The Class

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Identities and Relationships

Having analyzed the web of social relationships that connected the young people within and beyond the class, we now focus in more detail on the texture of the young people’s friendships and peer relations, asking, How do they create identities for themselves within the peer network? As the later chapters show in relation to life at school and home, children and young people live substantially in worlds not of their own making. Thus, we start with their friendships and social worlds, where they might appear to have more choice. As we saw in chapter 3, the unit of the class provides a convenient world for some young people, but for most, the friendships that matter both predate and extend beyond the class. We saw, too, that the young people often construct these friendships along gendered, classed, and ethnic lines in ways that contrast with the values of the school, which, as we show in chapter 5, is supposedly blind to difference. So what do young people’s friends mean to them? What forms of sociality do they sustain, in public or private, online or offline? And how do these shape the construction and expression of identity across the sites of school, home, and elsewhere?1

Intriguingly, when we mapped young people’s connections in chapter 3, we discovered that while members of the class had on average 500 “friends” on Facebook, when they drew us their ego network, they identified just 16 people as important to them. On the one hand, for this cohort, the heyday of Facebook had coincided with the class starting secondary school and needing quickly to establish their place in this new and much larger social world; as Nick said, “In Year 7, it was all about Facebook.” On the other hand, this did not mean that young people do not know what friendship or privacy really means anymore. Indeed, when it came to people important to them, they claimed no more friends than was ever the case.2 And the handful of friends they did claim were mostly local and all well known to them.

It seems, then, that young people sustain several intersecting social worlds. Is this simply a matter of an online world of multiple “weak ties”
and an offline world of grounded, strong ties? Weak ties were originally theorized “offline” as well as, now, online, so what seems new is the possibility of strong ties online. Equally interesting are the possibilities for online identity expression supporting, extending, or contrasting with what takes place offline.

Already by Year 9, Facebook had become a routine, even banal, means of keeping an eye on activity within the peer group. As Dom observed, “For us now, because we’ve grown up having all this stuff, it’s not, like, amazing.” With few exceptions, the young people’s offline friendships were mirrored and supported by their online networks, these playing an important role in sustaining relations with friends seen during the day but otherwise inaccessible in the evenings, given restrictions on children’s movement outside the home. Part of what matters here is precisely that everyone is on it, everyone is available. Mark and Hakim said they just had not seen the point of joining, yet Mark had acquired a profile by the end of the year, perhaps reflecting his increasingly comfortable position getting along with the other boys, while Hakim may have been hampered by having the poorest internet connectivity at home that we witnessed.

For some members of the class, however, we shall see in this chapter how the online networks also significantly extended the offline ones or provided a means of presenting a successful, or different, alternative “face” to their peers. Some of these reconfigurations of social networks involved the exploration of further online services: Twitter, Tumblr, and others that lay somewhat under the radar, not least because at the time of the fieldwork, Facebook was becoming highly monitored by adults, responding to media panics and safety concerns. This suggests that it is not simply that online communication occurs away from the heavily supervised spaces of home and school but that the communication process was distinctively shaped by the affordances of online sites and services themselves—in other words, by what the technology itself makes possible. We will show how these technologies make communication more visual, visible, searchable, and persistent. For example, it has not previously been possible to sort through other people’s contact lists or to check one’s message history among that of others in one’s network, as there is no real precursor to the digital footprint, which makes much of today’s communicative activity (comments, likes, images, links, etc.) visible to others.
Given the explosion of “weak ties” in the digital, networked age, everyone is increasingly connected to everyone else. Yet since one cannot “really” know everyone, building meaningful social worlds seems to involve a further set of choices—how to present oneself in different contexts, how far to connect different groups of friends, and when to place boundaries so as to limit or exclude connections. So how do young people manage these choices? What degrees of visibility or separation do they sustain? And where does all this leave face-to-face communication?

Visible Popularity

In chapter 3, we described the largest group in the class as “core”—the members well connected to each other and others, seemingly comfortable in their social standing. Yet further time spent with the class challenged the notion that life is easy for the core group or indeed that those who are on the periphery are more marginalized. We have already seen how the clique set themselves against any normative expectations, forming their own social world under the radar of what is visible at school. Meanwhile, for some on the edges of our diagram, the social center of gravity of their lives was simply located elsewhere.

It is also worth looking more closely at the core group itself. Take Gideon, right in the center of the class network. As we got to know him better, we saw what a lot of social effort it took to gain such status. And even though he valued this social success, it did not mean much to him in terms of intimacy. In drawing his ego network, Gideon divided his world into what he called “important people” (consisting of his extended family: “because they’re family, just family”), then the friends he does lots of things with offline and online (overlapping with the core group in the class), and then the people he just hangs out with online or chats to online (who were too many to name). So, while his visible social network was important to him, it was not made up of “important people.”

The people important to Gideon, we discovered, were those who helped him through what he had experienced as a difficult transition to secondary school—a time when he had difficulties with “anger management,” as the school called it. This was now familiar to him as part of his self-narrative:
I used to be quite small in Year 7 and 8, and I used to misbehave. The week before leaving at the end of Year 8 for some holiday, I got excluded because I got really angry at this supply teacher, and then I said to her, “Oh, you’re not a real teacher. You’re a fake teacher.” And then I called her a stupid bitch. And then that all got [unclear], but then . . . I’m not kind of like an angry person where I’d want to hit someone; I’m kind of an angry person—I just want to have a big argument like there. But now at the moment when I’ve . . . since I’ve come back, in the summer holiday, I’ve grown quite a lot. And then, I don’t know, I just can’t be bothered to be misbehaving.

Fortunately for Gideon, both home and school responded constructively. The school provided anger-management classes and regular meetings with a mentor, although the school retained some doubts about whether Gideon himself was actually improving his behavior. Probably more significantly, his family stepped up their efforts to support him through this recent difficulty. His father took him on extended
cycling holidays, and his mother contributed a series of enrichment activities, telling us, “I have to... there's a lot of encouragement all the time. So, you know, the summer holidays I took him to lots of things at the theater, I take him to art galleries, you know, because I want him to, sort of, be a rounded sort of person and have a bit of everything.” Then, in a pattern we saw in several families (see chapter 7), his family encouraged shared media use to build family solidarity—“We like him to spend some time with, you know, even if it's just sitting watching television together. It'll be that sort of thing”—while simultaneously restricting Gideon's media use in his bedroom. Gideon had responded positively to such efforts, privately pleased that, he said, “me and my mum, we can just talk about anything. I can never keep a lie from her, or if I have to say it, later on it would just come out.” Yet publicly—among his wide circle of contacts—he presented himself as a fun-loving person who takes life lightly and knows little of difficulties. Indeed, he did not discuss personal or private difficulties with anyone his own age; for such matters, he talked to his mother or his older sister.

Interviewer: Have you got especially good friends...?
Gideon: I just go out with anybody. Like friends of... I'm kind of like, I can be friends with, like, a lot of people, if you know what I mean.
Interviewer: Yes, like...
Gideon: Like, I have a group of friends that I might hang out with one time and then another group. But I think everyone, apart from the kind of the nerdy people, most of the people will know each other and stuff.8

He described chatting via his Blackberry smartphone in similar terms:

Interviewer: What kind of... when you're BBM-ing, what kind of conversations are you having with people?
Gideon: With girls it's kind of a flirting type.
Interviewer: Okay.
Gideon: And then with boys it's just kind of casual.

Similarly, on Facebook, we saw him putting in considerable effort to create a successful persona, yet we had a strong sense that Facebook friendships meant little to him. He had over 1,000 Facebook friends,
twice the class average, and unlike the typical, fairly straightforward self-presentation, his profile was remorselessly humorous: he was over 100 years old, cleans toilets at McDonalds, and has a huge family, with 50 friends listed as brothers and sisters. Moreover, he was very active on his profile (which, unusually, was public to other Facebook users), sharing links and happy birthday wishes, posting music, and adding new friends every few days in a manner he himself described as “addicted.”

**Interviewer:** Who do you chat with by text, Facebook, or BBM?
**Gideon:** Everyone.
**Interviewer:** Everyone? So everybody?
**Gideon:** Yes, plus more people.

Facebook, like school, connected him to what he experienced as a somewhat undifferentiated mass—significant in terms of scale and thus the validation offered to him but undemanding in terms of commitment. Is this projection of self as a cool, popular, and funny person part of his recovery from a difficult start? Certainly this slightly risqué image contrasts with the boy who talks to his mother, goes cycling with his father, visits art galleries, and watches TV comfortably with his older sister. It may even be that the very notion of a friend—if this means an intimate relationship of sharing and trust—does not mean much to Gideon at present. Meanwhile, the synergy between his online and offline contacts is striking, both facilitating weak ties that are important for communicating popularity but are not important in and of themselves.

**Private Spaces**

Megan was also in the core group at school, yet she drew her social and personal boundaries rather differently from Gideon. Her ego network included 13 people who mattered to her: the nuclear family, her two best friends, several of the core group from the class, and a couple of other friends. Surrounding this tightly knit grouping, we observed the wider circle of offline and online contacts that anchored Megan in the youth culture of her neighborhood. But Megan was juggling different sides to her identity and so required a diversity of social spaces. At home, she described herself as a “daddy’s girl,” able to get whatever she wanted
from her home-working father. With her mother, whom she could not “manage” in the same way, she was far more cautious, and we gradually saw that it was her mother who set high academic expectations for Megan, demanding violin practice, high grades, and good behavior. At school, however, Megan was “cool”—ostentatiously sassing the teachers almost beyond their tolerance, skipping classes, and missing homework (although, as demanded by her mother, she walked a fine balance to maintain high grades). With her two best friends, Mandy and Mila, Megan shared intimacies, preferring face-to-face time to talk
about what mattered to them, all the while missing her “best friend”—her older sister, now away at university.

Megan’s tightly knit social world, then, provided a way of seeing and being seen in the class, in the neighborhood in the evenings and weekends, and also on Facebook—all coextensive insofar as they enabled gossip, flirtation, and social arrangements. Her class friends were the most visible but not necessarily the most important part of Megan’s social world. The class also offered a space for getting on with boys, perhaps because there were more boys in the class but perhaps, too, because a girl who gets on with boys at this age poses a challenge to other girls (“None of the other girls talk to me. They don’t like me”). Hanging out in this space involved a kind of drama, especially when conducted face-to-face.10 “Usually I don’t start arguments. I get, like—say someone’s in an argument with, like, one of my close friends. I usually just get involved like that. That’s the most reason, because I don’t really—like, I defend people.” This kind of drama somehow took the place of flirting, which, as many of the class members agreed, might be inappropriate since they had been more like brothers and sisters for the previous two years. Megan explained, “People think that, like, in our year, people flirt, like, in the years above us and, like, below us they do, but the boys and girls in my year are always arguing, like proper arguments. . . . The most like normal arguments I have is with boys.”

Significantly, this was a year of transition for Megan, as she became more critical of peer influences and more serious about school, even trying out some of the after-school clubs. In the visible social spaces of school and neighborhood, Megan was stabilizing her network: “A few months ago, I used to, like—I was friends with different people then. I’m friends with other people now. I’ve, like, sort of changed groups, so I go out, like, more with them. I don’t really stay at home that much anymore because before I would just go to, like, other people’s houses and stuff or stay at home, and now I’ll actually go out.” This increasingly stable social scene was validated by the public nature of Facebook.11 By midyear, Megan had pruned her Facebook contacts down to the 600 or so people whom she considered she actually knew (although this was still more than the class average), saying it was becoming more functional than expressive: “If there’s, like, a party or something, because that’s how people will invite someone, like, an inbox or something. But
I don’t use it to talk to people that much.” This was partly because she considered communication on Facebook to be public, notwithstanding that she had set her privacy settings on Facebook to be private, while Twitter she saw as essentially private (despite being a primarily public platform, its direct message [DM] function is indeed private):12 “On Facebook, like, all my friends basically have my password on Facebook. But on Twitter, nobody does, so it’s, like—so say someone wanted to tell me something really badly, they would usually DM you.” This reveals one of the challenges of the peer culture: the very fact that Facebook profiles are password protected for reasons of privacy means that teens are inclined to share the passwords to signal their intimacy with their friends, even though the result is that the communication becomes public.13

But in addition to this public-private bonding, Megan was also searching out more personal and private spaces to try out different styles and interests, different selves even. In reflexively working out her identity, she was self-consciously following her much-admired older sister: “My sister was always different, so one time she was, like, a chav [a derogatory term for the working-class poor], one time she was, like, indie, then one time she was a Goth.”14 Popular culture—music, fandom, and the social media site Tumblr—all provided ways of constructing different selves in private, as Abby, another music lover, also told us:

I think music kind of describes a person really. So, like, if there was, like . . . if you listen to that type of music, they’re kind of—they’ve got their own type of personality kind of, like that music, and I think if you, like, listen to, like R&B-type music, you’re not exactly like [unclear] or nothing, but you kind of have the same type of personality as the music.15

Megan herself went on to say,

I’m, like, really, like, what people would call me is a fan girl—like, I’m a fan girl. I fan-girl everything. So I get obsessed with things. Like, I’ve had so many obsessions, like Harry Potter, Twilight, and celebrity, like Demi Lovato. I’m obsessed with her.

All Tumblrs are different, so you can have some which is just writing or some that is just pictures. . . . It’s just random pictures, like if I send a
picture, you can reblog it. But you have different things, so you can have Hipstar, Kawaii—all these different things. I used to have a Kawaii blog, which is like . . . although if I Tumblr, it’s just a random—if I thought something was nice, I’d reblog it. Then I went to Kawaii, which is flashing images, and now it’s gone to Hipstar, sort of indie.

Signs of these explorations of interest and self were all over her bedroom, including a shrine to Harry Potter, a muddle of music and fan paraphernalia, and a generally more enthusiastic self than was ever on view at school.

The most private space that Megan had found during our fieldwork year was on the microblogging and social networking site Tumblr (taken over by Yahoo! in 2013). For the class, Facebook was a unified and simple way of making arrangements and of knowing what is new. But spaces such as Tumblr offered more aesthetic opportunities for expressive and sometimes exploratory or transgressive identity work. For Megan, then, Tumblr allowed space for a self not even seen by her close friends: “I don’t show people, like, Tumblr. Like, I wouldn’t show my parents my Tumblr. I wouldn’t show my friends, really, my Tumblr. Tumblr’s, like, for me, quite private. Like, that’s my space for, like, my things. I don’t really want people to look at my Tumblr. I find it quite awkward, like, people looking through my Tumblr.” When we asked what she posted and why, she launched into an impassioned speech:

To be honest, it’s like I don’t know how to explain Tumblr. . . . When you first get Tumblr, you will hate it so much. You won’t understand, and, like, I promise you, you will get obsessed with it. Like, it’s such a nice thing to have. Like, that’s your space. You can design how it looks exactly to every detail of it. You can make it perfect. But I’ve spent, like, five hours in a row, like, perfecting it. . . . That’s, like, my space. I have everything perfect. Like, it’s all correct. . . . I’ve been doing it for maybe a year and a half now, and I can look back how everything—the pictures I’ve reblogged have changed. So it sort of shows me how I’m changing. And so I’ll do an hour of blogging, and then I’ll look at it and I’ll be like, “I’ve just done that,” like, “I’ve achieved that,” because I think it’s good if you can’t draw or something. I can’t really create that myself, and I’m not that
good with technology either, so I can’t just do that by myself. But Tumblr gives you the opportunity to, like, express yourself kind of.

Here we surely see Sherry Turkle’s “second self”—a portrayal of self that invites emotional commitment and promises perfection. It seemed that, for Megan, the changes she was making in her circles of contacts at home, at school, and in the neighborhood required the solitary reflective space offered by Tumblr, as if she could concentrate on her authentic self online and then bring it into existence offline. The wealth of resources to imagine the self, combined with the absence of known others overlooking this reflective process, seemed to be just what Megan wanted.

Beyond Local Networks

Within the class, we witnessed many variations in the patterning of friendship and peer relations, offline and online. One of these variations illustrates how, even as 13-year-olds are committed to building a social circle and exploring their own identity, as we have seen, they are also beginning to look further afield. Dilruba lived in a low-income, mixed-ethnicity family of four girls and a single-parent mother; at school, she was hardworking, confident, and chatty. In her ego network, she named a sizeable group of friends from school and the immediate neighborhood, distinguishing those people who were important to her: extended family, her few close friends (“there’s just certain people I’m close with”), and people she described as “just normal friends that I just, like, talk to, like, people in my class.” In the class, these included Salma and Lydia from the girls on the edge of the class network, but while friendly with them, she did not see them much out of school.

Dilruba’s inner circle, then, comprised her sisters as well as long-term close friends from primary school, so everyone was close to hand in her home or neighborhood. For these significant contacts, face-to-face communication was primary, although technology was useful for arranging such occasions: “I just like to meet up with my friends. Usually my friends call me on my mobile, and then afterwards I sometime text them and talk to them just to meet up with them.” Dilruba, it turned out, was someone whom others would come to with their problems:
Dilruba: Like most of my friends that I still have, and they like come to me and tell me, like, if they need help and stuff.

Interviewer: Okay. And are you good at sort of sorting out people’s problems, and . . .?

Dilruba: Kind of, but it depends what it is. I won’t get involved if it’s, like, none of my business and I shouldn’t get involved, but if it’s, like, something, like, personal for them, then yes.

But Dilruba’s mother worked long hours, and she tended to restrict her daughters’ freedom to travel far, to keep them safe. In this warmly supportive yet hyperlocal world, the internet offered a route to explore more widely. Especially since the start of secondary school, when Dilruba began to engage with more people, her after-school routine included several hours online in her bedroom chatting with friends on Facebook and Twitter. Her comment about what is or is not her business
is interesting, as it turned out that Dilruba was interested in the drama of girls’ friendships, as played out face-to-face and also on Facebook. She explained the way this worked on Facebook:

**Dilruba:** I do talk to them, but I’m not like close friends with them, like best friends with them. But I would add people on it.

**Interviewer:** Okay. Tell me some of the people you’d add to it now.

**Dilruba:** Alma because I’m cross with Amy. She just came new.

**Interviewer:** Okay. In one of the other Year 10 classes?

**Dilruba:** Yes. I’d probably put Alma on it, and I’d probably take people off. Yes, I’d take people off.

But in addition, Dilruba was quick to see the potential of Twitter to connect with the adult word, especially that of celebrity and fashion, her twin passions. In the class, just a handful used Twitter, a then-new microblogging service that soon became more popular among UK teens. Dilruba was the most enthusiastic user, following the maximum-allowed 2,000 people, being followed by 1,000 or so, because she liked “keeping up-to-date—just, like, looking, like, seeing celebrity lives.” One ambition was to be followed back by the celebrities, because “if they follow your Tweet, it’s kind of a big thing, isn’t it?” Regretfully, she told us, “I’ve never had a celebrity ever tweet back.” But to encourage this, she would upload or even directly take photos of celebrities (having worked out where they might be or whom she might catch sight of) and post them on Twitter, to gather followers. She also enjoyed working out the social conventions of this social networking service as they themselves were evolving among users: “If they’re annoying, I’ll just unfollow them. . . . When you reach 2,000 followers, you have a limit, so you can’t follow anymore. I’ve reached my limit so many times, and then I just unfollowed all the people that weren’t following me.”

Less like Gideon, who created an inner (private, offline) and an outer (public, offline, and online) world, and more like Megan, Dilruba exploited the affordances of different types of communication, including face-to-face communication, in order to engage with a range of people in different ways, thereby also enacting distinct aspects of her identity. These affordances matter; a celebrity would be unlikely to “friend” Dilruba on Facebook or, even, to “follow” her, but one might occasionally
“favorite” her tweet, especially if she had posted a photo of him or her. On Facebook, however, even the possibility of such direct contact was remote, and thus she treated Facebook as the space for contact with her “normal” (rather than close) friendship circle. Twitter, then, permitted entry to a world usually closed to teenagers, allowing first steps in being there, even if little noticed by others. Dom was another in the class who was trying this out. In his case, as a football player and fan, he would join in the adult Twitter conversations among professional football players and commentators, enjoying the chance to be part of something that he cared about but that was beyond his normal reach. Abby, too, had also worked out that Twitter could bring her closer to the music world that she hoped to join as a career, although her later declining interest in Twitter exemplified her self-exclusion from these early ambitions.

Transgressive Networking

While Gideon, Megan, and Dilruba stayed within adult-defined boundaries of experimentation with identity and relationships, our year with the class included one very difficult incident that also showed how the use of social networking sites can amplify and make visible problematic interactions. It was hard for us to get a good picture of Aiden because he was closely accompanied at school by classroom assistants and mentoring staff, having been expelled from a previous school for violent behavior. Although at school he was generally polite but reserved, seemingly anxious to avoid trouble, on several occasions, we witnessed his attempt to behave well disintegrate as he got drawn into disruptive exchanges during lessons. His family was, we were told, “known to social services” and received a range of state interventions in the form of social and health care workers. Although not evidently much poorer than some other members of the class, in the kind of housing he lived in and his material circumstances, he nevertheless brought a slightly more dangerous air of what he termed “the street” into the social world of the class.

One day in the middle of fieldwork, we arrived at VFS to learn that the school was no longer prepared to try to integrate him into mainstream education; he had, in effect, been expelled once again. The trigger was an incident on Facebook, but as so often, behind the amplification of conflict on Facebook lay a “real-life” (offline) incident:
Aiden: Basically some girl Facebooked me and said, “How did you get out at lunchtime?” And I said, “I’m allowed to go.” And then she said, “Oh, I’m going to come with you.” And I’m like, “Okay, cool, but if you get caught, don’t bring my name into it.” And then she came with me, and we were in ——, in some chicken and chip shop. And then we were playing about: she was grabbing me as a little play thing, and I punched her in her leg. And then she told her friend. And then her friend started hyping [acting “over the top”]** to me on Facebook, and I replied back. And then I don’t know how the school found out or what it had to do with them. . . . She told her friend, who was a boy, and then he started hyping to me. And then I retaliated, and I don’t know how the school got involved.

Interviewer: Okay. Do you want to say what kind of language you were using, or do you not want to say?

Aiden: No, not bad language, like, just I was saying, “I’m going to punch you if you don’t shut up.”

Reflecting on this incident, both Aiden and his mother acknowledged that he was at fault, but Aiden was also adamant that this incident was not a matter for the school. In his view, such peer interactions—on Facebook, on the street—were played out according to social codes that adults did not understand, nor were they meant to. He put a lot of effort into managing life at school so as to keep it quite separate from life with his tight group of friends “on the street,” and so he felt the school’s decision was unjust.

When we visited Aiden’s Facebook profile, we found that the seemingly reserved boy we had met at school had more “friends” than anyone else in the class (over 1,000) and low privacy settings, and he chatted daily with much vigor and interest. These communications revealed a curious mix—for the most part, he presented himself as a tough guy, strutting, flirting, threatening, and swearing. Yet there were also some photos of a “good boy,” along with happy birthday messages, suggesting (to us) a curious switching between superficially incompatible identity performances.

Most interesting was the way in which Aiden sought to manage the boundary between personal and public spaces—through his use of language. Quietly well spoken at school to adults, at home, on the street,
and online, he relished the linguistic repertoire of black London English along with contemporary forms of hip-hop culture (in this case, variants of British “Grime,” London-centric rap). On Facebook, nearly all expressions were in this argot, often involving highly sexist and sexual observations about women, violence, and anger, as well as solidarity with other oppressed black youth. The very frequency and intensity of these interactions revealed Aiden’s investment in asserting particular identity practices, in contrast with the largely banal yet civil online interactions of most of the class on Facebook. For Aiden, unlike others in the class, Facebook offered a closed and peer-directed space for important personal expression and subcultural solidarity.

Had such interactions remained “on the street,” it is possible that Aiden could have maintained the boundaries between different parts of his life—and, interestingly, his teachers tended to share Aiden’s view that in-school and out-of-school spaces should be separate. But as they explained to us, once Facebook had made the out-of-school visible within school, they could not fail to take action. Indeed, several teachers had complained to us that social networking incidents increasingly opened up an unwelcome and troublesome window onto the mess and muddle (as they saw it) of some of the students’ lives out of school, forcing them to deal with problems that they regarded as outside their remit. As one teacher said, “I honestly think that some students become something quite different when they are online.” Then, compounding the problem, “unfortunately often that home matter spills into school, and that’s where . . . that’s where that tension and that difficulty lies, because we then have to call home and say, ‘There’s been this incident. Part of the investigation has shown that it stemmed from . . . ’ And then you’re into home territory.”

Over and again, teachers told us of incidents in which events in one location had spilled over and continued online and then all through the day, to the point that they felt they had to intervene in life out of school in order to protect the standards and values they sought to maintain in school. A particular problem was the way in which Facebook interactions leave “hard traces,” making them difficult to ignore and thus demanding intervention: “Then one of the parents showed me the evidence, the rock-solid, watertight evidence, of the Facebook exchange which definitely proved [what had been claimed].” Yet these teachers
knew that they could be presented with edited highlights, so that disentangling what had really happened in an out-of-school exchange might prove both technically challenging and highly time-consuming. In short, although Aiden’s story is really a sadly familiar one of social disadvantage reproducing itself across generations and across sites, the digital media have complicated matters—on the one hand, creating a new space for at times rapid-fire transgressive peer interaction, while on the other hand, undermining long-established boundaries of authority dividing home and school in ways that can become troubling for all concerned.

Defining the Self and Being Defined by Others

Even in the 1970s, the term “friend” was used loosely to capture “relations of sociability, in which people visited, went out together, discussed shared pastimes, participated in an organization together, and so on. To a secondary extent, they were also intimate relations, ones in which respondents discussed personal matters—but not ones, however, in which respondents sought serious advice from the other.”25 This remains, surely, a good characterization of how young people connect online and offline today. Rather than romanticizing the notion of a friend as intensely personal—as, we suggest, the moral panics about youth culture tend to do in bemoaning today’s superficiality—in this chapter, we have seen friendship claimed not only of bland “getting along” with other students but also of deep ties to the nuclear and extended family, of connections with online contacts whose names are barely recognized, and of close intimates to whom personal matters are trustingly confided face-to-face. This is less a confusion in terminology than a reflection of the diverse links that enmesh anybody: mapping the nature of the networks children and young people participate in tells us, therefore, rather little about the quality of the links since it is their very diversity that provides the wealth of social possibilities that people work to embed themselves within.

Kevin Leander and Kelly McKim followed teenagers through their various offline and online practices of identity and connection, observing that “the ongoing production of space-time is a rich process that draws upon multiple material and discursive resources, is imbued with
relations of power, and is malleable through individual agency and imagination.” 26 The young people in our four main case studies in this chapter have constructed the space-time contexts of their lives in particular ways, depending on their imaginations and their circumstances. Yet in the main, notwithstanding the extensiveness of connections in the network society, we have also seen that for our class of 13-year-olds, a relatively small ego network—or “personal community” 27 or small lifeworld—seems sufficient. 28

In this chapter, we have had to work fairly hard to explicate the young people’s sense of identity and relationships, not necessarily because they lacked such a sense but because they were reluctant (and it is difficult) to articulate it. 29 We have tried to emphasize how identity is constructed partly through the claims made about who is a friend or what music one likes (along with disavowals), all of this contributing to the process of positioning that preoccupied all of the members of the class. Yet we saw considerable variation in the young people’s interest in exploring identity in these ways both across individuals and over the course of the fieldwork year. For example, creating a Facebook profile requires posting photos, making comments, sharing links, and so on—all of which are acts of self-presentation. But when we asked the young people what their profiles revealed about them, they disavowed any deep meanings. Dom said, “It says, like, I joke around with my friends really.” Lydia said, “That I talk to a lot of people. I have lots of my friends down as sisters.” Most were even less clear: 30

Gideon: I’m not sure.
Fesse: I don’t know why. I just put a picture.
Max: I’m not 100%. . . . I don’t really know, sorry.
Joel: I don’t really put much on Facebook. It’s just . . . I just sort of . . .
usually I use Facebook just for, like, say, if I’m going to ask someone to do something, if they’ve got a contact.

Yet Gideon’s profile photo was a posed gang sign, Fesse’s a pensive sideways look, Max’s a soft toy, and Joel’s a shattered glass. None seems as random as they suggest, and each could be read as hinting at different selves not generally visible at school. Others displayed more consistent identities. Dilruba’s profile was full of the fashion images that mirrored
her conversation at school and home, her interests on Twitter, and the pictures on her bedroom wall. Dom’s profile included images of football players and football news, reflecting his passion visible both in and out of school.

Giselle had fun choosing different screen names for her multiple online personae across different platforms. We asked her, “Do you see that as like a different Giselle . . . or an aspect of Giselle?” Her answer—“an aspect of me”—demonstrates a conception of identity as complex and multifaceted.31 Yet discursively, teenagers are under some pressure to construct a unified identity, to work out who they “really” are.32 Facebook itself seeks to enforce this by insisting on what it calls “authenticity”—a profile showing a real name and identifying information shared across platforms, whether used for work or leisure, with public and private faces seamlessly connected.33 Undermining such affordances, we instead saw a fair degree of interest in expressing different aspects of the self on different platforms along with a host of tactics to maintain control over who saw what about you in different contexts.34 For confident and successful Dom, this is fun: “One time in the summer, I swapped my . . . on his phone, I swapped my contacts, . . . someone else’s contacts around. So I pretended I was them for, like, two days.” For Lydia, all but ostracized at school, displaying a wide circle of friends on Facebook gave her power to redefine herself.35

During our fieldwork, the temporary dominance of one key site—Facebook—was already fading as teenagers sought out diverse platforms and services to connect with different audiences and to express different aspects of themselves.36 Some embraced multiple platforms, others selected their niche, and a few turned their back on everything bar the face-to-face. The result complicated the communication ecology as the young people tried to remember which of their friends used which platform and for what purpose. But despite a degree of confusion or mutual incomprehension, the experiments continued, for these facilitated forms of expression and connection that the class seemed to relish. Jenna tried out using Pinterest and Twitter to follow fashion. Some Skyped their friends as an added back channel during gaming. Those interested in photography had just discovered Instagram, which mixes photo blogging or photo editing with the “follow” feature of Twitter. Each new fad, some more successful than others, hints at people’s often
unsatisfied desire to be in touch with each other, and if this involves platforms under the radar of their parents, so much the better.

Conclusions

Parents may be relieved to learn of the continuing centrality of face-to-face communication for young people—the class members’ primary interests lay in seeing friends at school, meeting up out of school, spending time with family—and this fact should not be overlooked in the public hyperbole about digital media. This is not to say that everyone in the class was happy or sufficiently connected, as we saw most obviously in the case of Aiden, but rather that offline connections were important to all of them. Indeed, we suggest that those who struggled to sustain supportive connections offline also struggled online. It was not, therefore, that the internet was creating new problems in these young people’s lives, and given that many of the digital interactions we observed were devoted to arranging face-to-face meetings, we suggest that much of the worry about young people being absorbed in social media is wide of the mark. This helps explain why, for the most part, digital networks underpin face-to-face networks rather than creating alternative connections and modes of identity. As Adriana explained about her use of her phone, “I don’t just talk to people. If I want to, like, call someone up and do something, . . . I prefer to meet up with people.” In other words, face-to-face communication is hardly displaced by digital media.

In the language of network theory, strong ties are primarily sustained face-to-face, while it is for monitoring the wider circle of weak ties that Facebook and similar social network services were most valued. The continual copresence and easy visualization of their social networks as facilitated by Facebook enables people to see what was previously unseen—how peers engage with each other, who their friends are, and what they talk about—in turn facilitating a degree of reflexivity about their social world and their place within it. Given the expanded set of choices regarding modes of communication, it also might be that face-to-face communication is becoming re-mediated, ever less taken for granted and more a positive choice for exchanges characterized by intensity, authenticity, or intimacy. It also provides, of course, a back
channel for communication about school or family that leaves no trace for observing adults to find.

Our account of peer communication suggests that young people neither sharply distinguish online from offline nor find this distinction irrelevant. Rather, they are highly attuned to the particular social situations available to them, including paying close attention to the particular affordances of social networking sites—the conditions of visibility, connectivity, discoverability, amplification, and, most important, privacy. The typically brief and bland interactions we witnessed over and again on Facebook, for instance, seem to mirror and extend what we analyze in chapter 5 as the “civil” school, providing a social setting for weak ties, superficial social acceptance, shared interest in popular culture, and occasional drama. Tumblr was used to experiment with the self in private, deliberately disconnected from public spaces on- or offline. Twitter permitted the tentative extension of the self into adult worlds. Each bleeds into and reconfigures face-to-face interaction in different ways, with the affordances of offline situations being of equal interest. Hence, the clique of Jenna, Alice, and Max were strongly connected at home but not much visible at school or online. Giselle and Sara, the “gifted and talented” girls, were often together in the class but quite separate at home, during the rest of school, and online. The core group enjoyed the greatest overlap of connections at school, out of school, and online; possibly adopting a relatively normative and widely accepted identity generates the least need to construct alternative identities elsewhere. Yet Gideon, at the very center of the core group, sustained one of the greatest disconnects between his life at school, out of school, and online compared with his inner world at home, while Megan deliberately sustained a private and anonymous life online that, seemingly, gave her the strength to convey considerable social confidence in other settings.

Across the situations or places available to young people, we have witnessed their desire both for connection and disconnection—for the tactical opportunities to escape their parents’ expectations for shared family life, their school’s valorization of civility, and even their peers’ access to their more private explorations of the self. Since at home and school young people lack the power to manage their identity and social relations under conditions of their own choosing, they are particularly exploiting the new availability of digital networked spaces to pursue
such connections and disconnections, thereby constructing and enacting different aspects of the self and, in the process, collaborating in the construction of wider peer networks that accord them a position. Therefore, we could not disagree more with the teacher who told us, “I don’t think that peer-to-peer digital communication ever allows them to do anything meaningful.” On the other hand, we have also sought to show how what really matters is the exploration and expression of identity and relationships, and while this occurs simultaneously on- and offline, the offline is hardly being displaced, although it is, perhaps, being re-mediated in ways that will continue to unfold.