

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.<sup>5</sup>

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*.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.