preface

The year was 2006, and I was in northern California chatting with teenagers about their use of social media. There, I met Mike, a white fifteen-year-old who loved YouTube. He was passionately describing the "Extreme Diet Coke and Mentos Experiments" video that had recently gained widespread attention, as viewers went to YouTube in droves to witness the geysers that could be produced when the diet soda and mint candy were combined. Various teens had taken to mixing Mentos and Diet Coke just to see what would happen, and Mike was among them. He was ecstatic to show me the homemade video he and his friends had made while experimenting with common food items. As he walked me through his many other YouTube videos, Mike explained that his school allowed him to borrow a video camera for school assignments. Students were actively encouraged to make videos or other media as part of group projects to display their classroom knowledge. He and his friends had taken to borrowing the camera on Fridays, making sure to tape their homework assignment before spending the rest of the weekend making more entertaining videos. None of the videos they made were of especially high quality, and while they shared them publicly on YouTube, only their friends watched them. Still, whenever they got an additional view-even if only because they forced a friend to watch the video—they got excited.

As we were talking and laughing and exploring Mike's online videos, Mike paused and turned to me with a serious look on his face. "Can you do me a favor?" he asked, "Can you talk to my mom? Can you tell her that I'm not doing anything wrong on the internet?" I didn't immediately respond, and so he jumped in to clarify. "I

mean, she thinks that everything online is bad, and you seem to get it, and you're an adult. Will you talk to her?" I smiled and promised him that I would.

This book is just that: my attempt to describe and explain the networked lives of teens to the people who worry about them—parents, teachers, policy makers, journalists, sometimes even other teens. It is the product of an eight-year effort to explore various aspects of teens' engagement with social media and other networked technologies.

To get at teens' practices, I crisscrossed the United States from 2005 to 2012, talking with and observing teens from eighteen states and a wide array of socioeconomic and ethnic communities. I spent countless hours observing teens through the traces they left online via social network sites, blogs, and other genres of social media. I hung out with teens in physical spaces like schools, public parks, malls, churches, and fast food restaurants.

To dive deeper into particular issues, I conducted 166 formal, semi-structured interviews with teens during the period 2007–2010.² I interviewed teens in their homes, at school, and in various public settings. In addition, I talked with parents, teachers, librarians, youth ministers, and others who worked directly with youth. I became an expert on youth culture. In addition, my technical background and experience working with and for technology companies building social media tools gave me firsthand knowledge about how social media was designed, implemented, and introduced to the public. Together, these two strains of expertise allowed me to enter into broader policy conversations, serve on commissions focused on youth practices, and help influence public conversations about networked sociality.

As I began to get a feel for the passions and frustrations of teens and to speak to broader audiences, I recognized that teens' voices rarely shaped the public discourse surrounding their networked lives. So many people talk about youth engagement with social media, but very few of them are willing to take the time to listen to teens, to hear them, or to pay attention to what they have to say about their lives,

online and off. I wrote this book to address that gap. Throughout this book, I draw on the voices of teens I've interviewed as well as those I've observed or met more informally. At times, I also pull stories from the media or introduce adults' perspectives to help provide context or offer additional examples.

I wrote this book to reflect the experiences and perspectives of the teens that I encountered. Their voices shape this book just as their stories shaped my understanding of the role of social media in their lives. My hope is that this book will shed light on the complex and fascinating practices of contemporary American youth as they try to find themselves in a networked world.

As you read this book, my hope is that you will suspend your assumptions about youth in an effort to understand the social lives of networked teens. By and large, the kids are all right. But they want to be understood. This book is my attempt to do precisely that.



it's **complicated**

