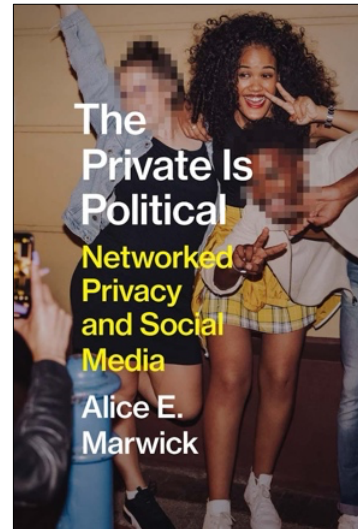


Alice E. Marwick, **The Private Is Political: Networked Privacy and Social Media**, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023, 384 pp., \$32.50 (hardcover).

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***The Private Is Political: Networked Privacy and Social Media***, by Alice E. Marwick, injects new thinking into an old problem: how technology is transforming the information environment and the relationship between privacy and inequality in the era of social media and big data. The book echoes the theories of surveillance capitalism from Bruce Schneier (2015) and Shoshana Zuboff (2017) in which Big Tech companies “uncover data that users intentionally opted to keep private” and “infer extensive personal information that users did not or would not provide” (Naughton, 2019, para. 17). The author introduces the concept of networked privacy through rigorous original qualitative research and scholarly action. She paints an insightful picture of how privacy is eroded, the work that people do to protect against this, and how marginalized communities are especially impacted.



Her research is based on four distinct and rigorous qualitative studies with a total of 128 participants that illuminate views of how to reframe privacy, understand what users mean by it, and how much control they can exert over it. The interviews delve into users’ experiences with online harassment and Internet platforms’ trust and safety teams’ reactions to this. This establishes a foundation for the new concepts advanced in the book, yet the recommendations that follow are somewhat succinct. Expanding on these suggestions might offer a more robust path toward a solution to the problem at hand.

Alice E. Marwick is an associate professor in the Department of Communication and the principal researcher at the Center for Information, Technology and Public Life, which she cofounded, at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She is an established qualitative research and critical Internet studies communications scholar. Besides her academic credentials, Marwick spent time in the industry at the Social Media Collective at Microsoft Research Labs. The book resets foundational privacy concepts and is written in an accessible language that facilitates broader acceptance beyond the wonkiest academic and policy-making arenas. I can see it influencing the discourse in the field going forward.

The book makes three fundamental claims: that privacy is networked, that it is unequally distributed, and that these two are inextricably intertwined. From the start Marwick “exposes our powerlessness to command how our personal information spreads through networks that we can never fully control” (p. 3). A fundamental tension permeating all chapters contrasts the prevailing view in the United States that privacy is an individual’s responsibility against our inability to control it in a networked world. This represents the core motivation for the introduction of a novel theory of privacy: networked privacy. Using feminist and critical theory lenses, the author debunks privacy myths—including that people

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do not care about their privacy—and challenges opting out as a solution. At the same time, she acknowledges pockets of apathy and digital resignation by those who want control but are unable to wield it. In an apt comparison to how second-wave feminists claim that the personal is political, she claims that the private is political. Framing privacy as a political concern, she goes on to show how it becomes legally actionable and provides a pathway to break the privacy legislation gridlock and constitutional debate in the United States (Carvão, 2023a, 2024).

The development of the concept of networked privacy builds upon the fundamental disconnect that Internet platforms are inherently “leaky” (Chun, 2016), and leaky by design (see also Carvão, 2023b). Furthermore, most privacy policies are a performative act of privacy theater. Marwick argues that “models of privacy that depend on individual agency over information are a fiction, but networked agency is removed by social media and big data technologies that work covertly to undermine norms and boundaries” (p. 27). Information contextual integrity, discursive frameworks, the unequal distribution of agency over privacy driven by power asymmetries, and the impact on marginalized populations are thoroughly discussed. The discursive framework concept, from critical discourse analysis, is used to show how context affects and shapes what is said and how audiences interpret the message. At the same time, it depicts how social media strips information of its context. The same principles are applied beyond social media to big data, data brokers, and genomic data providers, whose impacts can be more invasive and less visible given the nature of data profiling and the opacity of algorithms.

By highlighting the unique privacy experience of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning + (LGBTQ+) groups, the work reveals a nuanced perspective on privacy, beyond the public versus private binary, and goes on to make the case that navigating this spectrum is an ongoing political project. What one considers private for fear of repercussions or loss of status exists in the context of politics. “What makes information private or public is simply the person’s level of desire to share it with others: their agency determines what information they share, knowing that it can leak across frames, contexts, and audiences at any time” (p. 201).

The interviews that provided the data for the study built the foundation for the author’s analysis of “privacy work,” another important concept developed in the book. Her studies show that people do not accept the erosion of privacy by networked technologies but, rather, “go to great lengths to achieve this” in a way that is “quite different from the privacy-protective measures advocated by experts” (p. 63). Marwick centers inequity to discuss privacy work and places the burden of privacy on corporations or the state. Maintaining a feminist view, she analyzes how power and privilege affect the amount and form of “privacy work” that one does. This new take on the subject avoids blaming the victims, considers power structures, recognizes the impact on marginalized groups, and acknowledges the social and unequal nature of privacy. She goes on to establish how “privacy work is a form of invisible work that benefits the corporations and entities that profit from our information” (p. 94). The final chapters of the book develop the concept of gendered privacy, a taxonomy of harassment, the relationship between privacy and socioeconomic status, and the study of privacy and LGBTQ+ populations.

After reframing some of the current misconceptions about privacy, the author provides examples of the positive effects of social media and why opting out and other individual responses are not effective.

In closing, a set of collective solutions for the systemic issues is presented. This is where the book fell short of my expectations. The legislative, social, and technological recommendations that close the book whetted my appetite for more on the policy side. It seems Marwick intentionally steered clear of detailed policy discussions. Her effectiveness in navigating her chosen thematic territory, however, gives us a lasting contribution for those interested in the sociotechnical dynamics of privacy in the digital age.

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