

The Great Divide in Social Networking Sites

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In June of 2007, University of California PhD candidate danah boyd published on her Web page a [brief informal essay](#) noting class divisions between users of MySpace and Facebook discovered in the course of her research with teens. Her informal essay immediately drew reactions from across the world, largely driven by an [inaccurate story written by the BBC](#); these reactions ranged from legitimate questions about the meaning and validity of boyd's observations to vicious personal attacks and death threats. Although boyd's observations were attacked on many fronts and her methodology questioned, [further research](#) conducted by other scholars supports her broad conclusions: Facebook and MySpace users are self-segregating along familiar lines of class.

The visceral reaction many Internet users had to boyd's observations reinforces the notion that the Internet is an equalizer and an equal playing field where age, race, gender, and other constructs of the social and physical worlds are free to be abandoned, reconstructed, or reinforced as we choose. For many of boyd's detractors, the idea that something as artificial as social class would determine one's choice of social networking service seemed laughably archaic and ignorant. While some might wish this egalitarian vision of a completely neutral and level playing field truly existed online, it's ultimately a naïve vision that doesn't match with reality. We've known for decades that different people use and experience technology differently as influenced by these physical and social constructs and identifiers; the Internet is [no exception](#).

As argued by [boyd and others](#), sites like Facebook and MySpace are being used by youths in much the same way that movie theaters, malls, skating rinks, and parks have been used by other

generations: to socialize and “hang out” with friends. As we can observe on our own campuses and in our own neighborhoods, such socialization often seems to take place within relatively homogenous groups (which is why so many of us are so dedicated to programs and efforts promoting to diversity and multiculturalism). So it should be no surprise that this behavior is mirrored online. It’s particularly unsurprising if one is knowledgeable of the [history of these spaces and communities](#).

One finding we should take away from this research is that Facebook use is not universal among American college students. Current estimates are that 79-95% of American undergraduates use Facebook, a clear indication that not all students choose to or are able to use the service. Not do you have to be able to access the technology and be comfortable with it but this research specifically tells us that there is a component of class defining the line between those who use Facebook and those who do not. For example, [current research](#) suggests that Hispanic students and students whose parents have less than a high school education who may be significantly less likely to use Facebook and more likely to use MySpace. Unfortunately, most of us have been very focused on Facebook and it appears that our tunnel vision may have narrowed our vision to the point of excluding particular groups of students.

This research also speaks directly to those of us concerned with students’ interactions with other students of different backgrounds as we seek to understand and promote those interactions. We have known for some time that most college Facebook users interact largely with friends and people with whom they already have a relationship. We also know that many Facebook users interact heavily with their high school friends and classmates. Putting all of this together seems to tell us that many students are interacting and communicating via Facebook with people very much like themselves. Although the research regarding college students’ use of other social network sites is less substantial, the story appears to be the same for users of other sites like MySpace, Xanga, and Friendster. Considering the amount of time students spend on these sites and the importance these sites have in

many students' lives, the specter of class divisions among those students must play a role in our strategies and initiatives aimed at promoting interaction between students of different backgrounds.

Finally, this research speaks to very concrete issues facing many student affairs administrators who are using or considering using Facebook or other similar sites. While it is very cheap and easy to use these tools to advertise to, interact with, or collaborate with students, we must be cognizant of those students who do not use these tools. Not only does the traditional "digital divide" between those who have ready access to technology and those who do not still exist on many campuses, this research reminds us that there are other more subtle and sometimes systematic divides between users of different online services and tools.

Neither student affairs researchers nor administrators can afford to continue focusing exclusively or too heavily on Facebook. Technology changes too quickly for us to tie ourselves too closely to one particular service. Nor can we risk focusing on a particular service when we know that there are populations of students who systematically choose to not use that service.