

today's teens know.³ Teens accept this version of networked publics because, however flawed, the spaces and communities provided by social media are what they have available to them in their quest to meaningfully access public life. The commercial worlds that they have access to may not be ideal, but neither is the limited mobility that they experience nor the heavily structured lives that they lead.

To Be Public and To Be in Public

Enamored with Parisian society, French poet Charles Baudelaire documented the public life that unfolded as people strolled along city streets. He wrote of *flâneurs*—individuals who came to the streets not to go anywhere in particular but in order to see and be seen. In Baudelaire's conception, the flâneur is neither fully an exhibitionist nor fully a voyeur at any moment, but a little of both all the time. The flâneur is an intimate part of the city, gaining from both seeing and being seen, performing and watching others.

When teens turn to networked publics, they do so to hang out with friends and be recognized by peers. They share in order to see and be seen. They want to look respectable and interesting, while simultaneously warding off unwanted attention. They choose to share in order to be a part of the public, but how much they share is shaped by how public they want to be. They are, in effect, *digital flâneurs*.

As teens stroll the digital streets, they must contend with aspects of networked technologies that complicate the social dynamics in front of them. The issues of persistence, visibility, spreadability, and searchability that I introduced in the first chapter and addressed throughout the book fundamentally affect their experiences in networked publics. They must negotiate invisible audiences and the collapsing of contexts. They must develop strategies for handling ongoing surveillance and attempts to undermine their agency when they seek to control social situations.

Although most youth are simply trying to be a part of public life, the visibility of their online activities creates tremendous consternation among adults who are uncomfortable with the possibility that

teens might share something inappropriate on Instagram or interact with strangers on Twitter. This is where anxieties around online safety and privacy get coupled with broader societal concerns about race and class, sometimes becoming a source of tension. Teens are not ignorant of their parents' fears, but by and large, they see the opportunities presented by participating in public life as far outweighing the possible consequences they may face.

As teens work through the various issues that emerge around networked publics, they must struggle with what it means both to *be* public and to be *in* public. This often is framed through the language of privacy, and indeed, the tension between being public and being in public comes down to the ability to control the social situation. But the distinction also has to do with how teens relate to public life.

In North Carolina, I met Manu, a seventeen-year-old boy of Indian descent who was active on both Facebook and Twitter. Initially, I assumed that he was using Twitter to create a public presence while keeping Facebook as a more intimate space. I was wrong. Facebook had become so pervasive in his peer group that he felt forced to connect with everyone he'd ever met. Twitter was different because Twitter had not yet become particularly popular in his community. The difference in audience—and how people on each site responded to his sharing—shaped his understanding of Facebook and Twitter. Whenever Manu posted something on Facebook, he felt that he was forcing everyone he'd ever met to consume it, whereas on Twitter, people opted in when they felt that what he was sharing was interesting. As he explained, "I guess Facebook is like yelling it out to a crowd, and then Twitter is just like talking in a room."⁴ He posted messages he wanted to broadcast widely on Facebook while sharing whatever intimate thoughts were on his mind on Twitter. Manu's practice contradicts the assumptions then held by adults, who often saw Facebook as a more intimate site than Twitter because of each site's technical affordances and defaults.

What makes a particular site or service more or less public is not necessarily about the design of the system but rather how it is situated

within the broader social ecosystem. Although Facebook was initially built to provide an intimate, private alternative to MySpace, Manu's practice reveals how—by becoming the de facto social media site for one billion people—it's often more experientially public than more publicly accessible sites that are not nearly as popular. In this way, the technical architecture of the system matters less than how users understand their relationship to it and how the public perceives any particular site.

The tensions between the technologies that help create networked publics and the publics that are created through networked technologies reveal how the nature of public-ness is actually being remade every day in people's lives. Twitter is not inherently public even if the content is broadly accessible, nor are people's experiences of Facebook private just because the content can be restricted. Both help create networked publics, but the nature of public-ness for teens ends up depending on how the people around them use available tools.

What teens want from being in public—and how they understand publics—varies. Some teens see publics as a site of freedom, and they want to be able to roam free from adult surveillance. Whereas these teens want to be in public, other teens are looking to be public. They use the same technologies that allow them to engage in networked publics to magnify their voices, gather audiences, and connect with others on a large scale.

Some teens who are seeking to be public are enamored by the stories presented by media, including the “reality” of reality TV, the rich narratives of exploratory youth in novels, and the raucous adventures of celebrities. Teens often reference celebrities as individuals who achieve freedom and opportunities by being public. In this way, they blur the lines between being public and being in public.

Long before the internet, there were teens who dreamed of or actively sought out broader engagement and tried to create publics from their own homes. Teens who want to be public often use media or new technologies to do so. In the 1980s and 1990s, some youth turned to pirate radio and homemade magazines, or zines, to connect

with others.⁵ Even though teen adoption of these technologies was not universal, popular films like *Pump Up the Volume* and *Wayne's World* celebrated these practices and the fun that could be had by being public.

Social media has made being public much more accessible to teens, and many embrace popular technologies to build an audience and contribute their thoughts to the broader cultural ethos. I met teens who had cultivated hundreds of thousands—and even millions—of followers on MySpace, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram. Some shared homemade videos, fashion commentary, or music they made with their friends. Others posted risqué photos or problematic content in an effort to entice strangers. Their reasons varied, but an interest in attention is common. These teens relish the opportunity to be seen and be part of a broader conversation.

Although some teens are looking for the attention that comes with being public, most teens are simply looking to be in public. Most are focused on what it means to be a part of a broader social world. They want to connect with and participate in culture, both to develop a sense of self and to feel as though they are a part of society. Some even see publics as an opportunity for activism. These teens are looking to actively participate in public life in order to make the world a better place.

When Networked Publics Get Political

Not only has social media enabled new ways of being public and being in public, but these same technologies have been used to reconfigure political publics as we know them.⁶ Teens are often eschewed for being apolitical, but some teens are deeply and explicitly political in their activities, both online and off.⁷ A networked public is not inherently a political public sphere, but some teens can and do bring their politics to their online engagement and use technology to help them be political.⁸

Around the world, people have leveraged social media and networked technologies to instantiate meaningful political activities.

Using the internet and mobile phones to coordinate and communicate, activists have banded together and engaged different constituencies to resist political regimes.⁹ Even the simple act of hanging out online to see and be seen has enormous potential for creating the civic networks that support real-world political engagement.¹⁰ Teens' practices in social media are neither frivolous nor without impact in other parts of public and civic life, whether they are trying to be political or not.

The majority of teens' engagement with networked publics is never expressly political, but there are notable exceptions that often go unacknowledged. In 2005, Congress introduced HR4437, the Border Protection, Anti-Terrorism and Illegal Immigrant Control Act. This bill, directed at undocumented people living in the United States, was rife with measures that would have had serious social justice and humanitarian consequences. Immigration advocates described it as draconian and opposed it. As HR4437 gained traction among anti-immigrant groups, opponents began taking to the streets in protest.

In March 2006, immigrant rights groups organized massive protests through Spanish-speaking media and traditional advocacy networks. Many teen children of undocumented parents felt disconnected from the protests organized by more seasoned activists. They turned to MySpace and used text messaging to coordinate their own public stance.¹¹

On March 27, 2006, only a few days after immigrant rights groups hosted a massive protest, thousands of California high school students walked out of school and took to the streets to demand rights on behalf of their families.¹² In Los Angeles alone, more than twenty thousand students marched in protest. Students talked about how the bill represented a form of racist oppression that would permit racial profiling. Others spoke about the fundamental problems with the economic system, about how Mexicans are a critical labor force that is systematically oppressed. Still others described how their parents came to America to give them a chance for a better life. They crafted banners and posters, brought flags to signify the diversity of cultures that people came from, and invoked Cesar Chavez and human rights in their chants.

These teens were doing recognizable political work, despite adults' frequent dismissal of teens as having no civic interests and being otherwise politically disengaged. Were they celebrated? No. Rather than being complimented for their willingness to step forward and take a stance, the students were summarily dismissed.

Public officials and school administrators spoke out against the students' actions and their use of technology for creating a disruptive situation by encouraging fellow students to skip school. They chastised the students for using political issues to justify mass truancy. The press, using the fear-mongering tactics discussed throughout this book, gave the impression that administrators were concerned for students' safety.

In admonishing the students, administrators told the press that the students should return to school, where they could have conversations about immigration in a "productive" way. When Los Angeles mayor Antonio Villaraigosa spoke to the young protesters, he said: "You've come today, you registered your commitment to your families, your opposition to the Sensenbrenner legislation, but it's time to go back to school."¹³ His tone was condescending, implying that a day at school was more important than this political act. Some adults invoked Cesar Chavez by telling students that the well-respected civil rights leader would be ashamed of them. The discussions on MySpace painted a different logic to these criticisms as students discussed how schools would be docked anywhere from thirty to fifty dollars in state funding for each student who did not attend class.

The students faced steep consequences for their decision to protest. In some towns, authorities charged them with truancy for participating. Many faced school detention and other punishments. Few adults recognized the teens for their ingenuity in using the tools available to them to engage directly in political action. Activists regularly face punishment for their activities, but these teens weren't even recognized as activists.

Teens' engagement around HR4437 was in many ways a typical protest, but many of the other forms of activism that teens engage in