1. How Black and Latino Youth Are Remaking the Digital Divide

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How Black and Latino Youth Are Remaking the Digital Divide

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One of the factors that attracted our team to Freeway was the abundance of technology in the school. From the mobile devices that students owned to some relatively technology-rich classrooms, Freeway was living proof that the United States has entered a new era in the spread of media and Internet technologies. The often resilient and creative media practices of black and Latino teens are not only dramatically remaking the digital divide but also disrupting decades-old assumptions about race, technology, and participation in the digital world. As you will learn in this and several other chapters in this volume, the students at Freeway did not always suffer from a lack of technology. Still, they constantly found themselves in situations that required them to be creative in the face of the constant barriers—familial, financial, educational—that threatened to block their participation in the digital media cultures shaped and coveted by teens.

When more conventional or middle-class paths of access to and participation in digital media cultures were not available (e.g., home broadband, computer ownership), teens worked around social and economic barriers to pursue their creative investments in digital media. Within our research team we often referred to these activities as a form of social hacking.

The social hacking that we frequently observed differs from technical hacking but is no less ingenuous. Whereas technical hacking involves reprogramming or reengineering technology to do something that it was not originally designed to do, social hacking involves reengineering social situations to do something that one was not originally in a position to do, such as creating digital media content. The forms of social hacking that are profiled throughout this book are customary features of life in the digital edge and a pivotal reminder that many black and
Latino youth face persistent barriers to cultivating more substantive and sustained participation in digital media cultures.

Moreover, these practices compel a reconsideration of how the contours of the digital divide are shifting largely as a result of the inventive ways black and Latino youth are making distinct media practices. Despite the persistence of economic challenges—for example, lack of home broadband, outdated computers, data caps—many of the students in our sample found ways to get their hands on digital media. But the story does not end there. Black and Latino youth have done more than simply find ways to access social and mobile media. To the surprise of many, they emerged as early adopters and trendsetters in the social media space, leading the migration to the mobile Internet and driving the rise, for example, of Black Twitter a force in both pop culture and political life. In the case of black and Latino teens, their early adopter and trendsetter status has occurred in spite of the fact that they are not the beneficiaries of economic privilege or members of the tech elite, attributes that are typically associated with early adopter status in the consumer technology economy.

Several quantitative studies suggest that black and Latino teens are quite active when it comes to the use of, for example, social and mobile media.¹ Still, we know very little about the intricacies of black and Latino teens’ engagement with these technologies. Our qualitative study is designed, in part, to fill in some of the knowledge gaps related to the rapidly changing dynamics of black and Latino teen participation in the digital media world. Whereas quantitative data can tell us how much time black and Latino teens spend on social media on a given day, qualitative data can tell us what they do when using social media. Furthermore, qualitative approaches can offer more in-depth perspective on the context and conditions in which black and Latino teens are using technology. This last point is especially crucial because the settings in which teens use technology—in school, at home, with peers—are in constant flux and situate different opportunities for engagement.

But even as access to the Internet for black and Latino teens has improved over the years, this does not mean that all forms of access are equal. Young people’s Internet-related activities continue to be influenced, for example, by race and ethnicity, parental education, and the quality of schools they attend. Black and Latino youth are much more
likely than their white and Asian counterparts to grow up in homes without access to broadband Internet. Parental education often influences, for example, the kinds of social ties and support systems their children have access to. Black and Latino youth are also more likely to attend schools that offer limited access to classes, instructors, and learning opportunities that develop the technical and cognitive skills that align with a rapidly evolving knowledge economy. It is also true that black and Latino youth carve out their own distinct spaces for identity and community in the digital spaces that are transforming youth culture and everyday life. In this chapter we offer a framework for understanding the agency that Latino and black youth assert in the making of their social and mobile media lives but in relation to structural conditions that are not of their own making.

In the United States (and around the world) we are witnessing a social transformation as a greater diversity of youth than ever before are using Internet-based technologies and networks. Today, black and Latino youth spend more time using social and mobile media than their white counterparts, a fact that no one would have dared to predict just a few years ago. Still, access to technology does not necessarily lead to greater digital media literacy or, as we discuss throughout this book, social and economic opportunity. Similarly, access to media technology does not guarantee access to the forms of capital—social and cultural—that are the crucial gateway to educational achievement, economic development, and political engagement.

Immersion in the everyday schooling and learning lives of black and Latino teens confirmed that poor and low-income families are significantly more likely to have access to Internet-based platforms than they were ten years ago. However, access to social and digital media technologies remains tenuous for young people growing up in resource-constrained homes, communities, and schools. Lose a phone and one could go several weeks or months before getting a replacement. Rapid changes in hardware and software can often leave members in modest-income households stuck with outdated devices, defunct applications, and limited computing and network capacity. Faced with the choice of providing food for the family or having Internet access, a working parent makes the obvious choice, which means that Internet service at home is disrupted. These are the everyday struggles that the families and teens in the digital edge had to
contend with. And while economic constraints did not completely stall the desires of black and Latino teens to participate in digital media culture, they certainly shaped them.

Remapping the Digital Divide

The digital divide is made up of many distinct components. Much has changed from the period when the digital divide was largely understood as a matter of access to computers. The need for a more meticulous mapping of ongoing digital disparities is driven by technological and sociological change. First, the sheer pace and intensity of technological change necessitate new questions and analytical frameworks. For example, the platforms for participating in digital media cultures are evolving at a fierce pace. Smarter, smaller, and more affordable technologies (e.g., mobile devices) are radically expanding who participates in the digital world. Second, the divide is being remade as a result of significant social changes, characterized by new modes of adoption and participation, creative activity, civic imaginations, and entrepreneurial energy. Populations that were once figured as disconnected from the digital world are rendering such claims inadequate as they assert their own vision of life in the digital age.

The assorted ways in which Freeway students accessed and used media technologies complicate conventional theorizations of the digital divide, especially the notion of monolithic practices, impacts, and outcomes. There was substantial variation in the social and mobile media practices among the largely Latino, African American, and English-language-learning student body that populated the classrooms at Freeway. These differences make any reference to a single digital divide experience unsatisfactory. As our knowledge about life in the digital edge continues to evolve, it is clear that multiple dimensions of the digital divide exist. In this chapter and throughout the book we focus on three distinct yet interlocking aspects of digital inequality: the access gap, the participation gap, and the digital literacy or skills gap.

Internet Access

The issue of access to computers and the Internet has grown more complex over the years. Internet access is no longer simply a matter of
whether a teen, for instance, has access to a computer and an Internet connection. Access varies in terms of the type of connection, including broadband, mobile, and high- or low-capacity networks. Lower-income families are much more likely than their higher-income counterparts to have mobile-only access to the Internet. And while mobile has accelerated the pace of Internet access for lower-income populations, a reliance only on mobile for Internet connectivity poses many challenges. More specifically, the challenges are not necessarily related to access but rather quality of access and opportunities for diverse forms of participation.

Additionally, there is the question of not only how we access the Internet but where we access the Internet. Interestingly enough, the social and physical spaces of Internet connectivity significantly influence the quality of the experience and the kinds of opportunities a person is likely to have. In our study, access to the Internet came in the two primary spaces teens spend their time, home and school. The main advantage of home broadband connections is the opportunity to pursue interests and creative practices in a more deliberate fashion. Teens who grow up in broadband households are more likely than teens who do not to do a wider range of things online, develop richer forms of online social capital, and be producers rather than mere consumers of digital content.

Public settings like libraries, for instance, often restrict how much time teens can spend on computers as well as the kinds of creative activities they can pursue. In the Austin metropolitan area suburb that was the setting for our study, public libraries or community technology centers were essentially off-limits due to transportation and quality of service issues. Inadequate public transit options in poor suburbs make it difficult to get around. Many of the students that expressed an interest in digital media desired a place that allowed them to tinker, play, and collaborate with peers. Libraries and community technology centers often restrict opportunities for more social creative digital media practices. For most of the students in our in-depth cases, school—and more specifically, after-school time—emerged as a fertile space and opportunity to gain access to not only hardware and software but also a social and creative milieu that supported deeper forms of digital engagement, media production, and peer collaboration. These latter elements underscore what we might
call *network effects*, that is, the importance of having access to a diverse and dynamic set of social ties that support deep learning, thinking, and making with digital media.

**Participation**

When teens gain access to the Internet, the all-important question, How do they use it? comes to the forefront. Even as access to the Internet is spreading, not all forms of access and participation are equal. Researchers are beginning to map the various modes of Internet engagement that identify the subtle characteristics of teen social media behaviors. An ethnographic study of young people’s digital media practices by Ito et al. identifies two primary genres of participation: friendship-driven and interest-driven. Friendship-driven practices refer to the dynamic ways teens use Internet technologies to interact with their peers through the use of smartphones and social media channels like Snapchat and Instagram. The ability to use technology to connect with peers and create what is, in effect, a social space with little adult intrusion or authority has been an enduring feature of teenagers’ adoption of computer and Internet-based technologies from instant messaging to social networking.

Interest-driven practices highlight the fact that some teens are drawn to the Internet to pursue specific domains of interest. The teens in our study developed a wide variety of interests including music, games, film, design, and fashion. In virtually all of these cases the Internet was a go-to tool, learning resource, and community to further develop their expertise and engagement in an interest-driven activity.

There are certainly other modes of participation, including pop culture and civic. Later in this chapter I discuss some of the ways pop culture figures into the digital media repertoire of black and Latino teens. And while our study did not find students devoting substantial time and energy to civic genres of participation, this particular sphere of activity continues to evolve in ways that deserve additional inquiry and analysis. Students received practically all of their news and information about the civic and political sphere from the Internet. In a 2018 study, Vicky Rideout and S. Craig Watkins find that black and Latino youth are actually more likely than their white counterparts to use social media, for example, as a resource for civic expression and participation.
Whether it is to hang out with friends, pursue specific interests, or partake in new modes of civic and political activity, what teens do with the Internet is inextricably linked to the social, educational, and economic currents that are always at work in their lives. How do issues of equity influence teen engagement with the Internet and the connected world? Are some youth more likely, for example, to pursue interest-driven or civic-driven activities than others? If so, why? Moreover, how do these different forms of participation influence the future aspirations and trajectories of young people?

Digital Literacy

In an age of rapid technological change a main requisite is the cultivation of the skills and competencies to use networked technologies in relevant, dynamic, and capital-enhancing ways. It is no longer simply enough to provide young people access to computers and the Internet; they also need access to the resources—social and educational—and opportunities that develop the skills and dispositions that are associated with more dynamic forms of tech adoption and engagement. In this study we ask, what skills and dispositions do teens bring to their engagement with Internet-based technologies? More important, how and where do young people develop the skills that lead to more diverse and dynamic forms of participation in a knowledge-driven society and economy?

The question of digital literacy and its relationship to the digital divide consists of many distinct, yet connected components that span a continuum of skills and dispositions. For example, there is the matter of what Kathleen Tyner refers to as “tool literacy.”10 This is a reference to the foundational skills that are required to participate in our technology-driven world and includes everything from learning how to use a tracking pad to operating a smartphone. The design of mobile interfaces or social software assumes certain skills and a general facility with smart technologies. A move along the skills continuum includes the ability to use general computer software such as word processing, spreadsheet, and email applications. As one climbs the technical skills ladder the ability to master more complex software involving media creation, analytics, and coding emerges. These are all features of digital media literacy.
All of the students that we met at Freeway had developed many of the rudimentary skills that allowed them to use the Internet with little or no difficulties. For example, they could operate computers to conduct searches, create documents, download content, and send and receive emails. Literacy in general is not static and typically shifts in relation to technological and social transformations. In short, what it means to be literate in an ever-evolving and technology-driven society is constantly changing.

Digital literacy is not simply about “technical competency” but also about developing important social and critical thinking competencies. For example, a teen may be able to conduct a search to find information related to a task that she is trying to complete. But she must also execute a series of other more nuanced cognitive tasks. For instance, she must be able to critically evaluate search results and make discerning choices regarding the quality, relevance, and usefulness of the information accessed. We might call this mastering the skills of information literacy. Further, she must be able to take information from her search and engage in comparison and contrast, dissection, critique, and critical thinking. This is where critical thinking and analytical skills are prominent.

Transforming the information that she has evaluated into something tangible and in the form of an expressed artifact or representation—a graphic, game, report, or piece of code—is yet another dimension of digital literacy. These practices are related to design and production literacies. Schools devote most of their resources to teaching students technical skills with varying degrees of success. However, a more dynamic approach to digital literacy must also help students cultivate a questioning disposition that employs technology to practice innovation and problem solving.

Virtually all of the students that we met at Freeway were aware of and used a mix of platforms to search for information—Google, Wikipedia, and YouTube. However, the skills and the disposition to use that information in responsive and innovative ways were not nearly as prevalent. Skills related to tool literacy and basic computing like searching and downloading represent lower-order thinking skills, or skills that are not cognitively demanding. Skills related to evaluation, critique, design, and creation represent higher-order thinking skills, or skills that are more likely to demonstrate cognitive rigor and nuance. Whereas lower-order
skills are fundamental to participating in a digital and knowledge-driven economy, higher-order skills are essential to thriving. If the students in our study are any indication, schools do relatively well at developing lower-order skills but struggle to cultivate higher-order skills.

Finally, schools must also develop curricula that empower students to practice greater data literacy. The revelations in 2016 that social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter had been used in the presidential election to deliberately spread false information or what has become known as “fake news” through online social networks provokes a discussion about what role schools can play in building a more informed citizenry. The Facebook scandal involving the political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica further exposed the dangers of the connected world. Developments like these highlight the urgent need for schools to assume a greater role in helping young people understand the economics and politics of the Internet. Regarding the former, young people must cultivate a better understanding of how virtually everything they do online from posting pictures, to liking a video, to searching for a product is data that can be used to profile them and monetize their digital identities and practices. Regarding the latter, young people must cultivate a better understanding of how their online activities can expose them to political communication that is deliberately misleading and undermines the core principles of democracy. Whereas the former—the economics of the Internet—raise concerns about the monetization of data the latter—the politics of the Internet—raise concerns about the weaponization of data. Consequently, schools should not only be teaching students how to search, design, or code. Schools should also be teaching students how to think critically about how the algorithms built by coders shape our digital media practices specifically and our lives more generally.

Issues like these expand how schools and society should be thinking about what it means to be literate and high functioning in the digital world. Tool literacy involves learning how to use computers and software. Information literacy includes learning how to manage and navigate the flurry of information available in a connected world. Design literacy highlights the need to be able to make tech tools and information actionable. Critical literacy points to the need to comprehend the functions and implications of a rapidly evolving digital economy and
society. And data literacy includes the preparation of citizens who better understand the data-driven policies of tech companies and how they affect society. These components are distinct and mark an increasingly complex spectrum of digital literacies.

The Changing Landscape of Internet Access

Among the students in our in-depth study, access to the Internet ranged from the conventional to the nonconventional. A small fraction of the families were technology rich and maintained reliable access to broadband. For example, in Jasmine’s lower-middle-class African American household, she and other family members—mother, father, and younger brother—each owned an Internet-enabled mobile device. There were several computers in the household. In addition to her laptop, Jasmine owned a smartphone and went online regularly from home. Jack, one of the few white students in our sample, also lived in a tech-rich environment. Compared with the majority of students in our in-depth case studies, Jack lived in an affluent household. Jack’s mother and father worked in professional occupations. Although his parents were divorced they provided him with abundant technology. Jack was the only student who owned an iPad in our sample. He used the tablet to play games, though he did download a couple of textbooks for school. He also owned a smartphone and used it frequently at school to Facebook with friends, play games, and go online.

Many of the families in our study resided on the opposite end of the technology ownership and broadband access spectrum. Take Kyle and his family, for instance. They were poor and constantly on the move. During our year in Freeway the family was hit hard by a devastating fire, which made their meager financial circumstances especially dire. When we met Kyle, his family had resettled in a multigenerational household where he shared a sofa bed with his thirty-two-year-old uncle. There was only one computer in the household, and it was an outdated PC. The phone that Kyle owned was limited to texting. In this familial environment, broadband Internet was a luxury that simply could not be considered. Kyle’s home environment was similar to that of a number of students in our study, in that it did not afford the opportunity to cultivate the online social and digital capital that fuel deeper and
more diverse forms of engagement in digital media and participatory cultures.

Amina faced similar challenges. She and her mother moved frequently. Amina grew up in Rochester, New York, and moved to Austin in her junior year. She spent her sophomore year in Ethiopia living with an aunt. Her family is ethnically Ethiopian and Amina spoke Amharic. During our yearlong fieldwork at Freeway, a conflict with her mother forced Amina to move in with a friend's family for a brief period of time. Her mother went back to school, determined to shore up her postsecondary credentials and opportunities for more meaningful employment. As a result, Amina became a breadwinner as income from her job as a restaurant worker helped support basic household expenses. From time to time she also had to provide childcare for her two-year-old sibling. Through all of this Amina took AP courses and maintained aspirations for college.

By the end of the school year she moved into an apartment with a female acquaintance, starting her transition to young adulthood much earlier than most people her age (eighteen). They both worked in low-wage service occupations, and the struggle to make rent, utilities, and other necessary expenses made broadband Internet a luxury. In cases like Amina’s, a mobile data plan was the most reliable form of Internet access. But as we discuss below and in chapter two, mobile-only access limits the range of activities and kinds of media and production literacy skills that young people develop.

Parental Persistence

During our time in the school the economic recovery from the Great Recession was plodding along slowly for lower-income households. Faced with limited prospects for meaningful employment, many of the families experienced periodic disruptions in their home Internet access. Still, most families managed to offer some degree of access to computers and the Internet at home. Diego’s family experience was not atypical among our study participants.

Diego was a senior, smart, and deep into games. (In chapter six we discuss his games-based interests and activities in detail.) He and his younger brother lived in a Spanish-language-dominant household. They spent weekdays with their mother and weekends with their father.
When it was a struggle to keep up with rent and utilities, Diego’s mother would opt to overlook the monthly payment for Internet service. Diego described the times without home Internet as frustrating, “because you feel disconnected from the world,” he told one of our researchers.

Most of the parents in our study worked in lower-wage, lower-status service occupations. Still, nearly all of them placed substantial value on digital media and made sacrifices to ensure greater access to computers, the Internet, and mobile devices in their home. Parents overwhelmingly viewed the Internet as a necessary bridge to educational enrichment and better future opportunities. As one mother told us, “You have to know how to use computers in today’s world. If you don’t it’s really hard to find a good job.”

Diego’s mother illustrates the parental sacrifices that we observed. She spoke very little English and worked in a middle school cafeteria. Though it was a constant struggle she insisted on trying to keep up with the monthly payments for home Internet access. Diego often joked about how little his mother used technology. “She has no idea how to use Facebook,” he noted during a conversation with one of our researchers. Further, she did not use a mobile phone. Still, she had a full appreciation of how important technology was in the lives of her two sons and worked diligently to provide them access to a computer and the Internet at home. She patiently saved money and was able to surprise Diego with a brand new iPhone for Christmas. When he showed one of our researchers the phone after the holiday break, his eyes still sparkled from the elation the unexpected gift stirred.

One aspect of life in the digital edge that is little noticed is the extraordinary effort that some parents display to secure a richer technology and literacy environment for their children. No one needs to tell these parents that technology is important in education and the paid labor force. They understand better than most how low educational attainment or a lack of knowledge about computers and the digital economy limits your prospects for higher-wage, higher-status employment and social mobility. How these parents persist to create a more favorable media, technology, and literacy environment for their children deserves more detailed attention than even we give to the matter. Faced with limited financial resources, these parents make important investments in the lives of their children even as they face extraordinarily challenging odds.
Why the Home Broadband Internet Gap Matters

As the discussion above explains, several families in our study struggled to sustain access to home broadband Internet. The presence of broadband in the home is associated with a number of important outcomes related to young people’s participation in the digital world. During the period of our fieldwork, 73 percent of U.S. households adopted broadband Internet, according to the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA). Adoption varied along some predictable categories. For example, the lowest-family-income households (48 percent) were less likely to have access to home broadband than the highest-family-income households (95 percent). Similarly, white households (77 percent) were more likely than black (61 percent) or Latino (63 percent) households to have home broadband.

About 28 percent of the 122 million households represented in the NTIA’s study did not use broadband at home. The NTIA identified several reasons why some households were nonadopters of broadband Internet. The main reason given for nonadoption was “don’t need it, not interested.” We saw no evidence of this viewpoint in our study. This is likely due to one main fact: the presence of school-aged children in all of the households in our fieldwork. A child in the home has long been a good predictor of whether technologies like computers, gaming platforms, or the Internet will be available in the home. As we noted above, all of the parents that we met understood the basic benefits of computers and the Internet.

The second reason cited by the NTIA—broadband is too expensive—was a common refrain among the households in our study that were nonadopters of broadband. Among the families in our study, economic difficulties were a constant barrier to the acquisition of nonessential household-related goods and services. Another reason cited by the NTIA—the presence of an inadequate computer—consistently appeared in our conversations with students. Many of the Freeway students in our study had home access to computers and mobile phones. However, as these devices aged, an upgrade to a new computer or phone was not a certainty. As we discuss in chapter two, for instance, students often had to make do with dilapidated mobile devices and household computers;
thus, their home access to a more robust Internet experience was severely limited.

The broadband gap in the United States matters for several reasons. Students who have broadband access only at school or in public spaces like a library may not have sufficient time to tinker, play, or develop the repertoire of digital skills and social capital that are often associated with more dynamic digital media practices. Additionally, young people who lack access to high-capacity digital networks are more likely to be only consumers rather than producers of digital media content. Home broadband users are much more likely than nonusers to create and share content, two key features in the participatory cultures that are a significant aspect of the networked world. This has implications for the quality of young people’s engagement with media as well as their prospects for cultivating more advanced thinking and digital making skills.

The absence of home broadband has serious educational implications too. Students who do not have reliable access to broadband Internet face serious limitations in their academic endeavors and preparation for a knowledge economy. Whether it is in school or out of school, we live in a world that takes for granted the ability to collaborate with others, work with networked documents, and use mobile and cloud-based platforms.

Living in homes and attending schools that are short on financial and technological resources requires one to be creative and flexible. Freeway students were constantly adapting their Internet use to changing or uncertain circumstances—a lost or broken mobile device, social media filters at school, or no Internet connection at home. Students who did not have Internet access at home or via their own mobile device mined other options, including computers at school, public Wi-Fi, and the devices of friends. This last method—relying on devices from friends—was especially interesting and reflects the creation of what we call an informal sharing economy.

The student-powered “sharing economy” that we detected was marked by a series of practices that involved trading, co-owning, and partnering with peers to use handheld mobile devices like smartphones and iPods. The swapping and sharing of mobile handhelds created a distinct community of trust while also providing access to the media content coveted by many teens. The decision to share devices and passwords embodies the resilience that characterizes how students navigated the
daily realities of life in the digital edge. We discuss this informal sharing economy in greater detail in chapter two.

Further, students became experts at finding Wi-Fi hotspots when they could not afford mobile data plans. Some students even acknowledged that they figured out ways to use neighboring Wi-Fi connections even when they were not open to the public. A few students turned the computers at Freeway into their personal platform during the after-school hours. And others leveraged good relations with teachers to earn weekend borrowing privileges that allowed them to use laptops and digital editing software at home. In other words, even when access to a robust Internet experience or opportunity to produce digital media seemed unlikely as a result of social and economic barriers, students designed their own social hack to pursue their interests and creative aspirations in the digital world.

A Case Study of Creative Resilience: Miguel and Marcus

Miguel and Marcus, twins who lived in a trailer park community with their immigrant parents, are excellent examples of the tenacity many students displayed to ensure their meaningful participation in the digital world. All of our interactions and conversations with the twin brothers and their parents strongly suggest that the family were undocumented Mexican immigrants. Like many of the students from immigrant households, Miguel and Marcus began their schooling in the United States in an English language learner class. They mastered that curriculum relatively early in their academic career and transitioned seamlessly to an English-language curriculum. The twins were in the ninth grade, well adjusted, and enrolled in two pre-AP classes when we met them.

The media practices of the twins took shape in a home environment that offered a modicum of access to the social and gaming media they coveted. There was a computer and two televisions in the home. The computer was a PC that was shared among four siblings and two adults. Moreover, the PC was an aging machine with a temperamental graphics card, which made it unsuitable for the gaming adventures and social media that the twins enjoyed. The Internet connection was not broadband but it was functional. No one in the household owned a smartphone. Miguel, however, did own a Nintendo DS—a handheld gaming platform
that was steadily losing market share to the Apple products during our
fieldwork.

In the cramped bedroom that the twins shared was a Wii game con-
sole and television set. The Wii, according to Miguel, was hooked up to
an old television. “It’s a small old TV like the one that releases all that
static,” he said during one of our many interviews with him. Due to
the PC’s limited performance capacity, the twins opted to use their Wii
gaming console whenever they logged into Facebook at home.

Occasionally, Miguel used his DS to connect with peers. “The DS
has a browser and you can connect to Facebook Mobile,” he explained.
He used the social network to “personal message” friends, but it was a
much slower form of communication. “Most people have phones and
they text each other,” Miguel said. When asked what else he did with the
DS, Miguel said, “I can put music on it. There are programs and games.
There is a notebook thing that I can write down memos and meetings.”
He also had a few games on the device. Miguel expressed frustration
that the DS could not connect to the Wi-Fi at school. He noted that
Apple products like the iPhone and iPod connected with no problems.

In addition to connecting with his peers from school on Facebook,
Miguel used the social network to connect with people he had met
through Perfect World, a popular multiplayer online role-playing game.
Perfect World is a 3D adventure and fantasy virtual world based on Chi-
inese mythology. As with World of Warcraft, it took the commitment
of seemingly endless hours to develop both the technical proficiency
and the social currency necessary to build a more compelling experi-
ence in Perfect World. He played every night for two hours when he
arrived home from school. He acknowledged that he would have played
much longer, but “my parents only give me two hours of computer time
a night.” His commitment to playing also led to the creation of some
fruitful social relationships within the game.

Jason, a fifteen-year-old from Florida, was someone that Miguel met
in the virtual gaming world. “I was a noob [newbie] and had a quest that
needed to be done and he decided to help,” Miguel told us. During the
quest they entered a dungeon and killed the boss. Shortly after that they
became in-game friends and connected with each other outside of the
game through Facebook.
Another colleague in the game also came to his rescue in a time of need. “I had this other friend that invited me to his faction because my old faction was full of a-holes,” Miguel said. He needed another quest to complete a level, and the leader of the other guild helped him achieve his mission. They started chatting after that. The leader of that guild was twenty-four years old and lived in New York. Miguel was fourteen. He also befriended a couple based in Brooklyn. He chatted with them three or four times a week via Skype’s voice service.

Needless to say, the strategic play, social ties, and skills that Miguel developed through participation in Perfect World intrigued us. This was a whole different person. In school Miguel was reserved, quiet, and unassuming. Out of school he was actively involved in a virtual gaming world that required him to collaborate with strangers to problem solve and that also led to meaningful social interactions outside of the game.

The challenging computing conditions that they faced at home made after-school time especially appealing to Miguel and Marcus. Like a core group of students in our study, the twins stayed after school to access the Internet. When the school day ended, their social gaming and computing lives began. The twins were tinkerers and fond of experimenting with new online gaming platforms, forms of play, and communities.

As a result of their curiosity, the twins introduced Minecraft into their peer group’s informal gaming ecology. Somebody (it was never revealed who) took the time to secretly download Minecraft on all of the computers in Mr. Warren’s Game Lab. This act of bravado turned the classroom into a quasi-Minecraft studio for a brief period of time. In addition to playing the game, several students shared their perspectives and knowledge about the open and innovative world the Minecraft platform has sparked.

While Marcus, Miguel, and some of the other students played the game recreationally after school, Mr. Warren, the advanced game design instructor, was exposed to Minecraft and its merits as a learning engine. The following summer Marcus and Miguel were among a small cadre of students who received an invitation to work on a Minecraft-based project with geologists from a local university. The informal gameplay enriched the formal learning opportunities for the twins and some of their peers.
Critics typically decry engagement in gaming worlds, but the assorted skills—social, tactical, and communication—that some pick up can be useful beyond the game world.\textsuperscript{15} The twins were among the few students in our sample who played in this particular sandbox of digital and participatory culture. In many ways, their play was socially networked and reciprocal—that is, connected to other gamers who helped them execute various quests, level up, and attain skills and in-game assets that raised their status and capabilities within \textit{Perfect World}. These are precisely the kinds of skills—leveraging networks to achieve mastery, greater competency, and social mobility—that are growing increasingly valuable in a knowledge-driven and networked world.

Even in a home environment that required four siblings to share an outdated PC, Miguel actively participated in a connected gaming community. Moreover, Miguel and Marcus’s discovery of \textit{Minecraft} contributed to the making of a rich, informal learning and gaming ecology at Freeway. Their openness to new gaming platforms and experiences led to important learning opportunities for them and their peers and also embodies the creative resilience that is a vital but seldom noticed feature of life in the digital edge.

\section*{Shifting Contexts of Internet Engagement}

In addition to learning about their access to Internet media, we were interested in learning more about the contexts in which black, Latino, and low-income youth use media technologies. Their widespread use of social and mobile media can be attributed to many factors, including a rapidly evolving media environment. In this section we focus on two features of this changing environment. First, we consider the widespread adoption of the Internet in schools. Second, we discuss how the diffusion of Internet-enabled handheld devices has profoundly reshaped the technology landscape and practices of black, Latino, and lower-income youth.

\textit{The Internet Goes to School}

Since the mid-1990s, public schools in the United States have made steady progress in expanding Internet access. In 1994, 3 percent of U.S. schools
had Internet access in instructional rooms.\textsuperscript{16} By 2005, nearly all (94 percent) public schools had Internet access in instructional rooms.\textsuperscript{17}

Predictably, schools with high poverty and black and Latino student populations were less likely than their counterpart schools to provide Internet access. In 1999, about three-quarters, 74 percent, of low-minority schools provided Internet access in instructional classrooms compared with 43 percent of high-minority schools. By 2005 schools with “majority-minority” populations (92 percent) were about as likely as schools with “majority-majority” populations (96 percent) to have access to the Internet in instructional classrooms.\textsuperscript{18}

The same was true across economic lines. Schools with a majority of students from lower-income households (91 percent) were nearly as likely as schools with a majority of students from higher-income households (96 percent) to provide Internet access in instructional classrooms.\textsuperscript{19}

In short, by 2005 most public school students—lower-income/higher-income, black/white/Latino, primary/secondary—were in classrooms that could provide Internet access.

These data, however, are misleading. Even though virtually all schools in the United States are connected to the Internet, not all connections are equal. First, there are substantial differences in the speed and quality of connections. During our time in the field, only 30 percent of U.S. public schools were meeting the Federal Communications Commission’s minimum Internet access goal of one hundred kilobits per second per student, according to a study by the nonprofit EducationSuperHighway.\textsuperscript{20} Freeway offered wireless connectivity, but it was spotty and occasionally required patience to use.

While Freeway was a wired school, not every classroom had computers. This was not atypical or inherently problematic. The school did not have sufficient funds for distributing laptops or tablets to each student to create what are commonly called “one-to-one computing environments.” A laptop or tablet for every child is more likely to occur in affluent rather than lower-income schools. Freeway’s main computer lab consisted of a cluster of desktops in the school’s library. The library computers were used on occasion for school-based assignments, but we never observed high traffic or usage. Among the students that we spent the most time with, there was barely any mention of the library computers.
This was in sharp contrast to the two classrooms in which we spent the entire school year—the Game Lab and the Digital Media Lab. Both of these classrooms were outfitted with Apple iMac computers with large twenty-seven-inch display screens and an impressive suite of software. Students who were enrolled in either the Game Design or the Video and Technology applications elective courses used these computers as a matter of routine to create digital videos, graphics, and even simple games. As we discuss in chapter six, students also used the computers in these two classrooms to pursue more interest-driven projects during the after-school hours. It may have been precisely because the computers in the game and media labs were not marked strictly as “academic” that made them a more desirable destination for students and their “non-academic” creative pursuits.

As recently as 2013, only about 20 percent of U.S. students had access to true high-speed connections in their classrooms. Freeway students frequently complained about the spotty Internet connections when using their own devices. In fact, it was common for Freeway students to express frustration with a school Internet that was also deliberately limited as a result of the school district’s decision to block access to social media. In short, even as schools have become a key point of access to the networked world, lower-income students remain hampered by an inadequate technical infrastructure for high-capacity networks, ill-conceived district policies that block access to social media, and limited opportunities to develop more cognitively demanding media and design literacy skills.

The Mobile Breakthrough

No development has impacted the media and connected lives of black and Latino teens more than mobile phones. In fact, mobile technology dramatically altered what is commonly referred to as the digital divide, the formation of the “technology rich” and the “technology poor.” In 2012, 55 percent of mobile phone users browsed the web with their phone. But the use of a mobile phone to go online was notably higher among younger and more racially and ethnically diverse populations. Seventy-five percent of mobile phone users aged eighteen to twenty-four years used their phone to go online compared with just 16 percent of those aged sixty-five years and older. Moreover, the Pew Research
Center reported that “roughly two-thirds of black and Latino cell owners go online using their mobile phones, compared with half of whites.”

Browsing the web with a mobile device was the norm among Freeway students. Even as educators and policy makers were holding on to a digital divide narrative that described an earlier era (before smartphones), black and Latino teens like those at Freeway were ushering in a new era in the digital world.

To put the adoption of mobile among blacks and Latinos in perspective, consider this: as late as 2011 most Americans were still using a desktop computer to go online. Laptops (61 percent) were a close second. Nearly 40 percent (39 percent) reported using a mobile phone to go online. By contrast, African Americans and Latinos were early adopters of the mobile Internet. Historically, early adopters of innovations in computer and Internet-based technologies have been white, college-educated, affluent, and generally male. This profile flows smoothly with long-standing beliefs about the diffusion of innovations and early adopter characteristics. However, the adoption of mobile phones by African Americans and Latinos to go online turned the typical early adopter narrative on its head.

Furthermore, the adoption of the mobile Internet by blacks and Latinos provoked the popular view that the rapid diffusion of Internet-enabled phones did something that years of policy intervention could not do—bridge the gap between the technology rich and the technology poor. The implications for the adoption of the mobile Internet among black and Latino teens are complicated and obscure some of the challenges they continue to face in securing a more equitable Internet experience. We consider some of the challenges in chapter two.

Social Media: Practices and Participation

Not surprisingly, the social media activities at Freeway were extraordinarily diverse and cut across a wide terrain of interests, identities, and communities. Many of the students that we interviewed were introduced to social media as the transition from MySpace to Facebook was in full swing among teens. While children are exposed to social media at fairly young ages, the use of social media ramps up in the transitions to middle school and high school. Older teens (aged fifteen to seventeen
years) are much more likely than younger teens (aged thirteen to fourteen years) to use social network sites. This is due to several factors, including the fact that as teens grow older they actively seek out more autonomous spaces and opportunities to connect with their peers while also crafting interests and identities that are deliberately distinct from the adults in their lives.

Teens, generally speaking, are more likely than any other demographic group to use multiple social media sites. Moreover, their use of one platform (e.g., Instagram) could vary significantly from how they use another platform (e.g., Twitter). For example, Freeway students used established social media like Facebook to communicate with their friends at school or family members about the more routine aspects of their lives. Some students, however, experimented with sites like Tumblr and Instagram to explore an identity, interest, or creative practice that was not routine.

Gabriella used Tumblr to reflect on her emotional state and deliberately kept her profile away from her friends at school and family members. According to Gabriella, the content that she posted and reposted on Tumblr helped her process her thoughts and emotions. Talking about her involvement with Tumblr, Gabriella says, “I post what I feel. If I get sad then I post what I’m sad about. I have trouble saying things out loud, so I say it on Tumblr.” She and her boyfriend also shared a private Tumblr account that was only for them.

Inara was fascinated with the world of fashion and spent a lot of her time online browsing sites like Tumblr and Pinterest to explore design trends. As we discussed above, Miguel and Marcus fashioned a social gaming network that was completely separate from their life and peers at school. After participating in a summer design project Diego developed a fascination with game authoring software and online tutorials related to building gaming computers. In these and other instances, students adopted social media to cultivate interests and identities that were not rooted in their local peer cultures.

One of the hallmark features of the social media landscape is the formation of participatory cultures, defined by Jenkins et al. as “a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression . . . strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along
to novices.” The Internet has certainly expanded the ways in which affinity groups connect with and engage each other. Digital formations of participatory culture are marked by distributed expertise, collective intelligence, and the creation and circulation of media content. Proponents of participatory culture point to the rise of social and creative milieus in which members believe that their contributions matter and they also feel a connection to one another. Participatory cultures are rich in social capital insofar as they reinforce reciprocity and community.

Throughout our fieldwork we repeatedly encountered instances of students who were reluctant to share their creative work or ideas related to a particular domain of interest in the context of online participatory communities. This is a noteworthy discovery insofar as the sharing of creative content in communities that offer feedback, support, and the opportunity to cultivate a more dynamic online social network is widely regarded as an era-defining feature of today’s media and cultural landscape. Why were Freeway students reluctant to circulate their creative work in online participatory cultures? Students offered a mix of reasons.

In some instances, students were uncertain about the quality of their creative work and how it might be received. Students also expressed concern about Internet trolls and mean-spirited comments that can diminish the desire to share creative work. After he posted two videos in which he was playing the guitar, Diego was greeted by a troll who called it “the worst piece of guitar playing s@!t I have ever seen. You should be embarrassed to post this.” Diego’s response included a couple of expletives of his own. Though not advisable, his retort was certainly understandable. As far as we know he never shared anything else in a context like this again during our time in the school.

We speculate that robust involvement in participatory culture is mediated by the many dimensions of cultural capital such as in-group knowledge, familiarity with community norms and communication styles, and reputation. For instance, in-group knowledge about a specific technology, platform, skill, or interest facilitates entry into and engagement in a participatory community. Moreover, members of participatory cultures develop shared vocabulary and understandings that define community norms and facilitate communication and the exchange of ideas. Finally, engagement in participatory culture is also shaped by reputation and recognition. Effective participation through the sharing
of content or feedback establishes an individual’s social status and influence within the community.

Participatory cultures certainly foster inclusion and engagement. But participatory cultures also create the conditions for exclusion and disengagement, making it more difficult for some to cultivate the knowledge, cultural fluency, and status that are requisites for effective participation. What are the implications of this exclusion? Owing to their limited engagement in participatory cultures, many Freeway students were unable to expand and diversify their social networks beyond their peers at school, which limited opportunities to deepen their expertise, cultivate cultural fluency and status, and enrich their capacity to circulate their creative work among a wider milieu of content creators. Whatever their reasons for not actively engaging online participatory cultures, the impact was clear: Freeway students were much less likely to benefit from the feedback, support, and network-building capacity that are often generated.

Teens, Social Media, and Pop Culture

Popular culture was also a key driver in the social media practices among Freeway students. While considerable attention has focused on matters like the increase in screen time and media consumption, teen social media practices also enable new modes of identity work and expressive culture.

Freeway students coveted social media and mobile devices because they offer an unfettered path to games, videos, and music. Social and mobile media also offer teens opportunities to explore their creative aspirations and new notions of self. As with previous generations of teens, for example, pop music was a central force in the lives of Freeway students. Music is central to the identities and communities that teens carefully construct and serves many different purposes—social, psychological, political—in their lives. Social media remakes the pop music rituals of teens in a variety of ways. In their engagement with social media, teens make meaningful social and psychological investments in music artists, genres, and narratives that reflect their desires, sensibilities, and aspirations.

No matter where they were in school—in class, in the hallways, hanging out with friends—Freeway students always seemed to be plugged
into music via their mobile devices and earbuds. At Freeway, students followed their favorite bands and music artists through social media. Gabriella maintained a separate Twitter account just to coordinate her music interests. She enjoyed getting updates from the bands that she follows and hearing excerpts of their songs. Selena and Amina both posted lyrics they favored on Twitter. Users of Tumblr covered their walls with images and lyrics from their favorite artists. Fans of rap music used social media channels to explore hip hop's digital underground, a creative world bustling with mix tapes (i.e., original rhymes accompanied with elaborate remixes of popular songs and beats), homemade videos, and constant social media chatter about culture, politics, and the mundane aspects of everyday life.30

Some students also developed customized media channels to coordinate their personal investments in pop music. In instances like these, teens took to social media to curate their own pop music interests and experiences. Kyle was among a handful of students in our sample who used YouTube as a music media destination. Music-related content on YouTube was a source of creative inspiration for him and the hip hop band that he experimented with. Many aspiring musicians and bands have adopted YouTube as a channel for sharing their music in hopes of connecting directly with audiences.

Sergio also used YouTube as his very own personal music platform. He visited the world's biggest online video site every day, in part, to discover new bands. Sergio subscribed to nearly three hundred music channels, “mainly like independent musicians or bands who are promoting themselves on YouTube,” he told us. Students adopted YouTube to watch music videos, follow their favorite music artists, and build a community around their music-based affinities and identities. In 2014, Google moved to convert these kinds of music-driven interests and practices into a formal and more viable music streaming channel and revenue source called YouTube Music Key.31

Whereas corporate radio and pop culture brands like MTV were once the undisputed gatekeepers of teen pop music interests and identities, teens are immersed in a steady and fluid stream of social media interactions that are profoundly transforming the traditional flows of power and influence in the pop culture landscape. Corporate media remains powerful, but the intensity of its influence has been subtly
and steadily altered by the practices and relationships enabled by social media. Many bands, especially upstart and indie artists, view social media as an opportunity to fashion their creative identity and connect directly with fans. Moreover, fans view social media as an opportunity to connect with each other and fashion their own distinct identities, communities, and sensibilities. Social media channels are just as likely as traditional media channels to influence teen pop music interests, tastes, and consumption. Among other things, shifts like these allow black and Latino teens to assert greater control over which media they consume, thus serving to bring greater diversity to the stories and storytellers they encounter in pop culture.

Pop culture is also a vital terrain of cultural capital for teens. It is a primary resource in the acquisition of in-group prestige and status. Through these and other social media activities, teens are not simply consuming pop music; they are actively fashioning a social identity that affords them a sense of self, status, and recognition among their peers through their engagement with pop music specifically and pop culture more broadly.

We observed similar dynamics in other spheres of pop culture, including gaming. Virtually every student that we met at Freeway played games. Jasmine used social network sites to play *The Sims*. Some preferred casual mobile games like *Angry Birds*. Other students made more intense titles like *Call of Duty* or immersive gaming experiences like *Perfect World* their primary gaming experience.

Students such as Miguel, Marcus, and Diego made substantial social, psychological, and personal investments in games. In years past their deep engagement with games would have easily been dismissed as a distraction from more meaningful uses of their time, especially time spent on academics. But their gaming and media practices challenge traditional concerns about screen time and screen-based media. More specifically, their activities underscore why adults should focus less on the amount of time that teens spend with media and focus more on the repertoire of activities they are engaged in and the kinds of literacies that they develop.

Miguel, Marcus, and Diego spent time playing games, but they also spent time studying the technologies used to create games. Miguel and Marcus did not simply “play” *Minecraft*; they used Facebook to join af-
finity communities around the platform and turned to YouTube to keep up with *Minecraft* channels that offered tips and tactics for developing a richer gaming, design, and user experience. Diego’s experience designing games in a summer enrichment project inspired him to start studying online tutorials during his quest to make games (in school) and build his own gaming computer (out of school). On closer inspection, their gaming activities established pathways to the kinds of literacies (e.g., media, technology, and design) and dispositions (e.g., exploration and experimentation) that schools struggle to develop. In fact, whether it was listening to them describe their gaming practices or observing their practices, it was impossible to discern the difference between playing and learning.

The Hidden Legacy of Social Media

For all of the criticism about the amount of time that teens spend with screens, one fact is undeniable: social media transformed black and Latino teens’ relationship with computer-based technologies and the Internet and arguably for the better.

In the 1990s a group of researchers from the University of Texas examined the digital divide in what they called Austin’s technopolis. The technopolis was a reference to the elaborate coordination between business interests, city leaders, and university officials to create a vibrant technology and knowledge-driven economy in Austin. One of the group’s more secondary findings was that some black and Latino teens, especially males, associated the computer and the Internet with geeks. During this period most African American and Latino teens had limited exposure to people using computers, and the majority of ads did little to dispel the viewpoint that the Internet was a predominantly white and middle-class activity. Thus, the primary image many black and Latino youth had of computer users were geeks whom they interpreted as uncool and unrelated to them. A decade later black and Latino teens’ notions of the Internet—who uses it and what it can be used for—had been dramatically altered, in part because of their widespread adoption of social media.

If the early years of computers and Internet use were constructed as predominantly white, male, and middle class, the adoption of social
media by black and Latino teens certainly rewrote that narrative. A part of social media’s hidden legacy is how it transformed black and Latino teens’ relationship with computer-mediated technologies. Through their vigorous adoption of social media platforms like MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, African American and Latino teens, and teens from modest social and economic circumstances began to cultivate a mix of computer-mediated literacies and forms of social capital that had never been associated with them. In other words, they began to develop their own distinct techno-dispositions while also charting very distinct digital media practices.

When Freeway students shared memories of their earliest experiences with social media—MySpace—they consistently spoke about the immense personal satisfaction they gained from building their own personal profiles. Through their engagement with MySpace their notion of what a computer could be used for was greatly expanded. Significantly greater numbers of black, Latino, and low-income teens began using the Internet to communicate, connect, and create content that resonated with their own sense of self and view of the world. In short, playing around with the design of a social media profile or cutting and pasting HTML code dramatically transformed their notion of computers, the Internet, and life in the digital age.

Importantly, black and Latino teens did not simply follow larger social media adoption trends; they became trendsetters. When much of the media was asking why teens were not using Twitter, the percentage of black and Latino teens adopting the platform was steadily rising.34 Between 2010 and 2012 the percentage of Americans using Twitter doubled. African Americans led the user growth of the micro blogging service among teens.35 Since at least 2009, African American teen Internet users have been more likely to use Twitter compared with their white counterparts.36

During our fieldwork at Freeway we came across repeated references to Twitter. The use of Twitter among Freeway students was primarily driven by peer and pop culture. They used Twitter to experiment with their social identities and new modes of creative expression. Some Freeway students posted song lyrics that reflected their mood. Some posted lines from poems that they or someone else wrote. Twitter was also a way for teens to share their daily thoughts, emotions, and experiences.
When we asked Amina how she used Twitter, she noted that she “updates good news, bad news, what I’m doing, and a song lyric [that] gets in my head.” Gabriella stated that Twitter was entertaining, a likely reference to the fact that Twitter has also become a tool used by celebrities to broadcast their lives off-screen. Gabriella went so far as to acknowledge, “I’m addicted to Twitter. I can’t stop checking it.”

No population in the United States was more poised for the rise of mobile-based social media than young African Americans and Latinos. For a variety of social and economic reasons, practically all of their social media use was via a handheld device. Consequently, black and Latino teens became, in the words of Everett M. Rogers, “early adopters” of mobile social media in the United States. This development, of course, ran counter to the dominant digital divide narrative and long-standing early adopter trends in the tech consumer economy. African American teens were among the first group of American youth to adopt the mobile Internet at scale, a development that has made them extraordinarily influential in the evolution of social media. The rise of Black Twitter, a form of social media engagement that has become a pop culture and political force, is a notable illustration.

Social Media and Family Life

Many of the students in our study were members of families that were in constant transit. Consequently, social media was an effective way to keep in touch with distant friends and family. For instance, Marcus used social media to keep up with friends that he left behind in his family’s move to an Austin suburb. Michelle used social media to keep up with her family that lived outside the Austin metro area, including her mother, who was divorced from her father. Inara and Carlos used Facebook to stay connected to family members who lived in Mexico.

About 11 percent of the Freeway student population was English language learners, many of them from immigrant households. For these and other students from immigrant families, social media was a way to stay connected to faraway relatives. Some of the students had vague
memories of life in Mexico, for example, and social media allowed them to maintain important familial connections through the sharing of pictures and updates posted on Facebook. One of the benefits of social media is that “out of sight” no longer has to mean “out of mind” due to the ambient awareness aspects of social media.39 In situations like these, Freeway students also served as brokers who helped their parents and guardians navigate the functions of networked technologies to stay connected to family in distant places.

It is common for children to take on a lead role when it comes to the use of new technologies in the home. Researchers have long referred to children as the “technological gurus” in the home. However, children in immigrant households may be called on to display those skills for more family-critical purposes. Latino teens are much more likely than their elders to use the Internet, smartphones, and social media.40 As a result, children in immigrant households emerge as prime candidates for technology-driven forms of engagement with the outside world. For example, their tech expertise can help Spanish-speaking parents navigate English-only online documents or searches for work and social services.41 Also, their tech expertise often compels them to serve as the primary bridge in the efforts of teachers to communicate with parents about their academic progress. In other words, children who broker in the context of immigrant families are doing more than playing the role of the typical household tech guru. They are also functioning as intermediaries between their (Spanish language dominant) household and (English language dominant) local institutions.

There is often substantial diversity—social, educational, language—within immigrant households. For example, not all children experience their family’s immigrant status the same way. Moreover, not all children develop the same kinds of brokering skills or even the need to take on the brokering role. Older siblings are more likely than younger siblings to assist the family in navigating its relationship with outside social institutions, social media, and correspondence with distant relatives.42 Many of the students in our study were older teens. Moreover, their exposure to teen and digital media culture meant that they were more likely than their younger siblings to take on the role of brokering in the household.
Our field observations consistently support the data that suggest that black and Latino youths are active in digital media culture. If we had conducted this study in, say 2000, in a school composed of similar students and households, most of them would not have been regular users of the Internet. Despite the many labels—“disadvantaged,” “at risk,” “low performers,” and “English language learners”—Freeway students maintained a robust and diverse repertoire of social, digital, and mobile media activities that illuminate the shifting contours of the digital divide. Further, our research suggests that teens from resource-constrained environments navigate a world in which access to hardware (a computer or smartphone) has improved, but access to the forms of capital (social and cultural) that support more diverse and sustained forms of participation in the digital world remains elusive. Moreover, even as access to technology continues to expand and new modes of participation emerge to shape digital media culture, significant social and economic inequalities persist.

Black, Latino, and lower income teens use social media more than their white or affluent counterparts. On any given day: they spend more time on social media and also post more content on social media. These trends point to a series of enigmas that researchers, including our team, have not fully explored. What are the unintended consequences of black and Latinos teens’ valiant efforts to bridge the digital divide? More specifically, what are the perils and the possibilities associated with their greater participation in a digital world that Facebook once described as “more open and more connected?”