

Responding to Responses to: "Viewing American class divisions through Facebook and MySpace"

danah boyd

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<http://www.danah.org/papers/essays/ResponseToClassDivisions.html>

(This is a response to the various critiques of my June 24 essay "Viewing American class divisions through Facebook and MySpace." Please read the original before reading this response.)

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

One month ago, I put out [a blog essay](#) that took on a life of its own. This essay addressed one of America's most taboo topics: class. Due to personal circumstances, I wasn't online as things spun further and further out of control and I had neither the time nor the emotional energy to address all of the astounding misinterpretations that I saw as a digital game of telephone took hold. I've browsed the hundreds of emails, thousands of blog posts, and thousands of comments across the web. I'm in awe of the amount of time and energy people put into thinking through and critiquing my essay. In the process, I've also realized that I was not always so effective at communicating what I wanted to communicate. To clarify some issues, I decided to put together a long response that addresses a variety of different issues.

When studying post-structuralism, I was utterly fascinated by the idea of the death of the author. The idea is that once a text is put out there, the author matters not because the author has no control over how that text is interpreted. The weird thing about blogging is that the author is pretty darn present. I'm here. No one seems to realize that but I am. In the last week, I read the thousands of Slashdot comments and blog entries addressing my essay. In most cases, I refrained from commenting though. Instead, I decided to take all of the issues and put them together in a response. This is that response. Of course, that doesn't mean that people will listen.. the author might not be dead but she might be powerless against people's preferred interpretations. And in the world of blogs, verbosity is akin to author suicide. Still, I haven't learned to be succinct.

This response is long because the issues are vast. In some sense, that's my fault. I've clearly been taken out of context in so many different ways and I didn't write my piece for the audience who ended up consuming it. My writing clearly did not leave the impression that I meant to leave. I can't promise that this response clears up everything. It might not. But I feel the need to respond. Even if no one reads it.

Form and Format

I'm an academic but I'm also a blogger. For me, these are separate identities. I write formal papers that I spend months trying to find the language to properly express what's going on. In those papers, I try to balance precision and readability. My blog is a different story. I write in an off-the-cuff manner, trying to paint impressions rather than nuance. In academic writing, I have to outline methodology and background, assuming that no one has heard of me or the topic before. In my blog, I write with the assumption that people are familiar with my work and with the topic. In academic writing, I write for posterity. In my blog, I write to get an issue off my chest and to work things out while they are still raw.

The informal language in my blog is intentional. The lack of citations is intentional. They are meant to signal that this is a work-in-progress. I want to signal that I'm thinking out loud. Unfortunately, many feel as though a blog must be formal and then they project this view onto my writing and then complain

about the language and the lack of cites. I am capable of situating arguments in broader theoretical arguments, but I don't attempt to do that here while I'm working through things. I guess my signals are broken.

The blog structure is not built for long essays. My blog itself is not formatted to take on a 3000 word essay (it breaks). When I started publishing conference cribs, I started making them separate webpages that I would link to from Apophenia and M2M. Following that, whenever I'd write a blog entry that was longer than 2000 words, I'd shove it off to the same messy directory with my papers and my cribs and link to it from my blog. They're all under the /papers directory simply because I started keeping track of things at the [papers URL](#). You can see more than papers there. I started sub-directorying it a few months ago because it was getting messy. Essays are exactly that and the class piece was an essay.

I added citations to everything under that directory because I was finding that people were taking that material out of context. They were copying/pasting the whole article without reference to where it came from because it looked like it stood on its own (folks didn't do that with my blog entries). I wanted people to know the context so all essays, cribs, op-eds, and papers got tagged with a citation. Unfortunately, this meant that people thought that it was a proper paper.

Data

For those who are not qualitative researchers, we need to talk briefly about what qualitative and quantitative research are and what they offer... (There are year-long classes on this so I'm only brushing the surface.)

Qualitative research has data. Typically, written ethnographies and other qualitative-driven findings show that data through individual accounts, quotes by people that are contextualized, and detailed descriptions of people or situations. I have that data but I did not include it in my blog essay. I intentionally save data for my academic works so that I can flesh it out and situate it in the depth that needs to happen. The decision to not reveal data has to do with separating the academic writing from the blog writing, but it also has to do with what I'm trying to accomplish with each. Writing a case study of someone or using data requires a lot more fleshing out than I typically do in my blog. Thus, I didn't show data in that essay but that is not because I don't have it. This is another way in which this is not a formal article - leaps of faith are fine when you're having a conversation, but not when you are trying to document something for posterity.

Qualitative and quantitative data show different things. The greatest mistake that I made in this essay was not clarifying why this piece needed a qualitative lens. This had to do with my failure to prepare for how far this piece would spread. In my local world, everyone understands why qualitative has value. I'm realizing the hard way that this is not generally understood.

At the top of the essay, I snarkily wrote "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..." The issue is not just that I don't have quantitative data; it's that quantitative data does not have the nuance to show what's going on. It gets us part way there, but there are problems with it. Class is not simply a matter of what income bracket you're at. When we use income level as a marker, we get the Marxist cafe worker and the immigrant janitor in the same bucket, but they are not living the same lifestyle at all. Another approximation that is often used for class is parental education. Post-graduate degrees are often helpful at pointing to upper class activity, but there's still a huge difference between a Stanford Law degree and a master's in special ed from the local night college. There's also a big difference between dropping out of Harvard after 2 years and getting a 2-year community college degree. Surveys usually ask what the last degree one got was. Do we

really put Bill Gates in the same bucket with other just-finished-HS individuals? (Gates was not just an average dropout... His parents were powerful and he dropped out of Harvard.) Marking teens' class is even more sticky because we use their parents as proxies. Many children replicate their parents class norms, but not all. This is why parents complain that one kid is doing "OK" and the other is not; this means that one kid is living up to parental class expectations and the other is not.

So how do we measure class? We need to be able to measure it before we can quantify divisions. There are ways to measure lifestyle markers and taste divisions through different approximations. And maybe if we collected enough data about a bunch of different things, we could bucket people into meaningful class divisions. But we're a long way from there and this is not what folks who are measuring users are doing. So we make these approximations and they don't tell the whole story. I'm sure that quantitative data will appear that will capture some of what I'm talking about. I've already received notices from academics who have measured it in college and seen this same phenomenon. comScore data sorta gets at it. And more will emerge. But my essay was meant to get beyond just the numbers and look at the lifestyle differences involved. This has to be done qualitatively because of measurement issues. Qualitative data lets you see the stickiness... and then you have to find a way to describe it.

The problem is that it's hard to show trends qualitatively. To be frank, I'm not sure how to do it. I can report on what I'm seeing and describe in detail what's happening. And maybe I should've brought out some of the fantastic quotes that I have about how this plays out, but I'm not sure that this would've convinced those who are obsessed with quantitative data. For whatever reason, many in this society think that things can only be proved through numbers. Of course, what's fascinating is that most researchers (and the USA Today) know that you can twist numbers to prove just about anything. Even numbers have to be interpreted and people are terrible at interpreting them. I think that our obsession with numbers is dangerous - I think that we give them too much credence and think that they say more than they do.

Folks also seem to believe that counterexamples destroy the value of patterns. What I'm trying to document is not an all-or-nothing situation. It's about patterns, it's about trends, it's about divisions that are subtle. There are going to be tons of counter examples, but that doesn't mean that patterns aren't emerging.

When I talk about data, I'm not talking about my friends or what I hear from teenagers in Los Angeles (or San Francisco). I drive to disconnected communities and talk to teenagers from different schools about their lives. I hang out in public places where I watch teens. I hang out on MySpace and scan the micro-profiles that one can see on Facebook. I talk to parents, teachers, pastors, and community leaders from all over the nation. I talk to people from varied backgrounds, all to get at what's going on. The trick to ethnographic work like this is to understand the biases that are operating in the spheres you study. This is not survey work. This is about contextualizing what you learn, making sense of how an individual is or is not like her/his peers. This is not about random sampling, but sampling until you start to see patterns that are predictable, until you flesh out the domain. While individual experiences are important, when I'm drawing patterns, I'm talking beyond the individual - I'm trying to paint a meta portrait.

Using extremes

In her book titled "Jocks and Burnouts," Penny Eckert talks about the value in marking extremes that narrate discourse even though most people fall somewhere in-between. Most teens are not jocks OR burnouts, but those terms evoke images of extreme camps that work as signposts in 1980s high schools. Those extremes signal opposing values and activities, ideas and ideologies. Most teens draw from both in framing their own world. There are caricatured jocks and caricatured burnouts but the reality is

somewhere in-between.

I did not do a good job of fleshing this out in my article. You will find an astonishing number of teens who have both MySpace and Facebook these days. At the same time, they are more drawn to one or the other (another way in which quantitative data that asks about which they use will not get at this). They have a sense that their friends in each are different or that each site represents a different side of friends who are on both. Few teens have identical profiles on each and often even the baseline photo is different. (Adults tend to copy/paste from one SNS to another.)

The extremes are there and they're marked through all sorts of sticky differences but most individuals are fluidly somewhere in-between. They know which tool to use to contact which friends. There's no incentive to choose one camp exclusively so they don't.

Evocative terms

When I chose "hegemonic" and "subaltern," I wanted to evoke an image. I almost made silly references to the "Hegemon" in the "Ender's Game" series but I decided that would be a bit too tangential for the non-geeks. No words really depict the camps so well and I wanted to avoid framing it all under "good" and "bad" even though so many teens talk about those two narratives in the way that 1980s kids talked about jocks and burnouts.

In evoking hegemonic, I'm referring to work done based on Gramsci's ideas of hegemony. He argued that power in society is not just maintained by force, but through indoctrination into values that will help perpetuate the status quo. Institutes like schools and mass media help perpetuate views. The maintenance of hegemony is always subtle and nuanced, variable and fragmented. People play different roles in upholding hegemony, often without realizing their position in the process.

By talking about hegemonic teens, I'm not talking about teens who necessarily have power, but those who publicly uphold the values of adult society (even when they themselves quietly rebel through action that they try to hide). In some sense, this is Eckert's "jocks" but I felt that jocks is too confused now.

The term subaltern comes from the military; it refers to a subordinate who has little power or authority. Through Gramsci, postcolonial studies picked up this term to refer to people who appear to be voiceless but whose voice can be understood through the lens of those in power. For example, the documents of British colonialists convey a lot about Indian culture because they documented the British failure to understand or suppress and in this condescension, you can see what the Indians were doing. (Of course, as Spivak points out, efforts to give voice to subalterns reinscribe their voice inside hegemonic discourse, arguably further disempowering them.)

I chose the term subaltern to refer to subculturally-identified and non-hegemonic teens because their expressions are often interpreted by hegemonic mass media in a way that they are always seen as failure. I wanted to choose a term that did not simply place them as second-tier citizens, but as powerful voices in discourse. Too many people who read my article assumed that the group that I talked about as subalterns are somehow inferior or less valuable than hegemonic teens. Perhaps that's hegemony speaking, but I find it frustrating. I think that they are equally powerful forces in society (and they are certainly equally powerful in the market) but I think that they have different views on the construction and maintenance of society as we know it.

The terms are extremely problematic but I used them with a smile on my face because I thought that they would evoke an image and make people think. Many have been outraged that I appear biased

towards one or the other (although no one seems to know which - I've been accused of being condescending towards subaltern teens and I've also been accused of fetishizing them). Perhaps I should've located myself. As a teen, I would've been caught in between - a smart kid whose friends and world were very much in the subaltern camps (geeks and burnouts primarily). As an adult, I have more privilege than I ever thought possible and my world is extremely hegemonic and I'm always trying to fight against that. Thus, I probably have more sympathy with subaltern teens but my friends are all raising hegemonic ones who I adore. Thus, I'm definitely caught in the middle.

Misreadings (or lack of reading)

A huge misreading of my piece concerns what age group I'm talking about. I study teens, American high school teens to be exact. I am not talking about college students or the 35+ crowd. Much of what I'm saying might apply to them but it's astonishing to me that so many folks have decided to "prove me wrong" by talking about themselves and their friends (all over whom are outside of HS). I should've put teenagers in the title; the only reason that I didn't was that I was sick of seeing the word teenager in the title of everything I write. My guess is that most people didn't read the article or they wanted to make it personal even though they aren't teens. Thus, when I'm talking about geeks and queer folks, I'm talking about teen geeks and queer teens. Their experience is quite different in HS than it is when they have more agency.

Another misreading of my piece concerns the history of Facebook. I've had literally hundreds of messages from people who want to tell me that Facebook started out as a college site. Duh. I explicitly note that it started out as a Harvard site. A huge part of my point is that the history of it was critical to the sense that it's for the college-bound. It was first seen as a rite of passage and then it was seen as what you did to grow up. The history is a large part of why this division has played out the way it has. The same can be said for MySpace which reached the teen population through music. Murdoch's acquisition also played a role. The history is crucial here and it explains a lot of why things emerged the way that they did. I'm not trying to negate that, but point out what else has fallen out as a result.

Unfortunately, misinterpretations were made worse by the mainstream media, and namely the initial BBC article that talked about this essay as a formal report of a six month study. (The article was corrected a few days later.) I realized very quickly that people read the BBC article or the Slashdot coverage or their friends' blog posts and decided to critique from there. I have been astonished at how lazy people have been. My article is not that inaccessible and it's not even that long. What was even funnier was that when I wrote a response to the BBC article on my blog, people then took that to say that I saw the essay as based on no data and otherwise meaningless. The essay is based on data; it is rooted in a very long ethnographic study; but it is just not a formal report of my findings.

Not only did folks misread all over the place, they perpetuated their misreadings and others' interpretations. The most insidious of this was the [MSNBC coverage](#). Not only did MSNBC not contact me directly, the author took my quotes out of context all over the place. She set me up to be mocked through their framing of my name and scary quoting the blog essay term and implicitly supporting the ways in which people attacked me for racism. She then went on to mock me for failing to realize the way the Internet works. Of course, she did conclude by pointing out that journalists are lazy (herself too?), but still, it sickens me that this kind of coverage is considered appropriate. Needless to say, the MSNBC article has prompted all sorts of mean-spirited emails and blog posts against me and it did not clarify any of what I was attempting to say. (Instead, she shows her own class biases by talking about MySpace as ugly.)

On being a racist, homophobic whore

My article is descriptive, not prescriptive. In other words, just because I see activities amongst gothic kids does not mean that all gothic-identified kids will do something. I'm marking what's going on, not what should be or could be.

In my list of who was in what camp, I used "Latino/Hispanic teens." When I was in the field, I found it fascinating that Latino and Hispanic teens used MySpace even when they were college bound. Those who were going to go college often had a Facebook, but their identity was connected to MySpace. Part of it had to do with family - their extended families were on MySpace so that's where they were. Unlike other racial/ethnic groups, Latino/Hispanic teens were really visibly in the MySpace camp. One of the reasons that I didn't bring up black teens was that they were very much split by socio-economic status instead of race.

I've been accused by many for being racist by marking Latino/Hispanic teens as drawn to MySpace and I'm a bit confused by this. As a white woman, I probably perpetuate all sorts of racists views without even realizing it, but I don't see how noting what is happening makes me a racist. I'm still hoping someone could clarify this for me.

The attack that really got me confused concerned my purported homophobia. I chose the term "queer" instead of any of the LGBT markers because I wanted to mark a broader sexuality stream. I also chose this because of its connection to politicized identity rather than just sexuality. This term has a 20+ year history of being reappropriated; I do not see it as a homophobic term at all. Then again, I identify as being queer while I've never fit nicely into an LGBT paradigm. (How can I be "bi" when gender is amorphous and many of the people I've dated don't identify cleanly as male or female or have identified as both at different times?)

Lots of folks have also called me up to say that they are on Facebook and they are queer. Even LGBT press have attacked me for calling lumping queers in with outcasts. I think most of them failed to realize that I'm talking about high school teens, not all queer individuals. While LGBT organizations are popping up on campuses, being a queer teen still sucks. It sucked when I was growing up, it sucked when most queer folks I know were growing up, and it still sucks today. Except at that LGBT-only school in NY, most queer teens grow up not knowing many other queer folks. They don't fit in, even if others accept them. The choice for dates is much more limited, resulting in many queer teens dating all other queer folks they know even when they share nothing in common. More than for any other group, college is freedom for queer teens. But in HS, being queer is rarely hegemonic.

Like duh

The reaction to my article has been extremely variable. One reaction often makes me giggle: "duh." To me, that is the reaction that it should've evoked. Duh. It makes sense. Of course. What I'm marking in this essay should've been obvious to everyone. What amazes me is that so many folks are shocked by it and so many others refuse to acknowledge it. It plays out online just like it plays out offline. Physical hangout spaces like bars are split by class, even though they theoretically welcome anyone. Public spaces get split by class.

The "conclusion" of my article should not have been a big deal, but I had to put it out there because so many folks weren't acknowledging it and the press kept perpetuating the view that MySpace was dead because Facebook was taking over. We used to have this utopian view that the Internet would solve all of our societal divisions. On the Internet, no one would know you're a dog, right? The reality is that all of society's issues are simply perpetuated online. And that's frustrating. I liked the utopian dream better, even if it's not real. But if we accept the reality - that the Internet mirrors and magnifies offline values

and views - we must start to think of what the implications of this are. Society is in a dangerous position when people who are different do not interact. This is how intolerance breeds and we definitely have enough of that in this country.

On marketing and consumption

I find it really weird when people have said that I just devalued MySpace by saying that hegemonic kids are on Facebook. Some marketers are even using my essay to say that all advertising should be funneled to Facebook. Are marketers that stupid?

There seems to be a myth that only rich kids consume. That's so not true, it's painful. For better or worse, subaltern teens consume a lot more than hegemonic teens. Part of this has to do with spare time, part with mobility, part with who has after school jobs, part with what is valued as markers of worth. (Rich kids tend to buy higher end goods, but they are only a small fraction of hegemonic teens.) What people do consume is really influenced by class (far more so than SES). Offline, marketers seem to get this. Why don't they get this online? Gap, Inc. knows this. Is there really that much of a difference between clothes from Old Navy and Gap (and Banana Republic)? The difference really is who shops there. Some people go into all three but the audiences are still quite different.

While class and lifestyle do affect consumption choices, socio-economic status does not necessarily do so. Consider a brand like Coach. You'll find that this is consumed heavily by both rich and poor, but not by middle class. Why is this? Why is having "elite" brands a marker of success in poorer communities? I'm always astounded by the teens who can tell that my knock-off accessories are precisely that. And those are never the middle class teens.

There are few brands that link cleanly to the divisions that I'm talking about. The best example would be Hot Topic. If I were Hot Topic, I'd devote most of my teen advertising efforts to MySpace instead of Facebook. But the majority of major brands hit both groups in different ways so I'm surprised that this is that revelatory to marketers.

What I'm saying does affect marketing and marketers should think through what communities they are targeting as they approach both. My article also should help them think about the norms of those spaces and thus what will have greater resonance. There are damn good reasons to market on both sites but they require different marketing strategies.

Peer review spun out of control

Finally, I need to comment on peer review. One of the fascinating tangential conversations that has emerged because of this essay is whether or not this is what modern peer review looks like. I find this a little funny because it makes the assumption that I put out a nearly-finished article for review. Still, there's no doubt that I got some form of "peer" "review." Of course, the most interesting reviews came in personal emails and private conversations. Because I didn't cite anyone, most people suggested publicly that I cite the obvious. My closer friends knew that I was quite familiar with Gramsci and Bourdieu and Eckert and Hall and Butler and Foucault and subcultural theory and all of the things that I alluded to without citing. Instead, they focused on little-known references from visual studies and discussions of makeup and class and other such things that I have not yet tracked down.

This is not to say that the publicness was not valuable. Because of the publicness of this article, I've had unbelievable conversations with academics and practitioners and parents and ministers and others about issues that I'm trying to address. I can't help but wonder if they would've had time for this conversation

if it weren't so publicly visible. (None of us academics ever have time.)

I'm very fortunate to have the opportunity to have thousands of people read my writings and ponder the questions that I put out there. My peer group extends beyond the academic walls. It's not without cost though and I couldn't help but wonder if the academics I know could've handled some of what I received this month. Not all of it was what we would call a review. I've had to practice deep breathing as I went through detailed discussions of whether or not I was cute enough to fuck or look through bulletins that had decided to gather photos of me for analysis (they concluded that my arm bracelets prove that I'm a cutter). I know the Slashdot/Metafilter community well enough to not take the personal threats on my life or body seriously, but that doesn't mean they don't suck. Emails from parents accusing me of destroying their children's lives suck. PR campaigns to discredit me suck. In general, being mocked isn't any fun. Many of my dearest friends can't stand even the slightest personal attack online; I've learned to take it for granted while being continuously disappointed by it. If online peer review is going to be this personal, few are going to be masochistic enough to want it.

My hope is that this article got a conversation started. Maybe a few more people will think about class dynamics as a result. Down the road, I'll write it up more formally. I've gotten a lot of pressure to do so, but there are many things I need to do first.

This has been an unbelievable learning opportunity for me and for that I'm grateful. Perhaps I won't be so "careless" in the future, but I doubt it. I need my blog to be an outlet for me to express things I'm seeing long before they're ready for publication. I need to not have to couch every argument that I make on my blog in broader theoretical and methodological frameworks which means that I will continue to be taken out of context. If I had to write on my blog in the way that I write papers, I'd never blog. I do hope that I'll be able to continue blogging without every piece being so controversial and overwhelming. This year marks 10 years. Pretty crazy, huh?

If you read this far, {{hug}}

