility of a particular piece of content to a narrower audience. As a result, many participants make a different calculation than the one they would make in an unmediated situation. Rather than asking themselves if the information to be shared is significant enough to be broadly publicized, they question whether it is intimate enough to require special protection. In other words, when participating in networked publics, many participants embrace a widespread public-by-default, private-through-effort mentality.

Because of this public-by-default framework, most teens won’t bother to limit the audience who can see what they consider to be mundane conversations on Facebook. Teens will regularly share things widely on Facebook simply because they see no reason to make the effort to make those pieces of content private. For example, teens will share “Happy Birthday” messages or bored notes where they ask others what they’re doing openly because they don’t see these particular interactions as having much significance. The sum of interactions that they have online appear to be much more public because teens don’t go out of their way to make minutiae private. Adults complain that teens are wasting their time publicizing trivia, whereas teens feel as though their audience can filter out anything that appears to be irrelevant.

This does not mean that teens never restrict the visibility of content. When they think something might be sensitive, they often switch to a different medium, turning to text messages or chat to communicate with smaller audiences directly. Of course, sometimes they also mess up, intentionally or unintentionally. They might post an inappropriate comment that they know will spark a fight because
they’re trying to get attention or because they’re lashing out. They might post a photo that they don’t think will be particularly controversial given their imagined audience, only to have that photo cause drama or result in other unexpected trouble. Teens do think through the social cost to what they post, but they don’t always get it right.

Teens are aware that technology has shifted sharing norms, but they see this more in terms of what’s visible than as an underlying value change. In North Carolina, I met Alicia, a white seventeen-year-old who articulated how she felt technology had shaped information sharing.

I just think that [technology is] redefining what’s acceptable for people to put out about themselves. I’ve grown up with technology so I don’t know how it was before this boom of social networking. But it just seems like instead of spending all of our time talking to other individual people and sharing things that would seem private we just spend all of our time putting it in one module of communication where people can go and access it if they want to. It’s just more convenient.

Alicia recognizes that the public-by-default dynamic creates a conflict around privacy, but she thinks that it’s a red herring. “When [adults] see [our photo albums] or when they see conversations on Facebook wall to wall, they think that it’s this huge breach of privacy. I just think it’s different. . . . I think privacy is more just you choosing what you want to keep to yourself.” Alicia is not giving up on privacy just because she chooses to share broadly. Instead, she believes that she can achieve privacy by choosing what not to share.

By focusing on what to keep private rather than what to publicize, teens often inadvertently play into another common rhetorical crutch—the notion that privacy is necessary only for those who have something to hide. Indeed, many teens consciously seek out privacy when they’re trying to restrict access to a narrower audience either out of respect or out of fear. But as content becomes increasingly persistent, teens are also much more aware of the unintended consequences
of having data available that could easily be taken out of context at a later time.

In DC, I met an African American seventeen-year-old named Shamika who found that her peers loved to use old status updates and point to them in a new context in order to “start drama.” She found this infuriating because the posts that she wrote a month earlier were never intended as fodder for current arguments. To deal with this, Shamika took radical measures to delete content from the past. Each day, when she logged into Facebook, she’d read comments she received and then delete them. She’d scan through the comments she’d left on friends’ updates and photos and delete those. She systematically cleansed her Facebook presence in a practice known as “whitewalling” in which she made certain that the front of her Facebook page—originally called the “wall”—was blank, revealing the background color of white. When I remarked to Shamika that anyone could copy and paste that content and bring it back at a later date, she nodded knowingly before telling me that doing so would be “creepy.” In other words, by using technology to signal what was expected, she shifted the burden from being a matter of technological access to being about a violation of social norms.

Although persistence has become de facto on most major social media, new apps have begun to emerge that call this normative affordance into question. For example, in 2013, teens starting using Snapchat, a photo-sharing app in which images purportedly self-destruct after being viewed. Given the assumption that teens use such services only to share inappropriate content, journalists often referred to this application in the same breath as sexting or the sharing of inappropriate sexual images. But in casually asking teens about Snapchat, I found most were using the app to signal that an image wasn’t meant for posterity. They shared inside jokes, silly pictures, and images that were funny only in the moment. Rather than viewing photographs as an archival production, they saw the creation and sharing of these digital images as akin to an ephemeral gesture. And they used Snapchat to signal this expectation.
As discussed in the introduction, technical affordances and design defaults do influence how teens understand and use particular social media, but they don’t dictate practice. As teens encounter particular technologies, they make decisions based on what they’re trying to achieve. More often than not, in a technical ecosystem in which making content private is more difficult than sharing broadly, teens choose to share, even if doing so creates the impression that they have given up on privacy. It’s not that every teen is desperate for widespread attention; plenty simply see no reason to take the effort to minimize the visibility of their photos and conversations. As a result, interactions that would be ephemeral in an unmediated space are suddenly persistent, creating the impression that norms have radically changed even though they haven’t. Instead of going out of their way to achieve privacy by restricting the visibility of particular pieces of content, teens develop other strategies for achieving privacy in public.

**Social Steganography**

Children love to experiment with encoding messages. From pig latin to invisible ink pens, children explore hidden messages when they’re imagining themselves as spies and messengers. As children grow up, they look for more sophisticated means of passing messages that elude the watchful eyes of adults. In watching teens navigate networked publics, I became enamored of how they were regularly encoding hidden meaning in publicly available messages. They were engaged in a practice that Alice Marwick and I called “social steganography,” or hiding messages in plain sight by leveraging shared knowledge and cues embedded in particular social contexts.

The practice of hiding in plain sight is not new. When ancient Greeks wanted to send a message over great distances, they couldn’t rely on privacy. Messengers could easily be captured and even encoded messages deciphered. The most secure way to send a private message was to make sure that no one knew that the message existed in the first place. Historical sources describe the extraordinary lengths
to which Greeks went, hiding messages within wax tablets or tattooing them on a slave’s head and allowing the slave’s hair to grow out before sending him or her out to meet the message’s recipient. Although these messages could be easily read by anyone who bothered to look, they became visible only if the viewer knew to look for them in the first place. Cryptographers describe this practice of hiding messages in plain sight as *steganography*.

Social steganography uses countless linguistic and cultural tools, including lyrics, in-jokes, and culturally specific references to encode messages that are functionally accessible but simultaneously meaningless. Some teens use pronouns while others refer to events, use nicknames, and employ predetermined code words to share gossip that lurking adults can’t interpret. Many teens write in ways that will blend in and be invisible to or misinterpreted by adults. Whole conversations about school gossip, crushes, and annoying teachers go unnoticed as teens host conversations that are rendered meaningless to outside observers.

These practices are not new. Teens have long used whatever tools are around them to try to share information under the noses of their teachers and parents. At school, passing notes and putting notes in lockers are classic examples of how teens use paper, pen, and ingenuity to share information. Graffiti on bathroom walls may appear simply to be an act of vandalism, but these scrawled markings also convey messages. As new technologies have entered into teen life, it’s not surprising that teens also use them in similarly cryptic ways to communicate with one another. Texting gossip during class serves much of the same purpose as passing a note, yet it doesn’t require having to move a physical object, which reduces the likelihood of getting caught. But encoding messages guarantees only that if all else fails, the meaning will not become accessible, even if control over the information itself is unsuccessful.

When Carmen, a Latina seventeen-year-old living in Boston, broke up with her boyfriend, she “wasn’t in the happiest state.” She wanted her friends to know how she was feeling. Like many of her peers,
Carmen shared her emotions by using song lyrics. Thus, her first instinct was to post song lyrics from an “emo” or depressing song, but she was worried that her mother might interpret the lyric in the wrong way. This had happened before. Unfortunately, Carmen’s mom regularly “overreacted” when Carmen posted something with significant emotional overtones. Thus, she wanted to find a song lyric that conveyed what she felt but didn’t trigger her mom to think she was suicidal.

She was also attentive to the way in which her mother’s presence on Facebook tended to disrupt the social dynamics among her friends. Carmen and her mom are close and, for the most part, Carmen loves having her mom as one of her friends on Facebook, but her mom’s incessant desire to comment on Facebook tends to discourage responses from her friends. As Carmen told me, when her mother comments, “it scares everyone away. Everyone kind of disappears after the mom post.” She wanted to make sure to post something that her friends would respond to, even if her mom jumped in to comment.

Carmen settled on posting lyrics from “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life.” This song sounds happy but is sung during a scene in the Monty Python movie *Life of Brian* in which the main character is being crucified. Carmen knew that her immigrant Argentinean mother would not understand the British cultural reference, but she also knew her close friends would. Only a few weeks earlier, she and her geeky girlfriends had watched the film together at a sleepover and laughed at the peculiar juxtaposition of song lyric and scene. Her strategy was effective; her mother took the words at face value, immediately commenting on Facebook that it was great to see her so happy. Her friends didn’t attempt to correct her mother’s misinterpretation. Instead, they picked up their phones and texted Carmen to see if she was OK.

Part of what makes Carmen’s message especially effective is that she regularly posts song lyrics to express all sorts of feelings. As a result, this song lyric blended into a collection of other song lyrics, quotes, and comments. She did not try to draw attention to the message itself.
but knew that her close friends would know how to interpret what they saw. And they did. Her friends had the cultural knowledge about what references were being made to interpret and contextualize the message underneath the song lyric. Thus, she conveyed meaning to some while sharing only a song lyric with many more.

While many teens encode meaning as a strategy for navigating visibility, other teens leverage similar techniques to tease their classmates with secrets. For example, some teens use pronouns and song lyrics in ways that make it very clear to the onlooker that they are not “in the know.” In North Carolina, I was browsing Facebook with a white seventeen-year-old named Serena when we stumbled across a status update written by her classmate Kristy. Kristy’s update said, “I’m sick and tired of all of this,” and was already “Liked” by more than thirty people. I asked Serena what this meant, and she went into a long explanation about the dramas between Kristy and Cathy. Sure enough, over on Cathy’s profile was a status update that read, “She’s such a bitch,” which was also liked by dozens of people. As an outsider, I had no way of knowing that these two posts were related to each other, let alone what was referenced by the pronouns “this” and “she.” But Serena could fully interpret the drama that was unfolding; she knew the players, and she knew what the fight was about. She brought all of this knowledge to her interpretation of what she saw on Facebook, yet she also knew that many of her classmates and none of her teachers would know what was happening. Although outsiders were surely seeing these individual messages, few would dare ask.

When teenagers post encoded messages in a visible way, they are aware that people outside of their intended audience will be curious. Some will find the uninterpretable messages to be a frustrating marker of popularity, while others will see them as an enticing opportunity to learn more. Some will investigate, while others will ignore what they can’t understand. When I asked Jenna, a white seventeen-year-old from a different North Carolina school, how she felt about seeing encoded messages, she told me that it depended on who was writing the message.
If it’s someone that I want to know what they’re talking about, then I’ll try to investigate it. I’ll look at the wall, a conversation or something. But [sometimes] I don’t really care what so-and-so is doing. I have friends from when I went to Malaysia. They were all about Facebook. . . . And sometimes I hide them because whatever they’re talking about is confusing to me because I don’t know what they’re talking about or I get stuff from them that I don’t really want.

Many teens are happy to publicly perform their social dramas for their classmates and acquaintances, provided that only those in the know will actually understand what’s really going on and those who shouldn’t be involved are socially isolated from knowing what’s unfolding. These teens know that adults might be present, but they also feel that, if asked, they could create a convincing alternate interpretation of what was being discussed. Through such encoded language, teens can exclude people who are not part of the cycle of gossip at school, including parents, teachers, and peers outside their immediate social sphere.

Over the decade that I observed teens’ social media practices, I watched encoding content become more common. In 2010–2011, teens started talking about subliminal tweeting, or “subtweeting,” to refer to the practice of encoding tweets to render them meaningless to clueless outsiders. More often than not, they employed this term when referencing various teen dramas that occurred between friends and classmates that required insider knowledge to decode. In other words, teens subtweet to talk behind someone else’s back. Although this is only one technique for encoding information, the rise of this term highlights how popular the practice has become.

Encoding content, subtweeting, and otherwise engaging in social steganography offers one strategy for reclaiming agency in an effort to achieve privacy in networked publics. In doing so, teens recognize that limiting access to meaning can be a much more powerful tool for achieving privacy than trying to limit access to the content itself.
Although not all teenagers are carefully crafting content to be understood by a limited audience, many are exploring techniques like this to express themselves privately in situations in which they assume that others are watching.

**Living with Surveillance**

In 2008, the *New York Times* published an article called “Text Generation Gap: U R 2 Old (JK).” The piece begins with an anecdote about a father shuttling around his daughter and her friend. They are talking, and Dad interrupts to give his opinion; the girls roll their eyes. And then there is silence, while the girls start texting. When Dad comments to his daughter that she’s being rude for texting on her phone rather than talking to her friend, the daughter replies: “But, Dad, we’re texting each other. I don’t want you to hear what I’m saying.”

Teens have many words for the kinds of everyday surveillance that they have grown accustomed to: lurking, listening in, hovering, and being “in my business.” Many of the privacy strategies that teens implement are intended to counter the power dynamic that emerges when parents and other adults feel as though they have the right to watch and listen. They shift tools and encode content, use privacy settings, and demand privacy. Some teens even go to extremes to challenge adults’ surveillance.

In Washington, DC, my colleague Alice Marwick interviewed an eighteen-year-old black teen named Mikalah who had grown accustomed to ongoing surveillance by adults. Having been in and out of different foster care settings, she was used to having state agencies and her varying guardians regularly check in on her, online and offline. Frustrated by their attempts to access what she posted on Facebook, she decided to delete her account. When she went to do so, she was shown a message discouraging her from leaving Facebook. Pictures of her friends were portrayed, along with a note about how they would miss her on the site. Facebook also gave her a different option—she could simply deactivate her account. If she took this option, her profile would disappear, but she could login at any time and reactivate.
her account, making her profile reappear. Doing so would allow her to preserve her account, including her content, friends, comments, and settings.

Presented with this option, Mikalah had an idea. She deactivated her account. The next day, she logged in and reactivated her account, chatted with friends, and caught up on the day’s conversations. When she was done, she deactivated her account again. The next night, she repeated this same pattern. By repeatedly deactivating and reactivating her account, she turned Facebook into a real-time tool. Anyone who checked in on her when she was logged in would find her account, but if they searched for her during off hours, she was missing. From Mikalah’s perspective, this was a privacy-achieving practice because she only logged in at night, whereas the adults she encountered seemed to log in only during the day. By repurposing the deactivation feature to meet her needs, Mikalah found a way to control the social situation to the best of her ability.

Mikalah’s approach is extreme, but it highlights the measures that some teens take to achieve privacy in light of ongoing surveillance. Teens’ experiences with surveillance vary tremendously. Those who are marginalized—typically because of their race or socioeconomic status—are much more likely to experience state surveillance than those who are privileged, but even privileged youth must contend with parental surveillance.24

Although not all parents and guardians are trying to control their children’s every move, many believe that being a “good” parent means being all-knowing. I regularly heard parents say that being a responsible parent required them to violate their children’s privacy, especially when the internet is involved. In an online forum, Christina, a mother from New York, explained her reasoning. “I do not believe teenagers ‘need’ privacy—not when it comes to the Internet. I track everything my kids do online. I search their bedrooms too. I’m the parent—I’m not their friend.” When a teen responds to her post by arguing that parents should not look over their children’s shoulders, Christina responds critically.
Annoying or not, I do it and will always do it. It’s MY computer. I also log in and check their history, and track where they go, who they talk to . . . everything. I’m a mom. It is my responsibility to protect them. I wouldn’t let them talk to strangers “irl” so why would I let them do it online without supervising? That’s just foolish, imo. If my girls don’t like my spying, they’re free to not use the computer.

Christina’s attitude is not universal, but it does reflect a style of “intensive” parenting that is quite common in the United States. Legal scholars Gaia Bernstein and Zvi Triger have found that the norms around intensive parenting are increasingly part of public discourse and inscribed into law, making parents liable if they don’t abide by the cultural logic of intensive parenting. Thus, even when parents don’t share Christina’s attitudes, there is significant pressure for them to engage in acts of surveillance to be “good” parents. And given the digital traces that teens leave behind as a byproduct of their mediated conversations, many parents feel the need to track, read, and consume every interaction their children have in networked publics, even though doing so in an unmediated world is completely untenable.

Christina may feel that she has the right to track her children’s movements as long as they are in her house, but other parents make themselves all-knowing by being always present. In Michigan, Bianca, a white sixteen-year-old, told me that there is no such thing as privacy in her house because of her family dynamics. The problem isn’t just that her parents are always around, but they seem to feel as though they have the right to be a part of any interaction that occurs within earshot. Bianca told me that it’s impossible to have a conversation with her best friend in her house because “my family butts in to everything.” Not only do Bianca’s parents listen in on her conversations—whether they occur on the phone, via instant messaging, or in the living room—but they even interrupt to ask for clarifications. Rolling her eyes in agreement, Bianca’s best friend explained that it’s
much better for them to hang out at her house because her mother gives the girls “space.”

Parental nosiness is not new. In an era before cell phones, teens prized cordless phones precisely because they could be taken to a private space. Even then, parents—and siblings—often used separate phones to listen in. Today, parental nosiness extends to kids’ online encounters. In many households, the computer occupies a shared space—in part because parents are told that kids’ safety depends on parental awareness of what their children are doing online.

Although most of the teens I interviewed did not mind the central location of the computer, quite a few complain about their parents’ ongoing tendency to hover. In Massachusetts, Kat, a white fifteen-year-old, told me that she found her mother’s behavior annoying. “When I’m talking to somebody online, I don’t like when they stand over my shoulder, and I’ll be like, ‘Mom, can you not read over my shoulder?’ Not that I’m saying something bad. It just feels weird. I don’t like it.” Kat isn’t ashamed of what she’s doing online—and she has even willingly given her mother her Facebook password—but she hates feeling watched. Some teens see privacy as a right, but many more see privacy as a matter of trust. Thus, when their parents choose to snoop or lurk or read their online posts, these teens see it as a signal of distrust. Teens like Kat get upset when their parents never leave them alone when they’re online because they read this as a lack of confidence in their actions.

This issue of trust also emerges in relationship to passwords. Many teens are comfortable sharing their passwords with their parents “in case of an emergency” but expect that their parents will not use them to snoop. Christopher, a white fifteen-year-old from Alabama, told me that his parents had all of his passwords but that he expected them not to log in to his accounts unless there was a serious issue. He respected his parents’ concern and desire to protect him, but in return, he expected them to trust him. Although he believed nothing in his accounts would upset his parents, he also said he would be angry if they logged in just to see what he was doing. Like many of his peers,
Christopher believes that there is a significant difference between having the ability to violate privacy and making the choice to do so. Whether privacy is a “right” that children can or cannot have, or a privilege that teens must earn, adult surveillance shapes teens’ understanding of—and experience with—privacy. In his book *Discipline and Punish*, philosopher Michel Foucault describes how surveillance operates as a mechanism of control. When inmates believe they are being watched, they conform to what they believe to be the norms of the prison and the expectations of their jailors. Surveillance is a mechanism by which powerful entities assert their power over less powerful individuals. When parents choose to hover, lurk, and track, they implicitly try to regulate teens’ practices. Parents often engage in these acts out of love but fail to realize how surveillance is a form of oppression that limits teens’ ability to make independent choices. Regardless of how they explicitly choose to respond to it, teens are configured by the surveillance that they experience. It shapes their understanding of the social context and undermines their agency, challenging their ability to control the social situation meaningfully. As a result, what teens’ do to achieve privacy often looks quite different than what most adults would expect as appropriate tactics. Teens assume that they are being watched, and so they try to find privacy within public settings rather than in opposition to public-ness.

**Privacy as Process**

Taylor is not one to share, and if she had her druthers, she wouldn’t tell her friends much about what’s happening in her life. She understands that her friends mean well, but the Boston-based white fifteen-year-old is a reserved person, and she doesn’t like it when people are “in [her] business.” To combat nagging questions from friends and classmates, she has started creating a “light version” of her life that she’ll regularly share on Facebook just so that her friends don’t pester her about what’s actually happening. Much to her frustration, she finds that sharing at least a little bit affords her more privacy than sharing nothing at all.
She’s not alone. Many public figures find that the appearance of unlimited sharing allows them to achieve privacy meaningfully. Heather Armstrong, a well-known blogger referred to by her nickname “Dooce,” once remarked: “People I meet tell me, ‘It’s so weird I know everything about you.’ No you don’t! Ninety-five percent of my life is not blogged about.” Through the act of sharing what appears to be everything, bloggers like Armstrong appear to be vulnerable and open while still carving off a portion of their lives to keep truly private.

In a world in which posting updates is common, purposeful, and performative, sharing often allows teens to control a social situation more than simply opting out. It also guarantees that others can’t define the social situation. Sitting in an afterschool program in Los Angeles, I casually asked a teen participant why she shared so many embarrassing photos of herself on her profile. She laughed and told me that it was a lot safer if she shared her photos and put them in context by what she wrote than if she did not because she knew that her friends also had embarrassing photos. They’d be happy to embarrass her if she let them. But by taking preemptive action and mocking herself by writing dismissive messages on photos that could be interpreted problematically, she undermined her friends’ ability to define the situation differently. After explaining her logic, she continued on to explain how her apparent exhibitionism left plenty of room for people to not focus in on the things that were deeply intimate in her life.

In most cases where people share to maintain privacy, they do because they do not want someone to have power over them. Performative sharing may or may not be healthy. For example, I’ve met lesbian, gay, and transgendered teens who extensively share to appear straight so that people don’t ask about their sexuality, and I’ve met abused teens who tell extravagant stories about their lives so that no one asks what’s really happening at home. Issues emerge when teens start to deceive in order to keep the truth private. But by and large, when teens share to create a sense of privacy, they are simply asserting
agency in a social context in which their power is regularly undermined. The most common way that this unfolds is when teens systematically exclude certain information from what is otherwise a rich story. For example, plenty of teens tell their parents about what happened at school without telling them information that would reveal that they have a crush. On one hand, these teens are hiding, but on the other hand, they’re sharing in order to hold onto a space for privacy.

Privacy is not a static construct. It is not an inherent property of any particular information or setting. It is a process by which people seek to have control over a social situation by managing impressions, information flows, and context. Cynics often suggest that only people who have something to hide need privacy. But this argument is a distraction. Privacy is valuable because it is critical for personal development. As teenagers are coming of age, they want to feel as though they matter. Privacy is especially important for those who are marginalized or lack privilege within society. Teenagers have not given up on privacy, even if their attempts to achieve it are often undermined by people who hold power over them. On the contrary, teens are consistently trying out new ways of achieving privacy by drawing on and modernizing strategies that disempowered people have long used. Rather than finding privacy by controlling access to content, many teens are instead controlling access to meaning.

It’s easy to think of privacy and publicity as opposing concepts, and a lot of technology is built on the assumption that you have to choose to be private or public. Yet in practice, both privacy and publicity are blurred. Rather than eschewing privacy when they encounter public spaces, many teens are looking for new ways to achieve privacy within networked publics. As such, when teens develop innovative strategies to achieve privacy, they often reclaim power by doing so. Privacy doesn’t just depend on agency; being able to achieve privacy is an expression of agency.
Fred and Aaron, white fifteen-year-old friends living in suburban Texas, are avid gamers. When we first met in 2007, their mothers were present. I asked about their participation on social network sites, and they explained that they didn’t use those sites but loved sites like Runescape, a fantasy game with customizable avatars. Their mothers nodded, acknowledging their familiarity with Runescape before interrupting their children’s narrative to express how unsafe social network sites were. Something about Fred and Aaron’s gritted nod in response left me wondering how these teens really felt about MySpace and Facebook—sites that were all the rage with their peer group at the time. Later, almost immediately after I sat with the boys alone to talk with them in-depth, they offered a different story.

Aaron explained that he was active on MySpace but that his mother didn’t know. Since many of his friends were using Facebook, he would have liked to create an account there, too, but his mother had an account on Facebook for work and he feared she would accidentally stumble onto his profile. Out of deference to his mother, Fred had yet to create an account on either site, but he was struggling to decide whether to keep abiding by his mother’s restrictions going forward. Fred told me that his parents forbade him from Facebook and MySpace after seeing “all the stuff on the news.” He said that his parents were afraid that “if I get on it, I’ll be assaulted.” Aaron chimed
in to sarcastically remark, “He’ll meet in real life with a lonely forty-year-old man.” They both laughed at this idea.

Neither Fred nor Aaron believed that joining MySpace would make them vulnerable to sexual predators, but they were still concerned about upsetting their mothers. Both felt that their mothers’ fears were ill founded, but they also acknowledged that this fear was coming from a genuine place of concern. Although their demeanor was lighthearted, their discussion of their mothers’ fears was solemn: they worried that their mothers worried.

Although Aaron had violated his mother’s restriction by joining MySpace, he was conscientious about his profile there. His profile was private and filled with fake information and a non-identifiable photo, in part to minimize his mother’s concerns if she were to find out about the account and in part to minimize the likelihood of her finding out at all. In explaining his actions, Aaron spoke of protecting his mom just as she had told me about her desire to protect him. He wanted to save his mother from fretting about him. This dynamic—children worrying about mothers and mothers worrying about children—was something I saw often.

Like their parents, Aaron and Fred’s understanding of MySpace was shaped by the concern that unfolded over sexual predators in the mid-2000s. They understood where their mothers’ anxieties came from, even if they found the explanation illogical. Starting in 2005, news media across the United States began to suggest that MySpace was an unsafe place for youth, a place where sexual predators—understood to be older men with malicious intentions—sought out vulnerable children. Although this was not the first time that the issue of online sexual predators emerged in the media, previous discussions had taken place before the internet had become mainstream among teens and before social media had become a media phenomenon. Parents were warned to keep their kids away from MySpace completely, lest they become someone’s prey.

This message of danger was heard loud and clear. The teens I interviewed had all heard terrible stories of teenagers being harmed by older
male sexual predators they met on MySpace. In particular, girls believed these stories and feared the possibility of being raped, stalked, kidnapped, or assaulted by strangers as a result of their participation online. Their fears were rooted not in personal experience but in media coverage magnified by parental concerns. Teens often referred to the Dateline NBC TV show *To Catch a Predator* as proof that evil men are lurking behind every keyboard, ready to pounce on them. From news stories to school assemblies, teens were surrounded by messages about the dangers of predation. Although some teens rejected such messages as unfounded, others internalized them. Yet all were aware of the issue and were grappling with their feelings regarding the risks of social media.

From the advent of social media, it has been impossible to talk about teens’ engagement without addressing the topic of online safety and sexual predators. More than any other issue presented in this book, the topic of online safety generally—and sexual predators specifically—has played a significant role in configuring teens’ relation to mediated communication, adults’ attitudes toward teens’ participation, and policy discussions about social media regulation. Online safety is also a particularly complicated issue, in part because a culture of fear is omnipresent in American society, and no parent wants to take risks when it comes to their children’s safety. Statistics showing the improbability of harm fail to reassure those who are concerned. Even when highly publicized stories turn out to be fabrications, parents still imagine that somewhere, somehow, their child might fall victim to a nightmarish fate. They are afraid because terrible things do happen to children. And although those violations most commonly take place in known environments—home, school, place of worship, and so on—the internet introduces an unknown space that is harder to comprehend. Nothing feeds fear more than uncertainty.

**The Foundation of Our Fears**

Since the mid-1990s, alongside utopian rhetoric about the opportunities that the internet would enable, journalists have written salacious stories reviling online communities as sinister worlds where
naive teens fall prey to assorted malevolent forces. Some adults have also vilified teens for using the internet to indulge their darkest and wildest impulses—notably, their sexual desires—typically below the radar of parental supervision. Those who portray the internet as a dangerous place for teenagers to inhabit seem to be motivated by several anxieties, but chief among them is a long-standing fear about teens’ access to public places.

Examining attitudes toward public spaces in the 1980s, geographer Gill Valentine documents how parental concerns about childhood safety—often discussed through the lens of “stranger danger”—have resulted in children being restricted from public spaces. Public parks and malls were at the center of parental anxieties because they were seen as sites where teens could encounter harmful strangers. Not all of the focus was on dangerous older men; the visible presence of youth gangs was also a concern for many parents. Although unease about delinquents date back decades, 1980s and 1990s parents were especially fearful that manipulative peers would conscript vulnerable youth into gangs.

Beyond broader concerns about childhood safety, fears about sex and sexuality have consistently dominated public debate, with topics like pornography, teenage pregnancy, and sexual predation regularly provoking public angst. Parks and other public spaces are consistently demonized as spaces where unseemly sexual conduct takes place after dark. News media magnifies fears about pedophiles and child rapists. Protecting children from public places—and protecting society from teenagers roaming the streets—has become a cultural imperative. As always happens whenever adults obsess over child safety, restrictions emerge and fearful rhetoric abounds.

As moral panics about child safety take hold, politicians feel that they should take action—or at least capitalize on the appearance of doing so. They regularly campaign over safety issues and implement or expand laws targeted at curtailing the freedoms of minors. In the 1980s and 1990s, this included curfew laws, anti-loitering laws, and truancy laws. To expunge teens from public places, cities and towns
limited where, when, and for how long teens could gather or hang out in public places. Many believed that curfew laws would combat crime; a 1997 survey of US mayors found that 88 percent believed that youth curfews reduced crime. It did not. As researchers began to examine the effects of these laws, they found that there was no correlation between curfews and youth crime. After analyzing the data, sociologist Michael Males concluded that authority figures use curfews more as a symbol of social control than an actual crime deterrent. In the late 1990s, when asked to justify teen curfew laws in light of data suggesting that they are ineffective, New Orleans mayor Marc Morial responded on the radio by saying, “It keeps teenagers off the streets. They need it, there’s too many teenagers hanging around the streets.” Despite no effect on reducing crime, cities continued to implement curfews, and aside from a few laws that have been declared unconstitutional, most laws restricting the mobility of minors remain in force.

The same fears that shaped children’s engagement with parks and other gathering places in the latter half of the twentieth century are now configuring networked publics created through social media. Adults worry that youth may be coerced into unseemly practices or connect with adults who will do them harm. For decades, adults have worked to limit teen access to and mobility within public spaces. Simultaneously, teens have worked to circumvent adult authority in order to have freedom and mobility. The internet limits adult control precisely because it makes it harder for parents to isolate youth from material that they deem unacceptable and from people whose values may differ from theirs or who are unfamiliar in other ways. Discomfort with teen sexuality further fuels this general anxiety about teens’ access to public spaces. American society despises any situation that requires addressing teen sexuality, let alone platforms that provide a conduit for teens to explore their desires. At a more acute level, fears are especially intense whenever the possibility arises that strangers might exploit teens sexually.

Excluding teens from public places may give parents or politicians a sense of control, but it systematically disenfranchises youth from
public life. Though authorities may see scaring teens as a valiant effort to protect vulnerable youth from danger, this approach can have significant consequences. As Valentine argues, “By reproducing a misleading message about the geography of danger, stranger-danger educational campaigns contribute towards producing public space as ‘naturally’ or ‘normally’ an adult space where children are at risk from ‘deviant’ others.”10 As a result, adult society isolates teens, limiting their opportunities to learn how to engage productively with public life.

Each new cultural shift, media development, or emergent technology reinvigorates anxieties about youth safety. When fears escalate out of control, they produce what sociologist Stanley Cohen calls “moral panics” as adults worry about the moral degradation that will be brought on by the shifting social force.11 A moral panic takes hold when the public comes to believe that a cultural artifact, practice, or population threatens the social order. Moral panics that surround youth typically center on issues of sexuality, delinquency, and reduced competency. New genres of media—and the content that’s shared through them—often trigger such anxieties. Eighteenth-century society saw novels as addictive and therefore damaging to young women’s potential for finding a husband.12 Introduced in the 1930s, comic books were seen not only as serving no educational purpose but as encouraging young people to get absorbed in fantasy worlds and to commit acts of violence. In the mid-1950s Elvis Presley’s vulgar, gyrating hips prompted great concern that broadcasting him on TV would corrupt teens.13 These are but a few of the unsubstantiated moral panics surrounding youth’s engagement with earlier forms of popular media.14

Unsurprisingly, as the internet started gaining traction among youth, the same fears and anxieties that surrounded other publics and media genres reemerged in relation to networked publics and social media.15 Girls’ online social practices, in particular, are often the target of tremendous anxiety.16 When MySpace launched and grew popular among teenagers—notably, teen girls—a widespread moral panic unfolded.17 Many of the teens I met referenced To Catch a Predator, which fueled the media frenzy. In this television series,
which ran from 2004 to 2007, adults would impersonate young teenagers in online chatrooms in order to find men interested in talking with underage minors. After contact was initiated, the show’s team would lure the men into meeting the “teen” in person only to be confronted by the TV show’s host. The show was controversial, leading to significant legal and ethical questions as well as raising issues about the relevance of such stings on teen behavior.¹⁸

As the media was amplifying public concern, Congress introduced the Deleting Online Predators Act to restrict minors from interacting with strangers online; this bill would have forbidden young people from participating in online comment threads or posting content to public forums on computers paid for by government money, including those at schools and in libraries.¹⁹ Even though the data suggested that dynamics surrounding sexual crimes against children did not remotely resemble what was depicted on *To Catch a Predator*, the US attorneys general began looking for technical interventions to stop the kinds of sexual predation depicted by the show.²⁰ Legislators never pursued these flawed approaches, yet their mere proposals reveal how powerful cultural furors over youth safety can be.

Moral panics and the responses to them reconfigure the lives of youth in restrictive ways, more than any piece of legislation could possibly achieve. Legal scholar Larry Lessig argues that four forces regulate social systems: market, law, social norms, and technology or architecture.²¹ Fear is often used in service of these forces. Companies sell fear to entice parents to buy products that will help them protect their children. Policymakers respond to fear by regulating children’s access to public spaces, even when doing so accomplishes little. The media broadcasts fears, creating and reinforcing fearful social norms. And technologies are built to assuage or reproduce parents’ fears. Given the cultural work done in the name of fear, it’s astounding that young people have as much freedom as they do.

Moral panics surrounding youth tend to reveal teens’ conflicted position within American society. Authority figures simultaneously view teens as nuisances who must be managed and innocent children
who must be protected. Teens are both public menaces and vulnerable targets. Society is afraid of them and for them. The tension between these two views shapes adults’ relationship with teens and our societal beliefs about what it is that teenagers do. This schism leads to power struggles between teens and adults and shapes teens’ activities and opportunities. Parental fear—and teens’ response to it—complicates the lives of teens as they’re coming of age.

**Incorporating Fear into Everyday Life**

On a gorgeous spring Saturday in 2007, I drove around a predominantly white upper-middle-class suburb in the middle of Texas trying to find where teenagers might hang out. It was a newly planned community and there were no public parks or other obvious gathering spots. The school’s parking lot was empty; no one gathered at the local church; a highway blocked any foot traffic to nearby shops. As I wove in and out of meticulously designed subdivisions, I started to wonder whether the town was deserted. There were plenty of cars in the driveways and many of the automatic sprinklers were busy watering the lawns, but there were very few people. After about a half an hour of driving and scouting, I had seen one father playing in a driveway with two small children and another man walking a dog. I made a mental note to ask the teens I was interviewing about when and where they gathered and met new people.

When I arrived at Sabrina’s house at the edge of a picture-perfect cul-de-sac in this idyllic community, I casually remarked how odd it was that no one was outside. She looked at me strangely and asked me where they would go. I knew that, at fourteen, she didn’t have a driver’s license, so I asked her if she ever biked around the neighborhood. She told me that doing so was futile because all her friends lived at least ten miles away. Because of how the community assigned students to schools, she said, she knew no one who lived in walking or biking distance. She had once walked home from school just to see if she could, but it had taken her over two hours so she didn’t try it again. She told me that there was a shopping mall in
walking distance but that it required crossing a major road, which was scary.

This prompted a conversation about the dangers of walking around town; she told me that safety was a big topic in her house. I wanted to understand what this meant in her family, given that her parents were both active in the military. I had to imagine that in their various tours of duty, they had been exposed to far riskier environments than I could imagine this pristine suburb to be. What I learned was that their experiences at war did not make them feel any safer at home. When I asked about the source of her parents’ concern, Sabrina told me that they were news junkies and were afraid about what might happen to her based on the stories they’d heard on TV. Both Sabrina and her parents felt that it was better to be safe than sorry. From Sabrina’s perspective, staying inside was much safer than walking around outside, and therefore, there was no point in trying to go out.

As our conversation continued, it became clear that Sabrina believed that the internet posed even greater risks than her suburban neighborhood. While her online safety concerns were far greater than those of most of her peers, they played a significant role in shaping her mediated interactions. She liked to read messages in online communities, but she did not post messages or talk to anyone in online forums because “any person could be a forty-year-old man waiting to come and rape me or something. I’m really meticulous about that, because I’ve heard basically my whole life, don’t talk to people you don’t know online, ’cause they’ll come kill you.” Sabrina has never personally known any victims of such crimes, but she told me that she had seen episodes of *Law and Order* in which terrible things happened to people who talked to strangers online. For a long time, she was afraid to get on MySpace—the social network site popular with her friends at the time—because she thought stalkers might find her. Her friends convinced her to join by pointing out that she could protect herself through privacy settings. Still, she worried that someone might stalk her, so she was very reticent. “It’s still like a possibility,” she said, “because I mean anyone can just click on your
profile and find out kind of what’s going on.” Sabrina feared that if she gave any indication of where she lived or where she went to school, some evil man might track her down and abduct her. As she explained her concerns, I could see genuine fear in her eyes.

Pervasive talk of “stranger danger” shaped Sabrina’s interactions with social media. Even though she was cautious and limited her online activities, she was terrified that something would go wrong. In telling me about all of the risks that she faced online, she cited stories she’d heard, referring to incidents that had received widespread news attention. Although many teens rolled their eyes when I raised the issue of online safety, these issues were very present and real for Sabrina.22

While Sabrina was more reluctant to engage in social media than most teens that I interviewed, the fears she expressed reflect concerns shared by many adults. When my colleagues and I surveyed a national sample of parents, 93 percent of them were concerned that their child might meet a stranger online who would hurt them even though only 1 percent of them indicated that any of their children had ever met a stranger who had been hurtful.23 Surprisingly to us, parents were no more afraid for their daughters than their sons. Also in the survey, before there was any reference to specific online dangers, parents consistently reported “sexual predators,” “child molesters,” “pedophiles,” and “sex offenders” as their primary concern in an open-ended question about their biggest worries about their children’s online participation. For example, one parent explained, “My Biggest fear is that [my child] would become the ‘target’ of some online predator that intends to either: 1) lure my child away to meet them ALONE! Or 2) Convince my child to reveal personal information that could jeopardize his safety and that of my family while in our home.” Via survey and in person, I heard variations of this fear repeated by parent after parent throughout the country.

Although many teens think that parental fears are unwarranted, a sizable number—like Sabrina—share their parents’ anxiety about sexual predators and worry for their own safety and for the safety of
their siblings. When I asked Sabrina how common she thought online sexual predators were, she referred to *To Catch a Predator* as evidence of their pervasiveness. Although she had never known anyone who had been a victim of an online stalker or rapist, she was determined to be vigilant, both for herself and for her peers.

Parental fear regarding sexual predators is understandable. No parent wants to imagine her or his child being harmed, and the potential cost of such a violation is unfathomable, regardless of how statistically improbable such an event might be. Combine this with the media’s magnification of the cultural mythos of the online sexual predator and it’s no wonder that countless parents become hyperprotective without considering the costs of their actions. But this distorted fear obscures the very real and costly risks that some youth do face. Untangling these issues requires stepping back and rethinking what we think we know regarding sexual predation.

**The Online Sexual Predator Myth**

Abduction, molestation, and rape reasonably top the charts of parental fears. From the Catholic Church predatory priest scandals to the 1993 Polly Klaas murder, society struggles to comprehend how adults can harm children. Each new horrific story raises the blood pressure of parents and motivates policymakers to try and enact new restrictions that might prevent future abuse. The approach that politicians take is rarely applied evenly. Although lawmakers are happy to propose interventions that limit youth’s rights to access online spaces, they have not proposed laws to outlaw children’s access to religious institutions, schools, or homes, even though these are statistically more common sites of victimization.

A central challenge in addressing the sexual victimization of children is that the public is not comfortable facing the harrowing reality that strangers are unlikely perpetrators. Most acts of sexual violence against children occur in their own homes by people that those children trust. Sexual predation did not begin with the internet, nor does it appear as though the internet has created a predatory epidemic.
Internet-initiated sexual assaults are rare. The overall number of sex crimes against minors has been steadily declining since 1992, which also suggests that the internet is not creating a new plague. At the same time, fear-based advertising campaigns continue to propagate the belief that the internet has introduced a new flood of predators into the living rooms of families across the United States.

Consider a widely distributed poster produced by the Ad Council that ran from 2004 to 2007, which reads, “To the list of places you might find sexual predators add this one.” These words appear above a grid of twelve images, eleven of which are public places like parks and streets; the twelfth, the image behind the words “this one,” is a child’s bedroom with a computer monitor. The message is clear: predators are lurking behind the computer and will enter your home through it. The television version of this campaign is even more nerve-racking. Alongside this message is a statistic: one in five children is sexually solicited online.

This campaign, along with the many salacious news stories designed to use fear to convince the public about the imminent threat of sexual predation, is extraordinarily misleading. First, the picture of the bedroom with a computer monitor on its desk is intended to suggest that the computer is what puts children at risk. Many children are actually victimized in their bedrooms, but not because of the computer. Second, the statistic, commonly used by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children and other safety groups, isn’t what it might seem. It is a misappropriation of scholarly research intended to trigger anxiety by capitalizing on the public’s assumption that sexual solicitations occur when sketchy older guys solicit prepubescent children.

The one-in-five statistic comes from a 2000 report by the Crimes Against Children Research Center (CCRC), a highly respected institution dedicated to understanding youth victimization. In its study, CCRC surveyed youth to understand all internet-initiated sexual contact, including that which minors desired. It asked youth about “sexual solicitation,” which was defined as including everything from
flirtation to sexual harassment. The survey also asked youth about the age of the initiator. The study found that only 4 percent of solicitations came from people known to be over twenty-five, whereas 76 percent came from other minors and the rest came from adults aged eighteen to twenty-four. In 75 percent of the incidents reported, youth indicated that they were not upset or afraid as a result of the solicitation. Furthermore, in spite of parents’ worries about the potential of offline harm, 69 percent of solicitations involved no attempt at offline contact. In other words, although any sexual solicitation that a youth receives might be problematic, this statistic does not signal inherently dangerous encounters.

With the rise of social media, many safety advocates presumed that sexual solicitations would spike. Repeating their study in 2006 with an identical definition to allow for comparisons, CCRC found that one in seven minors had been sexually solicited online, a 5 percent decline from 2000. Other scholars also found that youth were far more likely to be problematically solicited in online environments that were previously popular but were no longer considered cool. In other words, the teens who were getting into trouble were not those who were hanging out with friends in the online venues most popular with their peers but those who were socializing with strangers elsewhere online. During the years in which MySpace was the most popular online environment, the teens who were engaging in risky encounters online were chatting in obscure chatrooms filled with people looking for trouble.

Although sexual solicitation as it is colloquially understood is rare, it’s important to understand the smaller number of incidents in which youth are violated or harassed, coerced or manipulated. These incidents are unacceptable, and it is important to take steps to prevent any child from ever being victimized. But doing so requires understanding the youth most at risk. In examining cases in which unwanted sexual solicitations have occurred, it’s clear that these cases are not random. Teens who are especially at risk are often engaged in a host of risky sexual encounters online. There’s a strong correlation
between risky online practices and psychosocial problems, family issues, drug and alcohol abuse, and trouble in school. In other words, teens who are struggling in everyday life also engage in problematic encounters online. Rather than putting all youth at risk, social media creates a new site where risky behaviors are made visible and troubled youth engage in new types of problematic activity.34

Sexual solicitations are disturbing, but most parents are more concerned about the potential for their child to be physically sexually abused. Typically, the vision that parents conjure involves an innocent girl being lured into conversation by an older man who deceives her about his age and then psychologically manipulates her to trust him and distrust others. The discussion of sexual predation often includes the notions of psychological manipulation (also known as “grooming”) and deception, abduction and rape. But by examining police records and interviewing youth, CCRC found that when adults employ the internet in order to commit a sex crime involving a minor, it rarely takes that form.

Not all cases involving the internet involved a stranger. Looking specifically at the small number of arrests for internet-facilitated sexual crimes, CCRC found that approximately one in five (18 percent) involved victims’ family members or offline acquaintances such as family friends or neighbors.35 Even in cases in which the perpetrator was not someone that the victim initially knew, the perpetrator rarely deceived the teen. More often than not, the abused teens were aware of the offender’s age when they chatted online. Surprisingly, many teens were more deceptive about their age, intentionally portraying themselves as older. In criminal cases that prompted an arrest, the teens involved were typically in high school and the men they were encountering were most commonly in their twenties or early thirties. Their online conversations were sexual in nature, and the teens knew that sex was in the cards before meeting the offender in person. These abused teens believed that they were in love and often had sex with the offender on multiple occasions. As CCRC explained, these encounters often took the legal form of statutory rape.
Statutory rape is a criminal offense to prevent adults from using their status, experience, and authority to manipulate youth into engaging in sexual acts. At the same time, there is a significant difference between an abduction rape scenario and a statutory rape scenario. In the latter, youth often believe that they should have the right to consent to such an encounter, even if the law and their parents disagree. This difference matters because it affects what kinds of interventions are needed. What motivates teens to engage in these power-laden sexual encounters is often a desire for attention and validation in light of problems at home, mental health issues, or a history of abuse. Although the dynamics surrounding individual cases are often complex—and there are both legal and social issues at play—the teenagers who are victimized are at risk in different ways than is typically imagined by mainstream media. Helping combat this form of sexual exploitation requires a different model than the one presented by *To Catch a Predator*.

In order to intervene successfully, it is essential to understand the dynamics that surround the sexual victimization of children. What’s needed to combat grooming, deception, and abduction rape is very different than what’s needed to address the underlying issues that motivate a young person to engage in risky sexual encounters or to deliberately put themselves in vulnerable situations. Language that positions youth as passive victims diverts the public’s attention from the marginalized youth who are the most common victims of sexual abuse. By focusing media attention on potential sex crimes committed by evil, older men, the mythical construction of the online sexual predator can obscure the unhealthy sexual encounters that youth are more likely to experience.

**Unhealthy Sexual Encounters**

In 2011, *Rolling Stone* published an exposé of a young woman named Kirsten “Kiki” Ostrenga that depicted what can happen when teen sexuality, attention, social media, and mental health issues crash headlong into one another. After her family moved from Illinois to
Florida, Kirsten struggled to make friends. When classmates started teasing her for being an outsider, she stopped trying to fit in, preferring to wear what she described as “scene queen” clothing. In order to find a community of like-minded souls, she turned to the internet, where she developed a digital persona whom she called Kiki Kannah-bal. Online, she sold jewelry and shared modeling photos, collected followers and posted fashion advice.

When she was thirteen, Kiki met a young man by the name of Danny Cespedes on MySpace. Kiki was desperate for attention and validation when she met Danny, a teen boy who told her that he was seventeen even though he had recently turned eighteen. Kiki and Danny chatted online for a while. As Kiki’s fourteenth birthday arrived, Danny asked her mom for permission to meet Kiki. They met at a local mall on her birthday, with Kiki’s mom in attendance. Kiki’s mom was impressed by Danny’s politeness and supported the relationship. The two started dating, and Danny regularly spent hours at Kiki’s house.

One night, Danny was acting drunk, so Kiki’s parents allowed him to spend the night at their house. After everyone had gone to bed, he forced himself onto Kiki. Although she was uncomfortable with the encounter, their relationship continued. As time went on, Danny started acting more and more bizarre. Kiki’s parents began to worry, and eventually, Kiki tried to break up with Danny. He attempted suicide. Their relationship became rocky, and, through a series of conversations online, Kiki learned that Danny had dated a series of girls aged thirteen to fifteen, many of whom had had similar forced sexual encounters with him. She eventually told her parents what happened, and they called the police. After collecting extensive evidence, the police attempted to arrest Danny on seven felony counts of statutory rape. When they cornered him, he threw himself over a nearby railing. He died on impact. As Rolling Stone reported, “Kiki’s rapist and first love was dead.”

The article clearly portrays Danny Cespedes as a disturbed individual, but the article also highlights how Kiki believed that she was...
madly in love with the boy who raped her. This dynamic, far from being rare, is often the reality in cases of statutory rape. By all accounts, Danny manipulated and hurt a series of young girls, preying on their vulnerability and then abusing them. But Danny was also the product of abuse. He came from a chaotic household in which prison, violence, and threats were common threads. His father had been deported after being convicted of a sexual crime against a minor. Kiki’s parents had felt bad for Danny, not realizing that he was continuing the cycle of abuse.

The internet played multiple roles in this story. It was through the internet that Kiki found Danny, but it was also through the internet that the other girls found each other and learned that they were not alone. All the girls that Danny abused had willingly connected with him online and had believed themselves to be in love. Because of their feelings toward Danny, they suppressed their feelings about his sexual violations until they learned that it was a pattern.

Although Danny sexually assaulted Kiki when he forced himself on her, the police chose to address this as statutory rape, because the age difference alone meant that he was violating the law, making it much easier to prove. For many teens, statutory rape laws can be complicated and controversial. Although they are designed to protect young people from predatory acts—such as Danny’s—age differences alone do not necessarily imply abuse.

In 2009, I interviewed a black fifteen-year-old named Sydnia who lived in Nashville. Unlike many of her peers, she used MySpace to meet new people, notably other lesbians. One day, while downtown, she approached a woman whom she recognized from MySpace. They had been talking and flirting online but had never met, nor had Sydnia intended to meet her. During that chance encounter, Sydnia got the woman’s number and they started texting. Over time, they became lovers, and when I met Sydnia the two had been dating for over a month. Although Sydnia obscured her girlfriend’s age when discussing their relationship with me, she made a passing reference to the fact that her girlfriend could go to bars even though she could not,
making her girlfriend at least twenty-one. As we talked about their relationship, I learned that Sydnia had introduced her girlfriend to her mother and that her mother approved, enough even to tease her about the relationship; teasing was a central component of their mother-daughter bond. Yet Sydnia clearly recognized that her relationship was taboo. When I asked about her girlfriend's age, she balked and indicated that my question was off-limits. Sydnia was aware that the age difference mattered, if not to her, then at least to an outsider. At a different point in our conversation, we talked about online safety, and Sydnia told me that she had heard about online sexual predators but had never known anyone who was attacked by them. I didn’t have the heart to tell Sydnia that, taken from another perspective, her girlfriend could be viewed as an online predator.

Unlike Kiki and Sydnia, most of the teens I interviewed met their older boyfriends or girlfriends through friends, family, religious activities, or in other face-to-face encounters. Although parents in more privileged communities broadly condemned teens’ relationships with older individuals, attitudes regarding age and teen sexuality are not universal. In many lower-income and immigrant communities I visited, it was widely acceptable for a teen girl to date an older man. Some of the parents that I met even encouraged such relationships, indicating that an older man would be more mature and responsible than a teenage boy and that he might take care of her. Even though those in the more privileged communities I visited often ridiculed such a perspective, I couldn’t help but find it ironic that the most popular young adult fiction book in those same communities at that time was *Twilight*, a love story focused on a teen girl and a 104-year-old vampire in which their age difference is a central plot point.

In some communities, an age difference is seen as inherently suspicious, but it does not always result in harmful relationships. Nor are same-age relationships inherently healthy. No parent wants his or her child to be exploited or abused, but age is not necessarily a defining factor in problematic relationships. Some teenagers develop unhealthy relationships with older people, but some also develop deeply problematic if
not abusive relationships with their peers. Unfortunately, teen dating violence is not uncommon, and it typically involves teens in relationships with same-age peers.\textsuperscript{38}

Age differences may be taboo, but teens’ interest in adults is not new. Furthermore, the taboo of a marked age difference often fuels teens’ interest in older people.\textsuperscript{39} Fiction often romanticizes star-crossed lovers of different ages, and countless vampire tales recount older men being enamored of teen girls. Teens have long fantasized about older celebrities, and even teachers and countless teen films reproduce these frames. Teens have also consistently engaged in risky activities in an effort to get attention and validation from older people. My age cohort trafficked in fake college IDs so that we could attend local frat parties. Getting attention from older people can often be a source of status for teens. None of this is to say that there aren’t unhealthy relationships between people of different ages, but focusing on age can obscure as much as it reveals.

**A Parent’s Worst Nightmare**

The internet may make it easier for adults and teens to engage in inappropriate conversations, but a conversation with a stranger does not inherently put youth at risk. For all the ways that the internet allows people to connect, there is still a physical gap between interlocutors. Unlike teens’ encounters with predatory adults in face-to-face settings, it is not easy for an online conversation to move offline without a teen’s knowledge. Abduction by strangers is rare: when children are abducted, it is usually by a noncustodial parent. Yet the prospect of abduction by a stranger sends chills down the spine of any parent and sends communities into overdrive to get the word out because the first twenty-four hours matter tremendously in recovering a missing child. When a child disappears, people drum up media attention in the hopes of finding the child before anything worse happens. The American public often hears about abductions in this crucial window of time, but not all reported cases turn out to be what they may at first seem.
In February 2006, thirteen-year-old Alexandra Nicole Dimarco and fifteen-year-old Alexis Anne Beyer disappeared in the middle of the night from the same condominium complex in Los Angeles. All signs seemed to point to abduction: the girls left behind their wallets and prescription medication, and they had not packed anything of sentimental value. The girls’ parents contacted the media, informing a journalist that the girls had been talking with strangers on MySpace. A headline in a Los Angeles paper read “Mothers Think Girls Were Lured Away by MySpace.com Suitors.” Media coverage was swift, and the girls’ pictures appeared on local television and across the town.

Meanwhile, the police began their investigation in the hopes of finding the girls as quickly as possible. Given the parents’ reports of trouble involving MySpace, the police contacted the company. The company began working with local law enforcement to help. Although the parents had publicly pegged MySpace as the conduit, both girls had stopped logging onto the social network site a week before they disappeared. Alexis’s mother told the media that she had banned her daughter from using the site after Alexis had allegedly met men on MySpace who had been calling the house looking for her before she disappeared.

As more information emerged, the initial portrait of abducted friends grew murky. In talking with MySpace representatives, I learned that the girls logged into their accounts two hours after they’d disappeared—from a computer in another part of Los Angeles. Using this information, police officers were able to identify the location of the girls, and they sent out a rescue team. At that point, the public still believed that the girls had been abducted, but what investigators found through MySpace suggested otherwise. The content and intensity of messages between the two girls suggested that they were lovers, that their parents disapproved of their relationship, and that they had been forbidden from seeing each other or communicating online.

When the police arrived at the girls’ suspected location, they found that the girls were safe, that they had chosen to run away, and that one in particular was not interested in going home. No scary, older
male sexual predator had lured them away. They’d run away together to get away from their parents.

Relying on information from the girls’ parents and wanting to help, the media was quick to accept the conclusion that the girls had been abducted but did little to correct the original breathless story. News organizations reported that the police had found the girls but did not provide details about what had actually happened. In talking with families in the Los Angeles region, I found that many had heard that the girls had been abducted because of MySpace, but no one I met had learned that they had actually run away.

It’s not clear whether the girls’ parents knew that they had run away when they told the police that the girls had been abducted, nor is it clear whether they referenced MySpace to increase the likelihood that journalists would cover the story, but the combination prompted immediate action by both law enforcement and the company while also triggering a media circus. In capitalizing on people’s fear of new technologies and abduction, stories like this may prompt action, but they also help to reproduce the culture of fear. They leave the public with an even more exaggerated conception of the risks that youth face while failing to address the dynamics that prompt teens to engage in risky behaviors in the first place.

Society often blames technology for putting youth at risk, but the traces that youth leave behind can be valuable in making certain that they are safe. When Alexandra and Alexis ran away, technology’s traces and MySpace’s willingness to collaborate with law enforcement enabled the police to track down the two girls extraordinarily quickly. The public never saw this side of the story.

**Blaming the Technology**

In February 2007, a girl in Colorado named Tess killed her mother with the help of her boyfriend, Bryan. When the news was reported on TV, the takeaway was, “A girl with MySpace kills her mother.” The implication was that Tess had become deviant because of her use of MySpace and that this had prompted her to murder her mother.
This was not the first time that the public blamed communication or entertainment media for inciting a teen to kill. In 1999, video games and the band Marilyn Manson supposedly prompted two boys to shoot their classmates at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado.\textsuperscript{41} After two young women in New Jersey died by suicide during a wave of teenage deaths in 1987, the community blamed Metallica because one of the girls left behind a letter referencing the song “Fade to Black,” which directly addresses emptiness and pain and makes implicit overtures to suicide.\textsuperscript{42} Even though the technological platform provided by MySpace is different than the content produced by popular musicians, it is not uncommon for people to try to make sense of teens’ violent acts by turning to the media that they embrace.

Curious to learn more about Tess, I decided to see whether her MySpace page was publicly accessible; it was. What I saw was heart-breaking. For months, she had documented her mother’s alcoholic rages through public postings. She left detailed accounts of how her mother physically abused her and psychologically tormented her. Her comments and messages were flush with emotional outpourings, frustration and rage, depression and confusion. In one post, she explained:

Everyone knows the story of me and my mom . . . and everyone knows how much I’ve tried to fix it my whole life. And everyone knows how it never works. I tried to get her help. I tried moving to California. I tried moving back to Colorado. I tried moving in with CJ, Hassan, Jermy and Bryan, then Burt and Bryan. Then moving back home with Bryan. And its just never enough. I could write a book about how confusing it is trying to please that woman . . . and trying to do whatever I can to get her to stop drinking. Like honestly, I’d do anything. But nothing really ever works. And the shit that goes on at home, frays out and effects every part of my life.

Tess documented her experiences and emotional confusion extensively. On MySpace, she described her struggles with being bipolar,
her decision to start abusing alcohol, and her own confusion about how to make her life work. Her friends had left comments, offering emotional support and asking after her. But it was clear that they were in above their heads. In scouring the comments, I found no indication that an adult had been present in any of those conversations.

After Tess’s arrest, her profile turned into a public discussion board. Acquaintances and friends alike were leaving all sorts of comments—hateful, supportive, and concerned. Reading through them, I found that one girl, who appeared to be a close friend of Tess’s, was regularly defending Tess to detractors. This friend’s page was also public, filled with heart-wrenching confusion, hurt, and uncertainty. Unable to ignore this girl’s pain, I reached out to her to make sure she had support behind her. We exchanged a few messages as I offered Colorado-based resources for her to get help. She told me about how all of Tess’s friends knew that Tess’s mom beat her, but no one knew what to do. No adult was willing to listen. This young woman went on to tell me that some of Tess’s friends had reported the MySpace posts to teachers but that, because the school blocked MySpace, teachers said that they were unable to look into the matter. Lost, and distrustful of adults in their community, her friends didn’t know where else to go.

As the story unfolded, I learned that social workers had been informed of potential abuse from teachers but that nothing was done. Apparently, there wasn’t enough physical evidence to make this case a priority. Social services had not looked at her MySpace page or talked with her friends.

Even in the aftermath, the teens in Tess’s life felt powerless, unable even to get support in their community. I counseled Tess’s friend into seeking support from a trained adult, unable to be a proper counselor for her from afar. I gave her the names of hotlines and counselors who might be able to help. I offered her information she could give to her friends. She clearly had no adult to whom she could turn. Instead, she was lashing out at those who attacked her online as her sole way of coping.

When teens are struggling like Tess’s friend was, they often turn to social media. Some engage in risky behavior, but many more make
visible the challenges they are facing: crying out for help through their posts and behavior online. All too often, their pleas go unseen or are ignored. Sometimes, this is because those posts are anonymous, which make them impossible to track down. But in other cases, no one bothers to look or ask questions.

In September 2012, Canadian fifteen-year-old Amanda Todd posted a nine-minute video on YouTube entitled “My Story: Struggling, Bullying, Suicide, Self Harm,” in which she used note cards to describe how she was sexually harassed and blackmailed by an anonymous individual online and tormented by classmates at school. She described being tricked into sexual acts, being beaten by girls at school, and attempting suicide. She accounted for her insecurity and anxiety as well as her attempts to get help. Although the description that she provided for this video states, “I’m struggling to stay in this world, because everything just touches me so deeply. I’m not doing this for attention. I’m doing this to be an inspiration and to show that I can be strong,” the final two cards she displayed read, “I have nobody . . . I need someone : (“ and “My name is Amanda Todd . . . .” A month later, Amanda died by suicide at her home in British Columbia. Afterward, her video spread widely.

The internet is not just a place where people engage in unhealthy interactions. It’s also a place where people share their pain. Although not all youth who are struggling cry out for help online, many do. And when they do, someone should be there to recognize those signs and react constructively. Increasingly, there are tremendous opportunities to leverage online traces to intervene meaningfully in teens’ lives. But it requires creating a society in which adults are willing to open their eyes and pay attention to youth other than their own children.

**Eyes on the Digital Street**

The risks that youth face online are not evenly distributed. Teens who are most at risk online are often struggling everywhere. And although many parents are deeply involved in their own children’s lives, not all teens are lucky enough to have engaged or stable parents.
During my research, I met teens who looked after addicted parents, homeless teens struggling to survive, and teens whose parents were too focused on their work to notice them. All too often, teens who engage in risky behaviors do so in reaction to what’s happening at home or in the hopes that their parents might notice.

In 2008, researchers Melissa Wells and Kimberly Mitchell surveyed youth about potentially risky online behaviors. They found that 15 percent of a nationally representative sample of American youth with online access reported experiencing sexual or physical abuse or high parental conflict in the preceding year. These young people were labeled as “high risk” and were disproportionately likely to be older, African American, and/or not living with their biological parents. They also showed significantly more problematic online behavior than the rest of the sample. Youth reporting online victimization or experiences with sexual solicitation show similar risk factors as those who are vulnerable in offline contexts: they might experience sexual or physical abuse, parental conflict, substance use, low caregiver bonding, depression, sexual aggression, and other negative issues. Regular development of close relationships via the internet is also correlated with problems offline, including a poor home environment in which there is conflict or a poor caregiver-child relationship, depression, previous sexual abuse, and delinquency. The presence of unhealthy offline relationships may thus increase the risk of internet-based sexual victimization.

It can become a vicious cycle. Engaging in risky online behaviors—including speaking with strangers about sex—is intrinsically problematic as well as a signal of broader problems. Youth who are struggling are more likely to use less widely known services and to seek more attention from people they meet online, while those who have experienced negative offline encounters were 2.5 times more likely to receive unwanted sexual solicitation than other youth. When teens are crashing, they engage in activities that are more likely to magnify their troubles. And when we see teens whose online activities look problematic, they’re often using technology to make visible a broader array of problems that they’re facing in every part of their lives.
Although most teens are doing okay, those who aren’t really aren’t. While, as discussed in the chapter on privacy, many teens encode what’s happening in their lives so that it’s not visible, others are quite open about the troubles they face. In these situations, the digital environment becomes a platform for displaying their pain to the world. When we see these teens’ outbursts, it’s easy to blame the technology because, for most of us, truly at-risk youth are otherwise invisible. Offline, those from abusive homes or facing mental health crises are often struggling in isolation or in an environment where no adult is paying attention. Online, they can be visible. And what they share in plain sight is often frightening for people who imagine that childhood is always a precious experience to be cherished. Although the internet may not be an inherently dangerous place, it’s certainly a place where we can see kids who are in danger, if we are willing to look.

In protecting their own children, many parents turn a blind eye to the struggles others are facing; they go out of their way to keep their children from encountering those who are struggling. Moving to the suburbs or into a gated community are just two examples of how wealthier parents have historically tried to isolate their children from the rawness of less privileged environments. And when mental health issues seep through, many people try to ignore what’s happening. One of the reasons that the parents I met fear the internet is because they believe it makes it harder for them to set boundaries and isolate themselves and their teens from communities in which the values are different or teens are not doing well. This results in fewer adults being willing to help those who are seriously struggling. And when the message that teens get is one of isolation, few teens know what to do, where to go, or how to cope when things do go wrong.

Parents and society as a whole often use fear to keep youth from engaging in practices that adults see as dangerous. This can backfire, undermining trust and resulting in lost opportunities. I grew up with Nancy Reagan’s “Just Say No” messages alongside images like cracked eggs in a frying pan with the caption, “This is your brain on drugs.”
Like many of my peers, I was taught to fear drugs. In rebellion, some of my classmates began experimenting with marijuana in early high school. Once they realized that pot didn’t destroy their brains any more than alcohol did, many became vocal critics of the war on drugs, convinced that adults were trying to dupe them. Unfortunately, the all-encompassing “drugs are bad” message left no room for nuance, and I watched as some of my classmates began exploring cocaine and then crystal methamphetamine with the logic that these drugs must be equivalent to marijuana, since they had been lumped together in the war on drugs. I watched numerous classmates struggle with addiction for years. Looking back, I’m frustrated by how the fear-driven abstinence-only message regarding drugs left no room for meaningful conversation, let alone a framework for understanding abuse or addiction. When adults jump to fear and isolationism as their solution to managing risk, they often undermine their credibility and erode teens’ trust in the information that adults offer.

Many teens turn to networked publics to explore a wider world, and that often includes a world that their parents want to protect them from. When parents create cocoons to protect their children from potential harms, their decision to separate themselves and their children from what’s happening outside their household can have serious consequences for other youth, especially those who lack strong support systems. Communities aren’t safe when everyone turns inward; they are only safe when people work collectively to help one another and those around them. In The Death and Life of Great American Cities, urban theorist Jane Jacobs argues that society benefits when everyone is willing to contribute their attention to the dynamics of the street. The more eyes there are on the street, the safer a community is.

Jacobs is arguing not for a form of surveillance in which powerful entities regulate social behavior through an unwanted gaze but for one in which people collectively look out for vulnerable populations and intervene when needed. People may appear to ignore a child biking down the street, but in a healthy community, if the child falls off the bike, concerned individuals will come out to help because they
are all paying attention. Young people need the freedom to explore and express themselves, but we all benefit from living in an environment in which there’s a social safety net where people come together to make sure that everyone’s doing okay. Far from being an abuse of power, Jacob’s notion of shared eyes on the street provides a necessary form of structural support in an individualistic society.

Through social media, teenagers have created digital streets that help define the networked publics in which they gather. In an effort to address online safety concerns, most adults respond by trying to quarantine youth from adults, limit teens’ engagement online, or track teens’ every move. Rhetoric surrounding online predation is used to drum up fear and justify isolation. But neither restrictions nor either adult or institutional surveillance will help those who are seriously struggling. Instead of trying to distance ourselves from teens in this new media, we have a unique opportunity to leverage visibility and face the stark and complex dynamics that shape teens’ lives head on. If we want to make the world a safer place, we need people to pay attention to what’s happening in their communities, not just in their households. We need concerned adults and young people to open their eyes on the digital street and reach out to those who are struggling. And we need to address the underlying issues that are at the crux of risky behaviors rather than propagate distracting myths. Fear is not the solution; empathy is.
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. 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. 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. 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. 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.”

Cultural prejudice permeates social media. Explicit prejudice bubbles up through the digital inscription of hateful epithets in comments sections and hatemongering 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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.”

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. 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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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
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 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.

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. 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 Anakin 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
together across race and class lines. In 2010, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton espoused such idealism in a speech at the Newseum in which she argued: “The internet can serve as a great equalizer. By providing people with access to knowledge and potential markets, networks can create opportunity where none exists. . . . Information networks have become a great leveler, and we should use them to help lift people out of poverty.” This rhetoric assumes that, because the internet makes information more readily available to more people than ever before, access to the internet will address historical informational and social inequities. Yet just because people have access to the internet does not mean that they have equal access to information. Information literacy is not simply about the structural means of access but also about the experience to know where to look, the skills to interpret what’s available, and the knowledge to put new pieces of information into context. In a world where information is easily available, strong personal networks and access to helpful people often matter more than access to the information itself.

In a technological era defined by social media, where information flows through networks and where people curate information for their peers, who you know shapes what you know. When social divisions get reinforced online, information inequities also get reproduced. When increased access to information produces information overload, sifting through the mounds of available information to make meaning requires time and skills. Those whose networks are vetting information and providing context are more privileged in this information landscape than those whose friends and family have little experience doing such information work.

For many information needs, people turn to people around them. Sociologists have shown that social networks affect people’s job prospects, health, and happiness. Opportunities for social and economic support depend heavily on personal connections. Teens turn to their networks to learn about college opportunities. They also develop a sense of what’s normative by watching those who surround them. When it comes to information and opportunity, who youth know
matters. Just because teens can get access to a technology that can connect them to anyone anywhere does not mean that they have equal access to knowledge and opportunity.33

In his famous trilogy *The Information Age*, sociologist Manuel Castells argued that the industrial era is ending and that an information age has begun. His first volume—*The Rise of the Network Society*—makes the case for the power of networks as the organizational infrastructure of an economy based on information. Technology plays a central role in the network society that Castells recognizes is unfolding, and he documents the technological divide that put certain cities in better or worse positions to leverage the economic changes taking place. Although critics have accused Castells of technological determinism, Castells’s analysis is more fruitfully understood as a critical accounting of what economic and cultural shifts are possible because of technology and why not everyone will benefit equally from these shifts.34 In short, not everyone will benefit equally because networks—both social and technical—are neither evenly distributed nor meritocratic.

Social media does not radically rework teens’ social networks. As a result, technology does not radically reconfigure inequality. The transformative potential of the internet to restructure social networks in order to reduce structural inequality rests heavily on people’s ability to leverage it to make new connections. This is not how youth use social media.

Not only are today’s teens reproducing social dynamics online, but they are also heavily discouraged from building new connections that would diversify their worldviews. The “stranger danger” rhetoric discussed in the chapter on danger doesn’t just affect teens’ interactions with adults; many teens are actively discouraged from developing relationships with other teens online for fear that those teens may turn out to be adults intending to harm them. Not all teens buy into this moral panic, but when teens do make connections online, they focus on engaging with people who share their interests, tastes, and cultural background. For these teens, turning to people who seem familiar
allows them to feel safe, confident, and secure. They reinforce the homophilous social networks they inhabit instead of using technology to connect across lines of difference. Access to a wide range of people does not guarantee a reconfiguration of social connections.

The limited scope of teens’ engagement with people from diverse backgrounds—and the pressure that they receive to not engage with strangers—is particularly costly for less privileged youth. Although everyone benefits from developing a heterogeneous social network, privileged youth are more likely to have connections to people with more privilege and greater access to various resources, opportunities, and types of information. When information opportunities are tethered to social networks, how social relations are constructed matters for every aspect of social equality. When social divisions are reinforced—and inequities across social networks reproduced—there are material, social, and cultural consequences.

The issue of inequality gets realized when information is structured to flow only to certain groups of people. During the 2006–2007 school year—the period when teens were segmenting themselves into Facebook and MySpace—many college admissions officers also started using social media for college recruitment. They created online profiles, produced spreadable videos, and invited high school students to talk with them and student representatives. Although millions of teenagers were active exclusively on MySpace, most of the colleges tailored their recruitment efforts to Facebook. When I asked admissions officers about their decision to focus on Facebook, they invariably highlighted a lack of resources and a need to prioritize. Universally, when I pointed out that black and Latino youth were more likely to be on MySpace and that their decision was effectively targeting primarily white and Asian students, they were stunned. They had never considered the cultural consequences of their choices.

At the time of this book’s writing, it’s quite common for companies to turn to LinkedIn, a professional social network site, to recruit college interns and new graduates. Recruiters typically prioritize candidates who already have contacts to the company as performed
through social media. Some even explicitly ask applicants to list everyone they know who already works at the company. Those who don’t know anyone at the company are disadvantaged as candidates. This tends to reinforce same-ness because people’s social networks are rarely diverse. This also provides an additional obstacle for underrepresented minorities, those who come from less advantaged communities, and people who generally lack social capital.

We don’t live in a postracial society, and social media is not the cultural remedy that some people hoped it would become. Today’s youth live in a world with real and pervasive social divisions. Those dynamics are reproduced online and have significant implications for how teens make sense of public life. People help define what’s normative for their friends and contacts. And everyone’s opportunities are dependent on whom they know. Having access to the information available through the internet is not enough to address existing structural inequities and social divisions. The internet will not inherently make the world more equal, nor will it automatically usher today’s youth into a tolerant world. Instead, it lays bare existing and entrenched social divisions.