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Implications of User Choice: The Cultural Logic of "MySpace or Facebook?"
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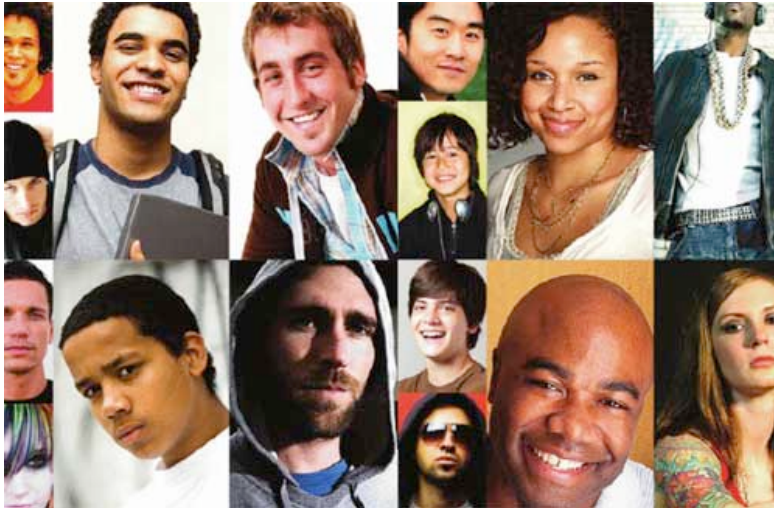
Many of us have had our lives transformed by technology. And many of us are also enamored of the transformative potential of technology, which has led us to develop technology and become advocates of technological practices. As we become more and more enveloped in and by technology, it's easy to feel excited about what's going on. Yet we must also be cautious.

The rhetoric around technology often makes it out to be the great equalizer of society, suggesting that technology can in and of itself make the world a better place. Let's ignore the technological determinist overtones for a moment and note that this rhetoric fails to capture the complex ways in which the actual adoption of technology tends to mirror and magnify a whole suite of societal issues.

It is crucial that we begin accounting for how technology actually reveals social stratification and reproduces social divisions. For decades we've assumed that inequality in relation to technology has everything to do with access and that if we fix the access problem, all will be fine. This is the grand narrative of politicized concepts like the digital divide. Yet, increasingly, we're seeing people with similar levels of access engage with technology in very different ways. And we're experiencing a social media landscape in which participation "choice" leads to a digital reproduction of social divisions, which already pervade society.

Rather than staying in the land of the abstract, let's go concrete with a specific case study: the differential adoption of MySpace and Facebook among American teens.

I have been doing ethnographic fieldwork on various aspects of social network sites since 2003. Starting in 2005, I began specifically focusing on the social media practices of American high school–age teenagers. During the 2006-2007 school year, I started noticing a trend. In each school, in each part of the country, there were teens who opted for MySpace and teens who opted for Facebook. There were also plenty of teens who used both. At the beginning of the school

year, teens were asking "Are you on MySpace? Yes or No?" At the end of the school year, the question had changed to "MySpace or Facebook?"

In analyzing my data, one can reasonably see this as a matter of individual choice in a competitive market. There are plenty of teenagers who will tell you that they are on one or the other as a matter of personal preference having to do with features, functionality, design, and usability. For example, Justin (15, Austin) prefers Facebook because of the unlimited pictures while Anindita (17, Los Angeles) likes that MySpace is "more complex" while "Facebook is just plain white and that's it."

Teens will also talk about their perceptions of different sites, about what they think certain affordances mean, or how they perceive the sites in relation to values they hold, such as safety. For example, Cachi (18, Iowa) likes that "Facebook is less competitive than MySpace" while Tara (16, Michigan) thinks that Facebook seems safer.

For all of the technology-specific commentary teens offer, the dominant explanation teens will give to justify their choice has to do with their friends. Simply put, they go where their friends are:

Kevin (15, Seattle): I'm not big on Facebook; I'm a MySpace guy. I have a Facebook and I have some friends on it, but most of my friends don't check it that often so I don't check it that often.

Red (17, Iowa): I am on Facebook and MySpace. I don't talk to people on MySpace anymore… The only reason I still have my MySpace is because my brother's on there.

In choosing to go where their friends are, teens reproduce preexisting social networks. Yet their choice is not neutral. Teens do not randomly select their friends; they connect with people who are like them. This is the basis of the sociological concept of "homophily," which highlights that "birds of a feather stick together." By the time most teens join MySpace or Facebook, they already know someone who is on the site. They are attracted to the site because of the people there. Thus, the early adopters of the sites and the network effects of adoption fundamentally shaped each site's tenor.

MySpace came out first and quickly attracted urban twentysomethings. It spread to teenagers through older siblings and cousins as well as those who were attracted to indie rock and hip-hop culture. Facebook started at Harvard and spread to the Ivies before spreading more broadly, first to other colleges, then to companies, then elite high schools, and then the unwashed masses. The first teenagers to hear about Facebook were those connected to the early adopters of Facebook (i.e., the Ivy League–bound). Thus, the desirability of the site spread from people who were heading to college. As the two sites grew, they initially attracted different audiences. But by early 2007, teens were choosing between the sites. And while that choice was driven by friendship, it also reinforced distinctions.

Teens recognize that MySpace and Facebook attracted different populations:

Kat (14, Massachusetts): I was the first one of my friends to get a Facebook, and then a lot of people got one afterwards… The people who use MySpace—again, not in a racist way— but are usually more like ghetto and hip-hop rap lovers group. And pretty much everyone else might have a Facebook. But there's some people that aren't that. All the rockers, too, will have a MySpace.

In trying to describe what distinguishes the two groups, Kat chooses words that signal that those on MySpace are from a lower socio-economic background and, most probably, black. This is reinforced both by her apology for the racial connotation of her distinction and also by her reference to a different group of youth defined by music, who are presumably not lumped into the group she marks as "ghetto."

The structure of social relations in the United States is shaped by race, socio-economic status, education, and lifestyle. Given the network-driven adoption of MySpace and Facebook, it is not surprising that the adoption patterns also play

out along these lines. What is interesting is what happened when some teens chose to move from MySpace to Facebook .

Social media is faddish. MySpace came first and many teens chose to embrace it. When Facebook came along, plenty of teens adopted it as the "new thing." In doing so, some chose to leave MySpace, while others simply maintained two profiles. Yet Facebook did not simply usurp MySpace. In May 2009—two and a half years after teens began splitting—comScore reported that MySpace and Facebook had roughly equal numbers of unique visitors. In other words, while a shift did occur, not all MySpace users left for Facebook, and not all who joined after both were available opted for the newer site.

Those teens who left were not abstractly driven by fads; they were driven by their social networks. Thus, the shift that took place was also shaped by race, socio-economic status, education, and lifestyle. Here is where the division solidified, marked by social categories and distinctions:

Anastasia (17, New York): *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 allllllways 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.*

In choosing between the two sites, teens marked one as for "people like me," which suggested that the other was for the "other" people. Teens—and adults—use social categories and labels to identify people with values, tastes, and social positions. As teens chose between MySpace and Facebook, these sites began reflecting the cultural frames of those social categories. Nowhere is this more visible than in the language of those who explicitly chose Facebook over MySpace.

Craig (17, California): *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.*

Craig's description focuses on a comparison of MySpace and Facebook to a series of lifestyle brands. Taste identification is a way in which people self-segregate. Yet, as with social networks, taste is highly correlated with race, socio-economic status, and education. Social networks also drive taste; people like what their friends like. Thus, in choosing Facebook, teens were both connecting with their friends and identifying with a particular lifestyle brand.

The mere fact that network effects, shaped by homophily, resulted in a self-segregation of teens across two social network sites should not be particularly surprising. Yet it ruptures a well-loved fantasy that the Internet would be a great equalizer in which race and class would no longer matter. Furthermore, it presents new challenges for those seeking to address the costs of social stratification in American society.

Social network sites are not like email, where it doesn't matter if you're on Hotmail or Yahoo (although there are connotations implied, with AOL conveying a different signal than Gmail). These are walled gardens. Those who use MySpace can't communicate with those on Facebook, and vice versa. So choosing to participate in one but not the other introduces a hurdle for communication across social divisions. This is further magnified when educators and politicians and universities and organizations choose to use social network sites to connect with their

students/constituents/customers. Choosing one becomes political, because choosing only one means excluding those who opted for the other. Consider, for example, the universities that are doing all of their high school recruiting through Facebook. Or the public officials who use just one platform to reach all constituents, thinking that everyone is or will be present. It's one thing to make this choice to reach a specific demographic; it's another to do so blindly and think that everyone is at the table simply because people like you are.

We cannot expect to suddenly eradicate inequality from society, and it is not surprising that technology reflects persistent social stratification. In raising these issues, I'm not arguing that technology can or should be the great equalizer. Instead, I want us to all recognize that it is not. The technologies that we build are never neutral—they are infused with the values and ideas of the creators and the actions and goals of the users. Network effects of adoption patterns further shape technology. As people begin to identify with specific technologies, they take on specific frames in society and begin to reflect them in everyday life. Understanding that divisions are taking place does not necessarily mean trying to "fix" them; there are perfectly rational explanations for self-segregating. Rather, recognizing social divisions means being conscious of the underlying factors and vigilant in thinking of the implications.

We can ignore the fact that social divisions are taking place, but in doing so we fail to realize that we shape what's unfolding. We are building systems in which social stratification will be reproduced and reenacted even if we do not design it that way. We often launch our systems first to those who are like us; the early adopters who set the norms are baking specific cultural values into our systems. These values can alienate people who are not like us, and the choices we make can thus reinforce social divisions. We are shaping the public dialogue about these technologies and our attitudes reflect our personal structural positions, often at the expense of people who are not like us. Knowing how the technologies we create mirror and shape society is crucial to being an ethical technologist. Even if we don't know how to tackle large societal issues, the least we can do is be conscious of their presence in the environments we create and respect the choices and attitudes of those who aren't like us.

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