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[Ellen Johanna Helsper](#)

Book review: status update: celebrity, publicity, and branding in the social media age

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Alice E. Marwick, **Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age**, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013, p368, \$27.50 (hardcover).

Review by

Ellen Johanna Helsper

London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

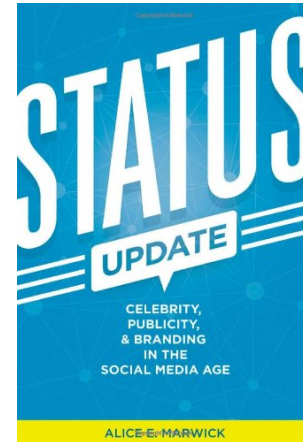
In *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age* Alice Marwick sets out to examine “how status was built into Web 2.0, and thus illuminate how popular social software may promote inequality rather than counter it” (2013, p. 4).

She definitely succeeds in pushing the reader to consider the gender, racial, and other imbalances in the production of content in this digital age. To construct her argument, she builds on Social Constructivist Theories (SCOT) of design, thus explaining how social media, like other technologies before it, are designed by elites in ways that suit their normative status quo. She asks what the consequences are of locating design in a tech culture that celebrates risk taking and innovation for “the good of society.” Positing that this means those whose socioeconomic and cultural position allows them to live this risky lifestyle—predominantly young, white, rich men—are those who determine what this good is.

This book will be an eye-opener for many in the tech industry, providing evidence for sexism and elitism in social media production. It is also a rich resource for journalists and policy makers interested in the history of digital and social media and associated societal changes. Those who have lived near or worked with the Californian tech scene in particular should find this an accessible book, while outsiders will find sections that shed a strong light on practices that are largely ignored within both academia and the industry. No other book addresses the same combination of design and everyday interactions with and use of social media.

Social Media Production and the Status Quo

To achieve her aim of pointing out how status is built into Web design, she covers considerable ground, linking her work to that of a wide range of academic fields and scholars, although she does not always reference them directly. She draws bridges among media studies’ work on celebrity and reputation, sociolegal studies on privacy, and feminist political-economic work regarding the participation of women and other underrepresented groups in media content production. Scholars and students interested in the wider implications of social media and the production of technologies and content in a digital age in these fields of interest will find thought-provoking ideas around power and agency. It is a nice complement to books by Grint and Gill (1995), Nissenbaum (2009), Mayer-Schönberger (2009), Solove (2007), and Wajcman (2004).



Marwick professes to wanting to counter "digital exceptionalism," the idea that the Internet differs from other forms of communication and therefore is not bound by the same legal and market forces, and that the Internet is intrinsically democratizing and transcends structural power relations such as sexism and racism. Using Foucauldian ideas about surveillance and power, the author makes a strong argument that the social media design process is an ideal case study for "the infiltration of market logic into everyday social relations" (Marwick, p. 5). The monitoring apps, platforms, and sites created to aid a "quantification of self" reflect how market logic and surveillance values are built into the digital world. These norms and values, held by designers and programmers who are spatially, racially, and gender located, suggest what is appropriate or good social media use. Marwick concludes that three myths drive these values (ibid., p. 246). The (1) meritocracy myth "implies that those who obtain great wealth deserve it;" (2) the entrepreneurship myth embodies a "limited view of who 'counts' as an entrepreneur," excluding entire categories of people; and (3) the authenticity myth privileges "a certain type of self-presentation that encourages people to strategically apply business logics to the way they see themselves and others" and that these forms of acceptable self-expression are those deemed acceptable to young, white, well-off men.

Celebrity Status?

Chapter 3 focuses on micro-celebrity (i.e. "a state of being famous to a niche group of people", p.114) in the (California and New York) tech scene. By studying fame within this relatively closed, sometimes cult-like scene, Marwick examines what is considered important and valuable in social media design. She shows discomfort, when observing that microcelebrity status seems to be based not on merit but on self-promotion, and empathy when positioning microcelebrities as resourceless victims of the self-branding and commodification system that they themselves have created.

This chapter is engaging and has many astute observations but she makes the wrong comparison if she is truly interested in the political economy of and value creation within the social media industry. Marwick overlooks the fact that the truly powerful in the social media industry are not as obsessed with "authenticity," publicity, and celebrity status as microcelebrities; they are far more reclusive. In the tech industry, as in the entertainment industry, it is the big stars who have access to a wide range of resources to manage their own image and protect their privacy. These men—they are still mostly men—run the big companies that own or buy the apps, start-ups, and smaller companies that micro-celebrities establish. It is these truly powerful men who decide which technology survives. Thus, following Marwick's argument to its logical conclusion, it should be their values, norms, and behaviors that are reflected in design rather than those of the fleeting microcelebrities.

Marwick is at her strongest when pointing out implicit gender and power imbalances in the production values of social media and digital technologies but does not paint an alternative scenario. Questions that remain unexplored are: Would social media have existed in the form they exist now if a different group of people had designed them? What would social media designed by women or ethnic minorities look like? Would we use these platforms differently and for different purposes?

Designer Determinism?

The lack of audience or user research makes the book weaker in showing that status differentials in design promote wider inequality, which is the book's second aim. A closer look at the work of sociologists and social psychologists who have researched how people manage privacy, identity, and relationships in on- and offline situations (e.g., Goffman, 1959; Joinson et al, 2011; Bargh, McKenna & Fitzsimmons, 2002; Postmes, Spears and Lea, 1998; Walther, et al, 2008) could have helped us understand what is truly new about social media and the way we relate to ourselves and others. Equally useful and equally absent are key theories about boundary setting and contextuality (e.g., Burgoon et al., 1989; Ellison, Heino & Gibbs, 2006; Hardin, 2006; Hogan 2010; Quandt, 2012) that have been worked out in a mediated interpersonal communication context.

Marwick's use of SCOT focuses on the technology industry and does not incorporate the domestication perspectives as presented by Silverstone (2005), which examine the everyday construction of technologies. Nor does Marwick examine how individuals use or feel about spaces designed by people unlike themselves. As a result, she goes too far in generalizing about how design will influence everyday use of the Internet, forgetting about long-standing arguments on agency. She overgeneralizes, from micro-celebrities and external validation junkies to the everyday user, and positions the social Web as promoting an inevitably exhibitionist culture, but the evidence is contradictory (see Joinson, Houghton, Vasalou & Marder, 2011) when applied to the average user. The way in which most social media users employ these platforms is strongly embedded in existing networks and offline contexts, a world very different from the life of those discussed in this book. Most everyday users would be "called on their bullshit" by their networks of friends and relatives if they seriously overstated their accomplishments.

In summary, Marwick argues against the technodeterminist view but falls into the trap of a design(er) determinist view. In addition, at several points she makes remarkably technodeterminist statements about the (unavoidable?) effects of always-on technologies and about the inevitable impacts of life streaming in relation to privacy perceptions without backing this up with audience research.

Conclusion

Marwick's book focuses on social media producers but not social media users. This leaves out an important part of understanding how technology design leads to the perpetuation of inequalities that reinforce the status quo. Nevertheless, it is a well-written book that should engage a wide variety of readers. It makes an important contribution in pointing out what are the values and persisting inequalities in the social media industry, an industry that, as she rightly argues, is far from purely meritocratic. The everyday consequences of and the solutions to these inequalities are left for other researchers and practitioners to figure out.

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