

## Studying Up: A Review of Alice Marwick's *Status Update*

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### Abstract

*Status Update* is an ethnography about Silicon Valley, Twitter, and the way that its residents use Twitter to oil the wheels of late capitalism. The review finds much to like in Marwick's book: it is an eloquent take-down of Silicon Valley culture and its pretense of being part of the counter-culture while forwarding distinctly neo-liberal ends. But the review also finds that Marwick has a tendency to "study up." Her ethnography is so focused on Silicon Valley elites that it ignores how people outside Silicon Valley produce and consume (and tweet about) digital culture.

Each one began to look at the others and to want to be looked at himself, and public esteem had value. The one who sang or danced the best, the handsomest, the strongest, the most adroit, or the most eloquent became the most highly considered; and that was the first step toward inequality...  
[Rousseau 1992]

I recently read Alice Marwick's *Status Update* in which she closely studies the political beliefs and social media habits of people in Silicon Valley. It's first and foremost a portrait about digital culture and the way that digital culture shapes political belief. But it should also be interesting to digital humanists who, to use Kathleen Fitzpatrick's phrasing, ask "traditional kinds of humanities-oriented questions about computing technologies" [Fitzpatrick 2010]. *Status Update* is very much in this vein since it examines how we use our tools and how, in turn, those tools shape consciousness.

For Marwick, the main tool in question is Twitter, and as a way of a hands on exercise while reading her book I decided to tweet her about it:

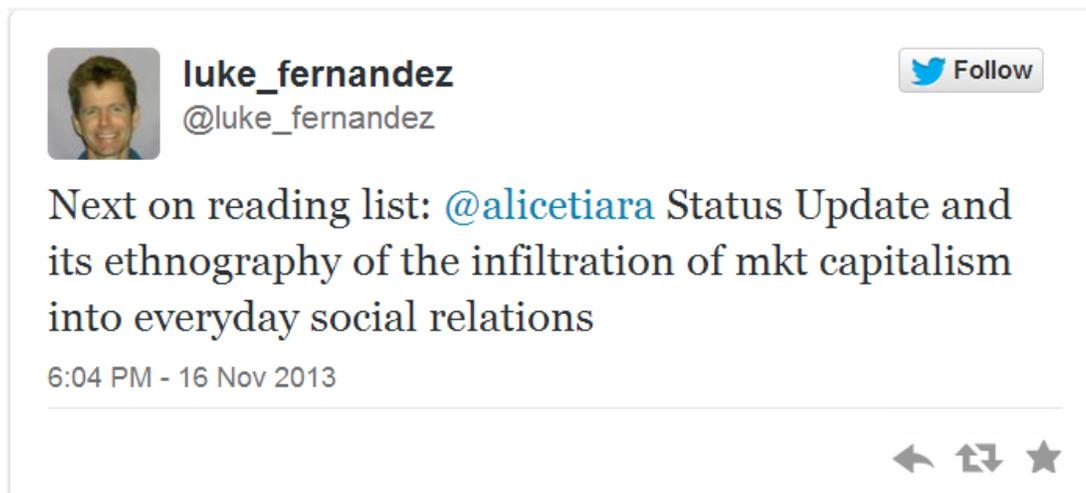


Figure 1.

Unfortunately, Marwick never responded to my tweets.

This minor Twitter tale underscores one of the central points that *Status Update* is making: in Marwick's view, social media users (or at least the users she studied in the Bay Area) tweet not only to exchange information but to increase their social capital. And in striving to increase their social capital, they also participate in modeling and practicing the type of activities that support neo-liberal economies that thrive on hustle. Building on an argument first forwarded by Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron in "The Californian Ideology" [Barbrook and Cameron 1996] Marwick contends that people involved in the Bay Area "tech scene" ascribe to a set of neo-liberal beliefs that give foundation and legitimacy to Silicon Valley entrepreneurial business practices. On the surface, Silicon Valley presents itself as a counter culture that is epitomized in the figure of Steve Jobs who had more than a few hippy predilections including a vegan diet, youthful wanderings in India, and a [perhaps fatal] faith in the power of alternative medicine. But while Silicon Valley may take on revolutionary and counter-cultural vestments, its more fundamental commitments are to neoliberalism and its celebration of individuals who compete freely with one another by selling and promoting themselves through markets. While these cultural contradictions have been described by others besides Marwick (see for example Fred Turner's *From Counterculture to Cyberculture* [Turner 2006]), she ups the ante by arguing that these same contradictions have been embedded in so-called "Web 2.0" social media platforms. Marwick observes that many people in the Valley believe that these platforms carry out democratic and egalitarian ends by facilitating connections and by spreading information. While social media may do these things sometimes, in Marwick's view, its more salient function is that it allows people to use it for self promotion, for enhancing status, and for displaying oneself to others. So in tweeting, I too might have been "subjecting" myself to these same questionable models of social behavior.

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As I was absorbing these points, I happened to tweet about them:

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Figure 2.

At the time, my tweeting seemed like a benign act. I'd merely transferred my habits of annotating books from the physical marginalia of the printed page, into Twitter. But if you apply Marwick's theoretical framework to this act, it takes on a darker, more disturbing character. To be sure, I'm performing a Status Update (e.g. "Hey followers! I'm on page 6 of Marwick's book and she's making a pretty cool point!"). But I'm also probably engaging in a more competitive and performative act of updating (and promoting) my status (e.g. "Hey followers! Check out the erudite books I read! Retweet it and maybe your followers will start following me").

While the second parenthetical is purposefully left unsaid when people tweet, seasoned Twitter users are aware of it. And since we tolerate these types of messages and produce some of our own, we're turning ourselves into subjects that model neo-liberal ideals of virtue. Marwick didn't reply to this tweet either. I can only speculate as to why but here are two possible explanations: internalized neo-liberal subjectivity suggests that one's status wouldn't be enhanced by connecting with me. Alternatively (and more positively), such an interaction would give further unwelcome credence to neo-liberal models of the self.

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In subsequent chapters on lifestreaming and self-branding, Marwick argues that the performative self isn't just a discrete behavior that people in Silicon Valley adopt while using social media. Instead, it's a behavior that pervades entire lives whether individuals are working, playing or socializing. In a chapter titled "Self-Branding: The (Safe for Work) Self" Marwick traces how inhabitants of Silicon Valley regard their entire lives as a brand that needs to be groomed and managed for the workplace. And in a chapter titled "Lifestreaming: We Live In Public" she details how Silicon Valley social media encourage its inhabitants to see themselves continually "through the gaze of others." In the aggregate, *Status Update* is a compelling description of how some people in a particular time, and a particular place, inhabit and navigate a neo-liberal world.

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It's worth emphasizing the fact that Marwick is talking about a particular time and a particular place. Like any good ethnographer she tries to clarify the limits of her study and the boundaries beyond which her analysis doesn't reach. But as readers and interested scholars, we want to know if the study scales. Can Marwick's observations be taken as a synecdoche of how the rest of us use social media? Have people who live in other parts of the world succumbed as completely to a neo-liberal ethos as the Valley has? Marwick presumes to be writing to an audience that extends beyond the inhabitants of Silicon Valley. But whether that is true or not is an open question.

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Part of the answer to these questions lies in reviewing how others have studied culture. As the anthropologist Laura Nader observed, in traditional ethnography, anthropologists had a tendency to "study down" [Nader 1972]. They took their craft to the ends of the earth, and instead of studying the colonizers, they studied the colonized. Marwick has done the reverse. She is mostly studying up. The book illustrates her using the rather regal twitter handle "@alicetiara," hobnobbing at the invitation-only conference Google Zeitgeist, and flying to the expensive South By Southwest conference. Elsewhere we see her cabbing to "an opulent hilltop event space" for a Facebook party and agonizing over what to wear in front of the step and repeat at the Webutante Ball. This isn't to say that there's something inherently wrong in studying up. Elites too deserve study and the requirements of participant observation (as anthropologists call it) probably justify the amount of time Marwick devotes to glamping it up with the tech glitterati. But studying up, just like studying down, has its limitations and they are on display here.

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First, the elites who Marwick studies are mostly in the business of promoting, selling, marketing and writing about technology. Yet the book spends little time talking about how actual programmers and engineers feel about their position in the mode of production. *Status Update*, in other words, focuses on the promotion and consumption of technology rather than its production.

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Second, *Status Update* portrays a world where everyone is on the make, where everyone has become outer directed, where the authentic self is eclipsed by the edited self, and where everyone has become so consumed by self-presentation that nothing is left but an edited self. To be fair to Marwick, it's possible that almost all modern individuals are outer directed and seek acclaim from others. In the *Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau postulates that this is simply a facet of becoming civilized [Rousseau 1992]. As such, perhaps *Status Update* is a mirror that reflects contemporary American life. Still, it's unlikely that individuals are outer-directed to the same degree or that it's the predominant mode of living in a world pervaded by digital culture. The social media platforms after all were created by software engineers, who, according to an article by Luis Capretz in the *International Journal of Computer Studies* [Capretz 2003], occupy the top introverted quadrants of the Myers Briggs test. It's not like programmers don't occasionally want to bask in the limelight. But programmers wouldn't be programmers if they didn't derive some of their most enjoyable experiences from talking to machines rather than performing in front of others.

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Third, part of the purpose of studying up is to examine how the colonizers have subjected (or reshaped) the colonized. Marwick does a pretty good job of showing how that has taken place in the Bay Area. Her study is replete with personal anecdotes by people in Silicon Valley using social media that has been created in Silicon Valley. But it's an open question as to how much the ideology of the Valley has colonized the rest of us. In particular, when the book suggests that neoliberal ideology is part and parcel of whatever people have adopted when they subscribe to Web 2.0 principles and Web 2.0 technologies, it makes an association that probably doesn't have that much traction outside Marwick's field site. The people who use the term Web 2.0 these days are programmers and designers who refer to it when they are trying to describe a rich user interface that is snappy and responsive. It has a discrete meaning and its principles are

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subscribed to by programmers and designers of many different political stripes. Some of them may be neoliberals but others – especially those who are members of The Free Software Foundation -- are distinctly not. *Status Update*, however, glosses over this more common usage of Web 2.0 and piles onto the phrase a set of politics that are not in keeping with the way it is most commonly employed. This isn't to say that Marwick has invented her definition out of whole cloth. It is derived from the way Tim O'Reilly and other elites of the Valley have tried to spin the term. But the dissonance between her definition and the way it is used elsewhere illustrates the fact that her study cannot be easily scaled. Put another way, *Status Update* may be a faithful portrait of life in the Valley. But we should be careful not to let that portrait eclipse how technology is being produced and used in the hinterlands where social media may be being repurposed for other ends besides status enhancement.

By studying up, *Status Update* misses out on a large segment of Web 2.0 producers and consumers and fails to describe the less narcissistic ways that some of its members have chosen to integrate themselves into late capitalism. If cyberspace was developed in Silicon Valley (and that proposition might itself be a myth), its power base is diffusing rapidly across the world. To document this digital culture, we'll need to complement Marwick's successes in studying up with other ethnographies that "study out" and "study down." Until then we won't know whether or not the colonizers have actually colonized the rest of us. 12

For scholars of the digital humanities these are important questions to be asking. Marwick claims that digitization and the over-reach of social media has affected our sense of what it means to be human in the era of late capitalism. She has certainly made a compelling case that in Silicon Valley the sense of what it means to be human is being reshaped by the technologies that Silicon Valley has itself created. But for scholars in the digital humanities comparative case studies are needed. We should be working hard to find out how applicable Marwick's thesis is in other parts of the world. 13

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