



Status update: celebrity, publicity, and branding in the social media age, by Alice E. Marwick, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2013, 360 pp., £9.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-30-020938-9

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Barrios, R., 2003. *Screened out: playing gay in Hollywood from Edison to Stonewall*. London: Routledge.

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In *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age*, Alice E. Marwick interrogates the divide between the rhetoric and realities of Web 2.0. Based on a four-year ethnography of San Francisco's 'tech scene' in the mid to late 2000s, the author joins a long list of scholars who argue that the early utopian promises of social media have failed to materialise (see Zimmer 2008, Morozov 2011). Researched in the same year as *Time* magazine chose 'You' to be its 2006 'Person of the Year', *Status Update* carefully critiques celebratory discourses about Web 2.0, which heralded the technology's potential for collaboration, transparency, and empowerment (see Benkler 2006, Jenkins 2006). Marwick's empirical research, which includes qualitative interviews with some of the tech scene's entrepreneurs, 'micro-celebrities', and journalists, and ethnographic observations of social media platforms and the scene's many social gatherings, exposes the complex ways in which social 'status' is built into Web 2.0. Marwick argues that the democratic, egalitarian, and participatory potentialities of Web 2.0 technologies are undermined by the tech scene's preoccupation with 'status' and profit, and by inequalities at the levels of production and organisation. Of particular concern to Marwick are the ways in which Web 2.0 often works to reinforce, rather than challenge, existing power structures, and how these inequalities are stratified by gender (and, less explicitly, by class, race, and sexual orientation). Marwick's unique theorisation of 'status' makes *Status Update* an important and timely contribution to the field of celebrity studies.

Status Update provides a sophisticated critique of the ways in which Marwick's 'characters' – San Francisco's tech elite – use status-building techniques such as micro-celebrity, self-branding, and life-streaming to garner attention and visibility online. Focusing her analysis

predominantly on Twitter, Marwick claims that there is a close relationship between the capitalist, market-driven logics of status-seeking techniques and neoliberalism. Borrowing from Michel Foucault, Marwick convincingly argues that the neoliberal values of the tech scene – individualism, entrepreneurialism, and meritocracy – are embedded within Web 2.0 technologies. Here, Marwick reveals an important contradiction: the tech scene's prioritisation of 'individual status-seeking over collective action or openness' works to reinforce the social hierarchies that participatory Web 2.0 technologies were heralded to diminish (p. 17). Despite Web 2.0's meritocratic ideal that 'anyone' can 'make it', Marwick implicitly builds on Chris Rojek (2001) to argue that the tech scene tends to value 'ascribed' rather than 'achieved' status, and has historically favoured those who are male, white, young, skilled, and already wealthy. For Marwick, social media technologies are thus inherently exclusionary.

Of interest to scholars within the field of celebrity studies are Marwick's critiques of 'status', 'authenticity', and labour in Chapters Three, Four, and Five. These observations are particularly timely, given the focus of the 2016 Celebrity Studies Journal Conference on 'authenticating celebrity'. Drawing on scholars such as Lionel Trilling and Sarah Banet-Weiser, Marwick suggests that 'authenticity' and 'being yourself' have become marketing strategies that are written into the scripts of Web 2.0 technologies, and that they work to 'encourage instrumental emotional labour' (p. 17). By this, Marwick is referring to the ways in which status-seeking techniques such as micro-celebrity, self-branding, and life-streaming are tied up with neoliberal governmentalities, and that the deployment of these techniques requires constant labour on the part of the social media user (or 'subject'), leaving technology companies to capitalise on these data. Here, Marwick uncovers another paradox within Web 2.0 culture, in that, despite the culture's advocacy of transparency, openness, and authenticity, the online, edited self 'must remain business friendly and carefully monitored' (p. 195). In *Status Update*, Marwick makes important points about the 'slipperiness' of the concept of authenticity, and notes other scholars' – and her informants' – inability to define it (p. 121). Yet, for Marwick, the 'slipperiness' of authenticity is 'part of what makes it useful', and one of the strengths of *Status Update* is its detailed theorisation of the multiple manifestations of authenticity in social media, and its relationship to 'status', neoliberalism, and labour (p. 121). This distinctive approach makes Marwick's research particularly valuable for scholars who are interested in theorising authenticity.

For Marwick, the integration of neoliberal and market values into Web 2.0 technologies has profound effects on its users in the tech scene, and there are instances where the author risks overstating the influence of these effects on everyday social media usage. However, Marwick mostly just draws on the work of other scholars who are conducting this research to allude to the ways in which status-seeking tactics, such as micro-celebrity, have 'trickled down to other social contexts' (see, for example, Senft's [2008] study on camgirls) (p. 280). This opens up an important area of debate for other researchers.

Perhaps the key strength of Marwick's *Status Update* is its underlying feminist influence. Particularly in the sixth chapter, the author makes a number of convincing arguments about the perpetuation of established gender-based inequalities in the San Francisco tech scene; inequalities that are, by extension, built into social media technologies. Marwick contends that women face discrimination in the tech industry because neoliberal governmentalities overlook broader structural problems, and posit that inequalities such as sexism are the result of individual failings (see also Rottenberg 2014). A particularly strong point put forward by Marwick is that not only does sexism exist at the levels of production and organisation, but also that what gets defined as 'acceptable' social media use is gendered. Here, Marwick makes another interesting connection to discourses around authenticity, arguing that its capitalist logics frame 'only certain types of self-expression as acceptable' (p. 252). In the tech

scene, preferred topics are those deemed acceptable to men, as opposed to 'feminine' discourses, like family, relationships, or body issues. As Marwick consistently reminds the reader, if you do not adhere to these gendered norms, you risk losing 'status', which is the ultimate failure in the neoliberal, entrepreneurial, and meritocratic tech industry. Whether the gendering of 'acceptable' social media usage extends beyond the tech scene is an important question for the field.

Marwick's ethnographic research of the San Francisco tech scene captures a significant moment in the history of new media. *Status Update* offers a nuanced account of the realities of Web 2.0, in contrast to the optimism that greeted its arrival in the mid 2000s. Marwick makes astute observations about her own role in the ethnographic research process, as someone who has 'insider access' to these circles. This text is particularly suitable for undergraduate and postgraduate students who are interested in new media and society, media and gender, celebrity studies, and ethnographic approaches to research. The first chapter of *Status Update* is particularly accessible for those outside academia who are interested in the cultural history of San Francisco's tech scene. Marwick's convincing arguments in *Status Update* serve as a reminder to avoid the technological determinism and digital exceptionalism that commonly accompany the rise of new media technologies. By studying the status structure of the San Francisco tech scene, *Status Update* offers a compelling account of how status is 'built into Web 2.0, and thus illuminate[s] how popular social software may promote inequality rather than counter it' (p. 4). Marwick's well-written ethnographic account makes an original and important contribution to knowledge in the field of celebrity studies and beyond.

Notes on contributor

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