**Deeply Digital, Socially Separate:**

**A Young Privileged Programmer Against Social Media**

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*Introduction*

“Do you use any sort of Social Media?”  *– Joshua*

“No! Social Media is the number one source of career limiting moves in the universe.” *– Owen*

Owen is hardly what you could consider a typical 14-year-old teenager; from the moment that I arrived to observe Owen in his ‘natural habitat’, it was clear he held specific environmental and resource advantages over other teens of his age, even when compared to individuals in his same general socio-economic status level. Owen lives in Marin county, one of the most affluent parts of California, in an unincorporated area known as ‘Lucas Valley’, nestled in the hills at the very northern edge of San Rafael, before 101 takes you into Novato and farther north into Sonoma county. His home is a custom red brick designer four bedroom in a neighborhood that forms the boundaries around Miller Creek Middle School, the only middle school in the very prestigious Dixie school district. As I parked out front, the front garage door was open, exposing a foreshortened storage and work space in front of a false wall, with an open door that led into the ‘Man Cave’, a converted garage space that the family used as a media and computer lab, as well as an electronics “Maker” workshop and entertainment area for Owen, his older brother Tim (age 16), Bruce (their father, a CTO for a high-end IT design company), and the various teens in the neighborhood that knew it existed and befriended Tim or Owen for access to this digital mecca. The stylish but crowded space is filled with several computer workstations around the perimeter of the room, including a dual-monitor station for Owen alone, and a matching one for his brother Tim. There is a large flat-screen television hung on one of the walls, with a oversized couch and low coffee table facing it, and in the center of the room there is the ‘Test Bench’, a standing-height stainless steel work table, covered in computer and electronic components in the process of being repaired or modified for any one of the many projects the family engages in on a regular basis. Along the walls above the desks are frosted glass cabinet doors that are filled with supplies for the family’s various ongoing projects, and the entire room looks well lived in. A lot of time is spent in this space, entertaining myriad activities, and whatever Owen’s family wishes to pursue, they have access to the knowledge and resources for its pursuit.

When asking the question, “What is it like growing up in a digital era?”, Owen’s story is one that speaks of privilege, entitlement, and an environment firmly situated in the cultural memes of high-tech entrepreneurial engagement and creativity. Owen himself is immersed in activities of software development and playing detailed and complicated simulation and strategy games, whose intricacies are lost on the majority of his friends, who refer to them as ‘Owen Games’. And yet, when asked the simple question of what social media platforms does Owen engage with, his answer is strong, negative, and absolute – he does not involve himself in such dangerous and injurious nonsense. What seems like at first glance to be a paradoxical incongruity between a celebratory stance around technology and a protectionist attitude towards social media can be unpacked in terms of issues of class, culture, and personal motivation. While Owen is casting his identity as what danah boyd would call a ‘conscientious objector’ to the world of social media (boyd, 2007, p.3), his involvement with applications and software that allow him to connect with others, and his attitudes about said utilities, have a greater complexity than he admits. The cultural and economic memes of creativity, technical mastery, and independence in which he participates shape Owen’s involvement in social media towards the closed community and a tight focus on the achievement of his own family-affirmed and recognized personal goals.

*Context and Methods*

My data set includes two separate observations, recorded at roughly ninety minutes each, and an interview recorded as a roughly thirty-minute portion of the second observation. Both of these observations and the interview took place in Owen’s home in the converted garage ‘Man Cave’, on separate days over a single weekend. I recorded the audio of each observation on my iPhone and used these audio tracks, along with a handful of pictures of the environment to later write up and reconstruct said observations.

I have a long-standing relationship with Owen as a friend of my eldest child, which goes back approximately eight years, and Owen has been a member of my afterschool enrichment program for the last four years. I am on friendly terms with both of his parents, and am acquainted with his brother, Tim. This context gives me some insight into his personal interests, as well as into his family and home environment.

I am conscious of the limitations of the observation environment, in that I did not create an observation of Owen’s activities directly situated on the Internet, such as observing his interactions on a social media site, or his text transcripts during chat sessions. However, primarily since Owen himself claims to not be involved with social media sites, and secondly since so much of what Owen was doing is directly related to his activities online, my over-the-shoulder observations of his work on his software development, and game play have given me at least a glimpse into creating a “connective ethnography” (Leander, 2008. Pg.37).

I designed the interview questions to elicit an understanding of Owen’s involvement in technology in his day-to-day life, including his use of any social media, and any attitudes that he may have regarding those technologies. I also asked questions designed to uncover any issues of race, gender, class or socio-economic status that might appear in Owen’s day to day life online. Finally, I asked questions about Owen’s relative social comfort and feelings of personal capability both online and offline.

My process of data analysis included reviewing the field notes and interview I conducted, and looking for common themes. I attempted to create an open coding based on a flexible taxonomy drawn from themes found in the readings referenced at the end of this paper, and emergent themes in the field notes and interview. Some common codes that emerged from the data included (in no particular order): apps, SES (socio-economic status), audience, media, empowerment, gender, race, social media, identity, status, network, conscientious objector, public, private, persistence, identity performance, self-reflexive, literacy, community, playful learning, digital literacy, critical, creative, production, privacy, maker, protectionist, impression management, and homophily. I used this taxonomy to tag paragraphs and elements, and looked for emergent themes to focus upon in the writing of this paper. I compared those themes to ideas discovered in our class readings, and from these formed my particular arguments.

*Findings*

Stepping into the ‘Man Cave’, I saw an environment that was designed exclusively to support the intellectual and creative pursuits of any member of the family, but particularly those pursuits that tie to software development and electronics. Both children in the house have been given their own dedicated and fully-loaded workstations, complete with multiple monitors that ease the development of software in that they allow for code to exist on one screen, and the results of that code running through tests on the other, or for the display of information found on the internet to aid in development. On top of this, there is a shared space for working on hardware-related projects, complete with tools and good lighting. It is clear that both Owen and Tim make ample use of this room, as do a number of kids in the neighborhood, but mostly from my observations, as a place to ‘hang out’ and seek entertainment. On the first occasion that I came to observe, not only were both Owen and Tim deeply involved in their own projects at their individual workstations, but the room was abuzz with activity from the local teens that regularly frequent the space, enough for Owen’s mother to give me the offhand comment ‘welcome to our culture!’, and for Owen’s father to explain to me how Tim’s friends use the room frequently as an informal hangout space. My own observations confirmed these admissions, as I watched teens come and go throughout the period I was there. In the absence of the public commons as a viable hang-out space for teens mentioned by Dr. Jessica Parker (Parker, 2010, p.19), Owen’s family has created a private commons or salon for the deliberate exclusive use of their children and their friends for intellectual, entrepreneurial, and creative pursuits, as well as a safe place to socialize.

Beyond having membership in a clearly upper middle-class socio-economic status, Owen is also a member of a prestigious intellectual elite class typified by his choices in personal leisure activities, and by the attitudes and values held by his family around creativity and ingenuity. My first question put to Owen to tell me a little bit about himself and his family, while redundant as he is aware that I know him and his family well, my intention was to give him an opportunity at identity presentation, unfettered by previous questions that might pre-load his expectations in his responses. He replied by stating his and his brother’s identity as game players and intellectual producers: “Let’s see… Tim plays professional Counter-Strike, and it’s pretty neat. I usually do computer stuff, whether it’s games or programming, or… all that stuff”. As I asked Owen other questions about his typical day, he began to express in his responses a critical analysis of activities and technologies that demonstrated a deep digital literacy and an unspoken membership in a technology culture, which flavored his biases. When asked about the technology used in his school, his comments about the use of “Chrome books for math, using their new math program, which is *hilariously* bad”, calling it “cringe-worthy”, or the complaint about using “cheap cameras” in his film class and having to use iMovie to edit, which he also calls “cringe-worthy”, with a riding comment of “I mean, you’d think they’d actually be teaching us something that we could apply in real life or a job” all indicate that Owen possesses a level of technological sophistication that allows for critical analysis. He demeans “*Mac guys”* as using restrictive technology, which he admits his opinion may have at least in part been formed through online influences.

Owen also prides himself not just as a technology consumer, but as a producer, and engages in a great deal of identity performance and self-reflexivity (Buckingham, 2008, p.9). When asked about how he feels like his identity as a computer guy have affected the way others treat him, he’s quick to tell a narrative that shows the shifting perception of him being merely a “nerd” to someone to be admired, after he started producing: “But once I made stuff like, uh, my first game, people’s like ‘oh wow, this is actually really cool.” In a sense, he’s used his activity as a software developer that the subsequent artifacts of his work to “write himself into being” a modality in mediated environments put forth by Jenny Sundén (boyd, 2007, p.12). As my observations on both days involved to a great degree Owen either programming complex code for a game he is developing, or being involved in games with high levels of sophistication, strategy and the mental tracking and maintenance of many disparate variables (what Owen refers to as ‘micro’), Owen’s identity is more than bluster. It is a fact that he has a very high level of technical sophistication, knowledge, and capability.

Owen’s family environment of course further promotes Owen’s identity as a creative producer. Not only does Owen’s older brother’s activities as a ‘professional’ game player, but also someone that creates artifacts for games, such as maps for games that can be ‘modded’ into the game play, shows a role model of behavior for Owen to emulate. Owen’s family also are long-time and frequent participants in the Maker Faire, a technology creative fair that demonstrates and promotes a Do-It-Yourself attitude towards innovation. Owen wants to make it clear that his identity extends just beyond being a sit-in-your-chair computer nerd. “Oh, what a common misconception is, people like me just sit in their room and do this all day…”, “my family has gone to the Maker Fair, and all these other really cool events, and, I’ve met like contacts there, like… my contacts with the… Roblox CEO… It started there.” – Owen is consciously casting himself as more than just an isolated computer programmer, but a member of an elite class of innovators, that includes the CEO of Roblox, a games programming platform site that Owen has been involved with since age 6.

So, with such a concern with being known as part of a network of creative innovators, why does Owen summarily reject the use of social media as “the number one source of career limiting moves in the universe”? Again, I think this is another attempt at identity performance that falls in line with a protectionist attitude against social media that is actually born out of a privileged world perspective that pits the ‘public commons’ of social media as being uncool, in favor of a gated community of interaction, that mirrors the physical world tendencies of the wealthy and privileged elite, but also creates a bourgeois public sphere dominated by the Technorati (boyd, 2009). To confirm Owen’s non-participation in social media sites, I did a quick search for his profile on a number of well-known sites, and indeed the only place I was able to find any existing accounts were on Google+, where none of his profile information other than his name and gender were indicated, and on YouTube, where only his name was indicated. My assumption is that these accounts were a necessary evil for Owen to be able to view the numerous YouTube videos that he sites as being sources of his learning, both for the games he plays, as well as for the information on software development. Interestingly enough, while Owen’s mother has an active Facebook account, his father does not. His father does, however, have an active Google+ account, and often posts his social media messages through that site.

As it turns out, there may be an indicated *brain drain* from sites such as Facebook to Google+ by the technical elite in the same way that danah boyd references a ‘white flight’ from MySpace to Facebook (boyd, 2009). According to a study reported by Agile Impact, Google+ users “tend to work in the engineering, software and design industries, and are more interested in discussions and trends than looking at photos of dogs or kids.” Identification as a ‘Maker’ only goes to further cement Owen’s identity in this technical elite; according to a Maker Market study “83% of makers are employed. Nearly one-third of them (31%) have job titles or job descriptions in technical areas such as scientific or engineering.” The study also indicates Maker families as having a high median income of $106k, and are well educated, married and with children 18 or younger in the household. It’s clear that Owen falls well in this demographic, and his identity is intertwined with the idea of being a ‘Maker’. I propose, that in much the same way that those that chose to leave MySpace for Facebook did so “in their belief that a more peaceful, quiet, less-public space would be more idyllic” (boyd, 2009), those that are leaving Facebook for Google+ may be doing so for similar reasons of controlling the content and space of their interactions.

Owen’s indication that permanent mistakes can be made on social media that could come back and haunt someone, especially in one’s endeavors to form or further one’s career, shows a high level of digital literacy. While Buckingham assures us that “Contemporary research suggests that children are a much more autonomous and critical audience than they are conventionally assumed to be” (Buckingham, 2003, p.12) and Gardner assures us that “Considerable empirical evidence indicates that youth are both aware of and care about privacy risks online” (Gardner, 2013, p.82), Owen’s decided to almost completely opt-out of anything that he views might threaten his personal career goals. It’s my belief that this level of digital literacy and the subsequent carefulness around the unknown consequences of indiscretion on social media comes from his family environment and his identity formation around being a software programmer.

And yet, what Owen conceives of as being ‘social media’ and what activities and platforms of communication he does choose with which to engage are not necessarily in complete agreement. When asked about whether Owen engages in any sort of chat or online communication, he is quick to assent that he uses Skype to communicate with his close friends, but he also indicates he’d like to see the group move to TeamSpeak, and audio-only communications server that allows for small, controlled chat rooms to exist. Owen also uses TeamSpeak to communicate with the community of gamers with whom he plays, and some of the game platforms with which he is participating, such as Roblox, has chat integrated into the game window. While observing Owen playing his games, he made frequent and facile use of these chat windows and opportunities, sometimes as a necessary evil, but other times extoling the virtues of large-scale TeamSpeak chat rooms. In speaking about one of his favorite games, Homeworld 2, he talks about epic battles that coordinate 3000 different users in a single combat, and he says this really can only be done with something like TeamSpeak. He observes that often in these massive engagements, the big battles are not won by the biggest fleets, but by the fleet with the best coordination.

When I asked Owen about his participation in online forums regarding his software developing, he indicated that to answer his questions, he would either play the ‘consult Google game’, or he would look at particular community postings to forums such as ‘Stack Exchange’ or ‘Unity Answers’. I asked him if he made any contributions to these sites, and his response was ‘Actually, No, and that’s really a shame. The main reason why I don’t is because… usually it’s way too much work to get an account and do all that stuff. Like you need their special Stack Exchange account…” This indicates to me that Owen has a desire to be an active contributing member to a social network or what Henry Jenkins refers to as a *participatory culture* (Jenkins, 2009, p.3), but there is a level of access that is being denied him, and which stops him from being an active participant in the way that he would like. Nonetheless, even as a consumer and practitioner, Owen is a member of that participatory culture and is developing technical, media, and social literacies from interaction in that participatory culture.

Between using Skype and TeamSpeak, interacting socially via chat window from within the games that he plays, and his dipping into online technical forums, Owen is by some respects an active engager with social media, but not in the traditional sense of the mediated public commons we see on sites such as MySpace and Facebook, and his engagement is limited only to further his own particular goals, as defined by his self-reflexive identity as a software developer and ‘maker’. His choice to create an identity that uses the ‘gated community’ model of social networking is related to his identity he inherits through his socio-economic status, as well as the Technorati identity he inherits through his familial participation in the Maker culture. Owen views his own intellectual career as an entrepreneurial enterprise, and seeks out information in the most direct and efficient ways he knows how, using the tools and skills he’s learned through a family that is highly technically facile and one oriented towards creativity, independence, and productivity.

*Implications*

Traditionally, abdication of involvement with social media on grounds of the dangers they hold is a protectionist attitude we have seen in the technically conservative and technophobic, but as we can see through Owen’s example, members of the technical elite can also hold such an attitude. Students, such as Owen, show a higher level of digital literacy than the norm of his age and class and status, and while we need to ensure our students have access to the means of acquiring high levels of digital literacy, there is also a need for teaching a level of nuance and enabling participation for those such as Owen who have a deep desire to be active members of a participatory culture, but do not have access to all of the skills and resources they need to further their own somewhat more loft goals.

A lack of participation in the public commons does not mean a lack of network and community – it may merely indicate participation in a ‘gated community’ model of social networking, which seeks to control the environment and access by participants to only those pertinent to the conversation. However, in much the same way that gated communities separate the have and have-nots, and through that separation, members of the gated community can lose perspective. The separation may breed intolerance, reinforce ‘homophily’, and propagate issues in our political, social and economic environment and reinforce the divisions that we’ve been trying to break down (boyd, 2009).

As educators, we need to teach a deeper level of digital literacy that not only incorporates all the possible modalities of social networking, including the mediated public commons and the mediated private communities, and we must teach the interconnected ecosystem between these two separate modalities. In doing so, we can not only help students like Owen better situate themselves inside their own particular participatory cultures and communities of practice, but we can help them understand the consequences of remaining separate from the mediated public commons, not only for themselves, but for those on the outside of the walled courtyard of the Technorati elite.

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