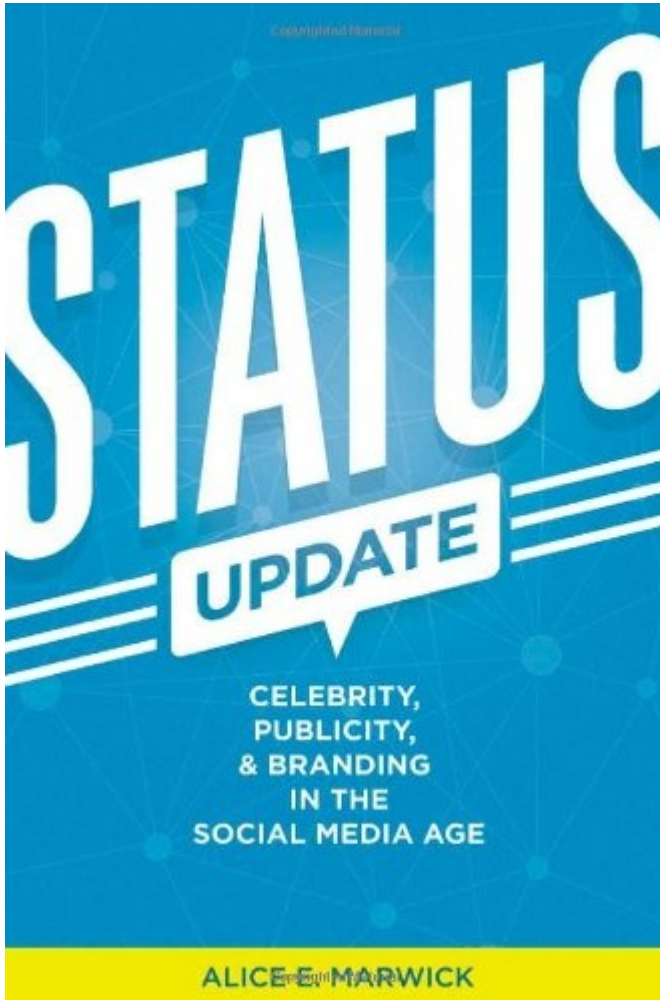Gadgets all around?

By Debra Bendis
December 12, 2013

In Review

Status Update

by Alice E. Marwick
Yale University Press

How many gadgets are *de rigueur* these days? I'm considering upgrading from my "dumb phone" to a smart phone, and I'm tempted to try an e-reader. At the same

time, I'm troubled by the unspoken reality: we gadget people are an elite minority, a society of first-world people who have access to a network and its benefits that others don't have. Or do we really believe that the entire world will soon be "like us," connected into one happy progressively social network?

I recently attended the joint annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature, along with thousands of other people—academics from many religions and places, the known academics and the bright-eyed, aspiring academics. At any given time, half of them were fixed on their smart phones, scrolling email or tweeting a speaker's best comments as he made them. Yet just outside were people in real need, out on the sidewalks in a chilly wind, some walking to and from jobs, some panhandling. One couple told me that they were trying to find the bus that would take them to a food pantry that was distributing free turkeys. They weren't thinking about Kindles.

Many of these people don't have a phone—and they're not in the far reaches of the world, but right here among us. Others have a cheap phone but only a few contacts that they use—and no data access. So why does our culture assume we are all owners of the latest tech stuff?

A new book from Alice Marwick ([read an excerpt at *Wired*](#)) addresses the danger of assuming a "digital elitism." *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age* is based on a multi-year study of San Francisco tech culture. Marwick's research led her to be wary of digital elitism as the seductive but dangerous belief that "tech innovations and entrepreneurship will solve the world's problems."

As an example of this kind of thinking, Marwick quotes Google executive chairman Eric Schmidt. "If we're going to achieve greatness in the 21st century," says Schmidt, "we have to start with some Silicon Valley thinking." But digital elitism, says Marwick, provides justification for enormous gaps between rich and poor, for huge differences between average people and highly sought-after engineers.

Not everyone is joining the digital elite. Marwick quotes *i09* editor Annalee Newitz:

> Let's say that most people can have access to computers sometimes but only some people can have access to computers all the time, and then an even smaller group can have access to the net while they're just out wandering around doing Twitter, right? They're like, I have my phone and I can say things

while I'm walking around where somebody else has to actually go home, to their one computer that they own. So the more that you want to participate in this network of wealth and entrepreneurialism, the more stuff you have to have to participate in it.

Which leaves me, as a gadget consumer, wondering if I can continue to acquire gadgets and yet also be available to those who aren't part of this elite. Can I balance my networking time, gadget purchases and passion for the social media innovations with time, purchases and passion for social change? What would this look like?