

Viewing American class divisions through Facebook and MySpace

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(If you have comments, please add them to [the related entry on my blog](#). Thank you.)

Over the last six months, I've noticed an increasing number of press articles about how high school teens are leaving MySpace for Facebook. That's only partially true. There is indeed a change taking place, but it's not a shift so much as a fragmentation. Until recently, American teenagers were flocking to MySpace. The picture is now being blurred. Some teens are flocking to MySpace. And some teens are flocking to Facebook. Who goes where gets kinda sticky... probably because it seems to primarily have to do with socio-economic class.

I want to take a moment to make a meta point here. I have been traipsing through the country talking to teens and I've been seeing this transition for the past 6-9 months but I'm having a hard time putting into words. Americans aren't so good at talking about class and I'm definitely feeling that discomfort. It's sticky, it's uncomfortable, and to top it off, we don't have the language for marking class in a meaningful way. So this piece is intentionally descriptive, but in being so, it's also hugely problematic. I don't have the language to get at what I want to say, but I decided it needed to be said anyhow. I wish I could just put numbers in front of it all and be done with it, but instead, I'm going to face the stickiness and see if I can get my thoughts across. Hopefully it works.

For the academics reading this, I want to highlight that this is not an academic article. It is not trying to be. It is based on my observations in the field, but I'm not trying to situate or theorize what is going on. I've chosen terms meant to convey impressions, but I know that they are not precise uses of these terms. Hopefully, one day, I can get the words together to actually write an academic article about this topic, but I felt as though this is too important of an issue to sit on while I find the words. So I wrote it knowing that it would piss many off. The academic side of me feels extremely guilty about this; the activist side of me finds it too critical to go unacknowledged.

Enter the competition

When MySpace launched in 2003, it was primarily used by 20/30-somethings (just like Friendster before it). The bands began populating the site by early 2004 and throughout 2004, the average age slowly declined. It wasn't until late 2004 that teens really started appearing en masse on MySpace and 2005 was the year that MySpace became the "in thing" for teens.

Facebook launched in 2004 as a Harvard-only site. It slowly expanded to welcome people with .edu accounts from a variety of different universities. In mid-2005, Facebook opened its doors to high school students, but it wasn't that easy to get an account because you needed to be invited. As a result, those who

were in college tended to invite those high school students that they liked. Facebook was strongly framed as the "cool" thing that college students did. So, if you want to go to college (and particularly a top college), you wanted to get on Facebook badly. Even before high school networks were possible, the moment seniors were accepted to a college, they started hounding the college sysadmins for their .edu account. The message was clear: college was about Facebook.

For all of 2005 and most of 2006, MySpace was the cool thing for high school teens and Facebook was the cool thing for college students. This is not to say that MySpace was solely high school or Facebook solely college, but there was a dominating age division that played out in the cultural sphere.

When Facebook opened to everyone last September, it became relatively easy for any high school student to join (and then they simply had to get permission to join their high school network). This meant that many more high school teens did join, much to the chagrin and horror of college students who had already begun [writing](#) about their lack of interest in having HS students on "their" site. Still, even with the rise of high school students, Facebook was framed as being about college. This was what was in the press. This was what college students said. Facebook is what the college kids did. Not surprisingly, college-bound high schoolers desperately wanted in.

In addition to the college framing, the press coverage of MySpace as dangerous and sketchy alienated "good" kids. Facebook seemed to provide an ideal alternative. Parents weren't nearly as terrified of Facebook because it seemed "safe" thanks to the network-driven structure. (Of course, I've seen more half-naked, drink-carrying high school students on Facebook than on MySpace, but we won't go there.)

As this past school year progressed, the division around usage became clearer. In trying to look at it, I realized that it was primarily about class.

Socio-economic divisions

In sociology, [Nalini Kotamraju](#) has argued that constructing arguments around "class" is extremely difficult in the United States. Terms like "working class" and "middle class" and "upper class" get all muddled quickly. She argues that class divisions in the United States have more to do with lifestyle and social stratification than with income. In other words, all of my anti-capitalist college friends who work in cafes and read Engels are not working class just because they make \$14K a year and have no benefits. Class divisions in the United States have more to do with social networks (the real ones, not FB/MS), social capital, cultural capital, and attitudes than income. Not surprisingly, other demographics typically discussed in class terms are also a part of this lifestyle division. Social networks are strongly connected to geography, race, and religion; these are also huge factors in lifestyle divisions and thus "class."

I'm not doing justice to her arguments but it makes sense. My friends who are making \$14K in cafes are not of the same class as the immigrant janitor in Oakland just because they share the same income bracket. Their lives are quite different. Unfortunately, with this framing, there aren't really good labels to demarcate the class divisions that do exist. For this reason, I will attempt to delineate what we see on social network sites in stereotypical, descriptive terms meant to evoke an image.

The goodie two shoes, jocks, athletes, or other "good" kids are now going to Facebook. These kids tend to come from families who emphasize education and going to college. They are part of what we'd call hegemonic society. They are primarily white, but not exclusively. They are in honors classes, looking forward to the prom, and live in a world dictated by after school activities.

MySpace is still home for Latino/Hispanic teens, immigrant teens, "burnouts," "alternative kids," "art fags," punks, emos, goths, gangstas, queer kids, and other kids who didn't play into the dominant high school popularity paradigm. These are kids whose parents didn't go to college, who are expected to get a job when they finish high school. These are the teens who plan to go into the military immediately after schools. Teens who are really into music or in a band are also on MySpace. MySpace has most of the kids who are socially ostracized at school because they are geeks, freaks, or queers.

In order to demarcate these two groups, let's call the first group of teens "hegemonic teens" and the second group "subaltern teens." (Yes, I know that these words have academic and political valence. I couldn't find a good set of terms so feel free to suggest alternate labels.) These terms are sloppy at best because the division isn't clear, but it should at least give us terms with which to talk about the two groups.

The division is cleanest in communities where the predator panic hit before MySpace became popular. In much of the midwest, teens heard about Facebook and MySpace at the same time. They were told that MySpace was bad while Facebook was key for college students seeking to make friends at college. I go into schools where the school is split between the Facebook users and the MySpace users. On the coasts and in big cities, things are more murky than elsewhere. MySpace became popular through the bands and fans dynamic before the predator panic kicked in. It's popularity on the coasts and in the cities predated Facebook's launch in high schools. Many hegemonic teens are still using MySpace because of their connections to participants who joined in the early days, yet they too are switching and tend to maintain accounts on both. For the hegemonic teens in the midwest, there wasn't a MySpace to switch from so the "switch" is happening much faster. None of the teens are really switching from Facebook to MySpace, although there are some hegemonic teens who choose to check out MySpace to see what happens there even though their friends are mostly on Facebook.

Most teens who exclusively use Facebook are familiar with and have an opinion about MySpace. These teens are very aware of MySpace and they often have a negative opinion about it. They see it as gaudy, immature, and "so middle school." They prefer the "clean" look of Facebook, noting that it is more mature and that MySpace is "so lame." What hegemonic teens call gaudy can also be labeled as "glitzy" or "bling" or "fly" (or what my generation would call "phat") by subaltern teens. Terms like "bling" come out of hip-hop culture where showy, sparkly, brash visual displays are acceptable and valued. The look and feel of MySpace resonates far better with subaltern communities than it does with the upwardly mobile hegemonic teens. This is even clear in the blogosphere where people talk about how gauche MySpace is while commending Facebook on its aesthetics. I'm sure that a visual analyst would be able to explain how classed aesthetics are, but aesthetics are more than simply the "eye of the beholder" - they are culturally narrated and replicated. That "clean" or "modern" look of Facebook is akin to West Elm or Pottery Barn or any poshy Scandinavian design house (that I admit I'm drawn to) while the more flashy look of MySpace resembles the Las Vegas imagery that attracts millions every year. I suspect that lifestyles have aesthetic values and that these are being reproduced on MySpace and Facebook.

I should note here that aesthetics do divide MySpace users. The look and feel that is acceptable amongst average Latino users is quite different from what you see the subculturally-identified outcasts using. Amongst the emo teens, there's a push for simple black/white/grey backgrounds and simplistic layouts. While I'm using the term "subaltern teens" to lump together non-hegemonic teens, the lifestyle divisions amongst the subalterns are quite visible on MySpace through the aesthetic choices of the backgrounds. The aesthetics issue is also one of the forces that drives some longer-term users away from MySpace.

While teens on Facebook all know about MySpace, not all MySpace users have heard of Facebook. In particular, subaltern teens who go to school exclusively with other subaltern teens are not likely to have heard of it. Subaltern teens who go to more mixed-class schools see Facebook as "what the good kids do" or "what the preps do." They have various labels for these hegemonic teens but they know the division, even if they don't have words for it. Likewise, in these types of schools, the hegemonic teens see MySpace as "where the bad kids go." "Good" and "bad" seem to be the dominant language used to divide hegemonic and subaltern teens in mixed-class environments. At the same time, most schools aren't actually that mixed.

To a certain degree, the lack of familiarity amongst certain subaltern kids is not surprising. Teens from poorer backgrounds who are on MySpace are less likely to know people who go to universities. They are more likely to know people who are older than them, but most of their older friends, cousins, and co-workers are on MySpace. It's the cool working class thing and it's the dominant SNS at community colleges. These teens are more likely to be interested in activities like shows and clubs and they find out about them through MySpace. The subaltern teens who are better identified as "outsiders" in a hegemonic community tend to be very aware of Facebook. Their choice to use MySpace instead of Facebook is a rejection of the hegemonic values (and a lack of desire to hang out with the preps and jocks even online).

Class divisions in military use

A month ago, the military banned MySpace but not Facebook. This was a very interesting move because the division in the military reflects the division in high schools. Soldiers are on MySpace; officers are on Facebook. Facebook is extremely popular in the military, but it's not the SNS of choice for 18-year old soldiers, a group that is primarily from poorer, less educated communities. They are using MySpace. The officers, many of whom have already received college training, are using Facebook. The military ban appears to replicate the class divisions that exist throughout the military. I can't help but wonder if the reason for this goes beyond the purported concerns that those in the military are leaking information or spending too much time online or soaking up too much bandwidth with their MySpace usage.

MySpace is the primary way that young soldiers communicate with their peers. When I first started tracking soldiers' MySpace profiles, I had to take a long deep breath. Many of them were extremely pro-war, pro-guns, anti-Arab, anti-Muslim, pro-killing, and xenophobic as hell. Over the last year, I've watched more and more profiles emerge from soldiers who aren't quite sure what they are doing in Iraq. I don't have the data to confirm whether or not a significant shift has occurred but it was one of those observations that just made me think. And then the ban happened. I can't help but wonder if part of the goal is to cut off communication between current soldiers and the group that the military hopes to recruit. Many young soldiers' profiles aren't public so it's not about making a bad public impression. That said, young soldiers tend to have reasonably large networks because they tend to accept friend requests of anyone that they knew back home which means that they're connecting to almost everyone from their high school. Many of these familiar strangers write comments supporting them. But what happens if the soldiers start to question why they're in Iraq? And if this is witnessed by high school students from working class communities who the Army intends to recruit?

Thoughts and meta thoughts

I have been reticent about writing about this dynamic even though I've been tracking it for a good six months now. I don't have the language for what I'm seeing and I'm concerned about how it's going to be interpreted. I can just see the logic: if society's "good" kids are going to Facebook and the "bad" kids are going to MySpace, clearly MySpace is the devil, right? ::shudder:: It's so not that easy. Given a lack of

language for talking about this, my choice of "hegemonic" and "subaltern" was intended to at least insinuate a different way of looking at this split.

The division around MySpace and Facebook is just another way in which technology is mirroring societal values. Embedded in that is a challenge to a lot of our assumptions about who does what. The "good" kids are doing more "bad" things than we are willing to acknowledge (because they're the pride and joy of upwardly mobile parents). And, guess what? They're doing those same bad things online and offline. At the same time, the language and style of the "bad" kids offends most upwardly mobile adults. We see this offline as well. I've always been fascinated watching adults walk to the other side of the street when a group of black kids sporting hip-hop style approach. The aesthetics alone offend and most privileged folks project the worst ideas onto any who don that style. When I see a divide like this, I worry because it reproduced the idea that the "good" kids are good and that Facebook participation is good.

Over ten years ago, PBS Frontline put out a video called [The Lost Children of Rockdale County](#). The film certainly has its issues but it does a brilliant job of capturing how, given complete boredom and a desire for validation, many of the "good" kids will engage in some of the most shocking behaviors... and their parents are typically unaware. By and large, I've found that parents try to curtail such activities by restricting youth even more. This doesn't stop the desire for attention and thus the behaviors continue, but they get pushed further underground and parents become less in-touch with their "good" kids.

While I think it's important to acknowledge that some of the "good" kids aren't that good, I don't want to imply that the inverse is true. Many of them are. But many of the subaltern teens that I talk with have their heads on much tighter than the hegemonic teens. The hegemonic teens do know how to put on a show for most adults (making it more fun for me to interview them and try to work through the walls that they initially offer me). As a society, we have strong class divisions and we project these values onto our kids. MySpace and Facebook seem to be showcasing this division quite well. My hope in writing this out is to point out that many of our assumptions are problematic and the internet often reinforces our views instead of challenging them.

People often ask me if I'm worried about teens today. The answer is yes, but it's not because of social network sites. With the hegemonic teens, I'm very worried about the stress that they're under, the lack of mobility and healthy opportunities for play and socialization, and they hyper-scheduling and surveillance. I'm worried about their unrealistic expectations for becoming rich and famous, their lack of worth ethic after being pampered for so long, and the lack of opportunities that many of them have to even be economically stable let alone better off than their parents. I'm worried about how locking teens indoors coupled with a fast food/junk food advertising machine has resulted in a decrease in health levels across the board which will just get messy as they are increasingly unable to afford health insurance. When it comes to ostracized teens, I'm worried about the reasons why society has ostracized them and how they will react to ongoing criticism from hegemonic peers. I cringe every time I hear of another Columbine, another Virginia Tech, another site of horror when an outcast teen lashes back at the hegemonic values of society.

I worry about the lack of opportunities available to poor teens from uneducated backgrounds. I'm worried about how Wal-Mart Nation has destroyed many of the opportunities for meaningful working class labor as these youth enter the workforce. I'm worried about what a prolonged war will mean for them. I'm worried about how they've been told that to succeed, they must be a famous musician or sports player. I'm worried about how gangs provide the only meaningful sense of community that many of these teens will ever know.

Given the state of what I see in all sorts of neighborhoods, I'm amazed at how well teens are coping and I

think that technology has a lot to do with that. Teens are using social network sites to build community and connect with their peers. They are creating publics for socialization. And through it, they are showcasing all of the good, bad, and ugly of today's teen life. Much of it isn't pretty, but it ain't pretty offline either. Still, it makes my heart warm when I see something creative or engaged or reflective. There is good out there too.

It breaks my heart to watch a class divide play out in the technology. I shouldn't be surprised - when orkut grew popular in India, the caste system was formalized within the system by the users. But there's something so strange about watching a generation splice themselves in two based on class divisions or lifestyles or whatever you want to call these socio-structural divisions.

In the 70s, Paul Willis analyzed British working class youth and he wrote a book called [Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs](#). He argued that working class teens will reject hegemonic values because it's the only way to continue to be a part of the community that they live in. In other words, if you don't know that you will succeed if you make a run at jumping class, don't bother - you'll lose all of your friends and community in the process. His analysis has such strong resonance in American society today. I just wish I knew how to fix it.

I clearly don't have the language to comfortably talk about what's going on, but I think that this issue is important and needs to be considered. I feel as though the implications are huge. Marketers have already figured this out - they know who to market to where. Policy creators have figured this out - they know how to control different populations based on where they are networking. Have social workers figured it out? Or educators? What does it mean that our culture of fear has further divided a generation? What does it mean that, in a society where we can't talk about class, we can see it play out online? And what does it mean in a digital world where no one's supposed to know you're a dog, we can guess your class background based on the tools you use?

Anyhow, I don't know where to go with this, but I wanted to get it out there. So here it is. MySpace and Facebook are new representations of the class divide in American youth. Le sigh.

Methodological background

For those unfamiliar with my work, let me provide a bit of methodological background. I have been engaged in ethnographic research on social network sites since February 2003 when I began studying the practices that emerged on Friendster. I followed the launch and early adoption of numerous social network sites, including Tribe.net, LinkedIn, Flickr, MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, Dodgeball, and Orkut. In late 2004, I decided to move away from studying social network sites to studying youth culture just in time for youth to flock to MySpace.

The practice of 'ethnography' is hard to describe in a bounded form, but ethnography is basically about living and breathing a particular culture, its practices, and its individuals. There are some countables. For example, I have analyzed over 10,000 MySpace profiles, clocked over 2000 hours surfing and observing what happens on MySpace, and formally interviewed 90 teens in 7 states with a variety of different backgrounds and demographics. But that's only the tip of the iceberg. I ride buses to observe teens; I hang out at fast food joints and malls. I talk to parents, teachers, marketers, politicians, pastors, and technology creators. I read, I observe, I document.

One of the biggest problems with studying youth culture is that it's a moving target, constantly shifting based on a variety of social and cultural forces. While I had been keeping an eye on Facebook simply because of my long-term interest in social network sites, I had to really start taking it seriously in the fall of 2006 when teens started telling me about how they were leaving MySpace to join Facebook or joining Facebook as their first social network site.

While social network sites are in vogue, not everyone uses them. When PEW collected data in December 2005, it found that 55% of American teens 12-17 admitted to having a SNS profile in front of their parents. 70% of girls 15-17. These numbers are low, but we don't know how low. In the field, I have found that everyone knows about them and has an opinion of them. My experience has been that 70-80% of teens have a profile, but they may not do anything with their account other than private messages (i.e. glorified email). The percentage who are truly active is more like 50. Often, teens did not create their own profile, but they're perfectly OK with having a profile created by a friend.

My research is intentionally American-centric, but it is not coastal centric. I have done formal interviews in California, Washington, Texas, Kansas, Nebraska, Iowa, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts. When I do this, I do not capture parents' income but I do get parents' education level and job. In each of these communities, I have spent time roaming the streets and talking informally with people of all ages. I have analyzed profiles from all 50 states (and DC and Puerto Rico). I use the high school data from these profiles and juxtapose them with federal information on high school voucher numbers to get a sense of the SES of the school. I have spent time in cities, suburbs, small towns, and some rural regions. There are weaknesses to my data collection. I have spent too little time in rural environments and too little time in the deep south. How I find teens to formally interview varies based on region, but it is not completely random. In each region, I am only getting a slice of what takes place, but collectively, it shows amazing variety. The MySpace profiles that I analyze are random. I do not have access to Facebook profiles, although I have spent an excessive amount of time browsing high schools to see what kind of numbers show up, even if I can't see the actual profiles. Again, none of this is perfect, but it helps me paint a qualitative portrait of what's going on.

