An Old Fogey's Analysis of a Teenager's View on Social Media

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Over the last few days, dozens of people have sent me a link to Andrew Watts' "A Teenager's View on Social Media written by an actual teen." Increasingly, I'm getting uncomfortable and angry by the folks who are pointing me to this. I feel the need to offer my perspective as someone who is not a teenager but who has thought about these issues extensively for years.

Almost all of them work in the tech industry and many of them are tech executives or venture capitalists. The general sentiment has been: "Look! Here's an interesting kid who's captured what kids these days are doing with social media!" Most don't even ask for my interpretation, sending it to me as though it is gospel.

We've been down this path before. Andrew is not the first teen to speak as an "actual" teen and have his story picked up. Every few years, a (typically white male) teen with an interest in technology writes about technology among his peers on a popular tech platform and gets traction. Tons of conferences host teen panels, usually drawing on privileged teens in the community or related to the organizers. I'm not bothered by these teens' comments; I'm bothered by the way they are interpreted and treated by the tech press and the digerati.

I'm a researcher. I've been studying American teens' engagement with social media for over a decade. I wrote a book on the topic. **I don't speak on behalf of teens, but I do amplify their voices and try to make sense of the diversity of experiences teens have.** I work hard to account for the biases in whose voices I have access to because I'm painfully aware that it's hard to generalize about a population that's roughly 16 million people strong. They are very diverse and, yet, journalists and entrepreneurs want to label them under one category and describe them as one thing.

Andrew is a very lucid writer and I completely trust his depiction of his peer group's use of social media. He wrote a brilliant post about his life, his experiences, and his interpretations. His voice should be heard. And his candor is delightful to read. But his analysis cannot and should not be used to make claims about all teenagers. I don't blame Andrew for this; I blame the readers — and especially tech elites and journalists — for their interpretation of Andrew's post because they should know better by now. What he's sharing is not indicative of all teens. More significantly, what he's sharing reinforces existing biases in the tech industry and journalism that worry me tremendously.

His coverage of Twitter should raise a big red flag to anyone who has spent an iota of time paying attention to the news. Over the last six months, we've seen a phenomenal uptick in serious US-based activism by many youth in light of what took place in Ferguson. It's hard to ignore Twitter's role in this phenomenon, with hashtags like #blacklivesmatter and #IfTheyGunnedMeDown not only flowing from Twitter onto other social media platforms, but also getting serious coverage from major media. Andrew's statement that "a lot of us simply do not understand the point of Twitter" should raise eyebrows, but it's the rest of his

description of Twitter that should serve as a stark reminder of Andrew's position within the social media landscape.

Let me put this bluntly: teens' use of social media is significantly shaped by race and class, geography and cultural background. Let me repeat that for emphasis.

> **Teens' use of social media is significantly shaped by race and class, geography and cultural background.**

The world of Twitter is many things and what journalists and tech elites see from Twitter is not even remotely similar to what many of the teens that I study see, especially black and brown urban youth. For starters, their Twitter feed doesn't have links; this is often shocking to journalists and digerati whose entire stream is filled with URLs. But I'm also bothered by Andrew's depiction of Twitter users as first and foremost doing so to "complain/express themselves." While he offers other professional categorizations, it's hard not to read this depiction in light of what I see in low-status communities and the ways that privileged folks interpret the types of expression that exists in these communities. When black and brown teens offer their perspective on the world using the language of their community, it is often derided as a complaint or dismissed as self-expression. I doubt that Andrew is trying to make an explicitly racist comment here, but I want to caution every reader out there that critiques of youth use of Twitter are often seen in a negative light because of the heavy use by low-status black and brown youth.

Andrew's depiction of his peers' use of social media is a depiction of a segment of the population, notably the segment most like those in the tech industry. In other words, what the tech elite are seeing and sharing is what people like them would've been doing with social media X years ago. It resonates. But it is not a full portrait of today's youth. And its uptake and interpretation by journalists and the tech elite whitewashes teens practices in deeply problematic ways.

I'm not saying he's wrong; I'm saying his story is incomplete and the incompleteness is important. His commentary on Facebook is probably the most generalizable, if we're talking about urban and suburban American youth. Of course, his comments shouldn't be shocking to anyone at this point (as Andrew himself points out). Somehow, though, declarations of Facebook's lack of emotional weight with teens continues to be front page news. All that said, this does render invisible the cultural work of Facebook in rural areas and outside of the US.

Andrew is very visible about where he stands. He's very clear about his passion for technology (and his love of blogging on Medium should be a big ole hint to anyone who missed his byline). He's also a college student and talks about his peers as being obviously on path to college. But as readers, let's not forget that only about half of US 19-year-olds are in college. He talks about WhatsApp being interesting when you go abroad, the practice of "going abroad" is itself privileged, with less than 1/3 of US citizens even holding passports. Furthermore, this renders invisible the ways in which many US-based youth use WhatsApp to communicate with family and friends who live outside of the US. Immigration isn't part of his narrative.

I don't for a second fault Andrew for not having a perspective beyond his peer group. But **I do fault both the tech elite and journalists for not thinking critically through what he posted** and presuming that a single person's experience can speak on behalf of an entire generation. There's a reason why researchers and organizations like Pew Research are doing the work that they do — they do so to make sure that we don't forget about the populations that aren't already in our networks. The fact that professionals prefer anecdotes from people like us over concerted efforts to understand a demographic as a whole is shameful. More importantly, it's downright dangerous. It shapes what the tech industry builds and invests in, what gets promoted by journalists, and what gets

legitimized by institutions of power. This is precisely why and how the tech industry is complicit in the increasing structural inequality that is plaguing our society.