Community and Collaboration in a "Value-Added" Community

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Introduction

Studying a complex industrial region is always a difficult conceptual and methodological challenge, one that is exacerbated when community is commodified and marketed as "value-added" to products and services. By "value-added" I refer to the value added by each step in a production process, regardless of whether it is a product or a service that is ultimately marketed. I use the phrase "valued-added community" to indicate two slightly different characteristics of life in that community. First, relationships in it are dominated by the concept of value-added; the quest for improved quality and productivity is ubiquitous. People may ask themselves how a particular encounter or relationship adds value to their day's work, their career prospects, or their lives. Second, community writ large becomes something that can add value to a product or service. The region becomes a laboratory for integrating technological innovation with community, and then using this synthesis to market the product or service.

Silicon Valley is such a place, one in which both communities as places and community as symbol are used by industry and government to maintain the region's importance as a center of technological innovation. Yet it is also a place where ordinary lives are lived, often by people who are blithely unaware that they live in "Silicon Valley." It is thus a place in which the lives of ordinary folks and corporate and public myth makers converge and collide in unpredictable and often poorly understood ways.

In this paper I explore some of the challenges in studying Silicon Valley, and how a group of anthropologists at San Jose State University is addressing them. First, I review how the team's conceptualization of Silicon Valley emerged through several years of participant-observation in the region. Second, the integration of research questions, data collection, and analysis into an undergraduate curriculum is described. Finally, I conclude by discussing the conduct of fieldwork and what it suggests about research in a value-added community.

Conceptualizing Silicon Valley Intending no disrespect to hockey's Sharks, more people know the way to Silicon Valley than to San Jose. The number of travelers departing from some foreign airports to Silicon Valley is so great that maps of its significant features are distributed. The latter are typically companies such as Intel, Hewlett-Packard, Silicon Graphics, and Apple Computers. Yet even a spatial bounding of the region is problematical, for the economic activities that define Silicon Valley are beyond its original locus of Santa Clara County. Likewise, people who work in Silicon Valley may not live in it. Some live elsewhere by choice, while others are driven out by the high cost of housing.

Arguments about the correct spatial definition of Silicon Valley are an enduring local recreation. Yet participant-observation suggests that this metaphor itself may be problematical. Silicon Valley may also be defined and experienced as a nexus in national and international flows of technology, people, ideas, and capital. For example, local workers may live and work in the region, but they may plan to return to lives in Kansas or Missouri, Taiwan or Ireland. Silicon Valley nurtures frontier boomtown dreams of quick riches that ironically can serve as a grubstake back home, and for many of the technological elite it is the place to hone already prodigious expertise by simply going to work.

Participant-observation also suggests that Silicon Valley may clone or find itself in other states and countries. We have encountered informants who speak of it being a small world after all, since they interact with people they see as similar in countries as diverse as India, China, and France. Discussion reveals that they have found people who work in similar industries and who are knowledgeable about Silicon Valley.

Important research implications follow from viewing Silicon Valley as enmeshed in a global nexus. Rather than focusing on where the boundary is drawn, it becomes important to trace specific flows of people, money, ideas, and technology. Silicon Valley becomes less an indigenous achievement of American know-how, than a dynamic system in which the exotic and the familiar uneasily coexist. Notable among the imported and exported ideas is the very concept of Silicon Valley which is paradoxically maintained and even championed by newcomers.

Participant-observation further complicates the spatial maps of Silicon Valley by calling into question its defining characteristics. First, informants often speak of Silicon Valley as but one sector of the regional economy. Yet this sector is not identical with the larger companies featured in the maps, and it includes a web of small companies that support high tech industry. The Silicon Valley sector also extends into financial, therapeutic, and legal services, as well as certain restaurants, shops, fitness centers, and hair stylists with the right reputations among the denizens of the high tech center. Silicon Valley is also often defined as a state of mind that is superimposed over the region. From this perspective, Silicon Valley is based on faith in certain assumptions and values, such as the importance of work, the celebration of entrepreneurship and risk taking, and the social value of efficiency.

Important research questions follow from viewing Silicon Valley as sector or superimposition. In the former, we ask how the sector is connected to the lives of individuals, families, and communities. The "state of mind" argument requires that we identify the minds in which it is a state; how and why Silicon Valley is produced and reproduced, and what its consequences are for the lives of true believers and skeptics.

We have found, too, that the static nature of the spatial maps introduces a subtle distortion into our explorations by focusing attention on what Silicon Valley is. But the latter is a place in which the pace of life is frantic and long work hours are common; technological innovations are seemingly ubiquitous, and life is lived on the "bloody side of the cutting edge." It is a place where anticipation cascades ahead of reality, a

place where many people see themselves as inventing the future, as they simultaneously reinvent Silicon Valley. The spatial metaphor thus overlooks the region's sense of becoming, and the considerable resources it expends on proclaiming its tomorrows. For us, the challenge is to find ways to capture the images of the future that result from and drive innovation.

Finally, assumptions about the significance of Silicon Valley affect how we conceptualize it. It can be viewed as a place like many other places. But Silicon Valley can also be studied as a distinctive, if not unique place. Although we may lament its barrage of exaggerated claims, it is distinctive due to its concentration of varied high tech companies, its prowess as an exporter of goods and services, its cultural diversity, and its place as a global symbol of a postindustrial future. This leads us to try to understand what is distinctive about Silicon Valley, how those distinctions articulate with "official" definitions and explanations of the region, and how its distinct features affect other aspects of local life.

Inventing and Surviving Silicon Valley

We also faced the pragmatic challenge of conducting fieldwork under several constraints. We faced a teaching load of four courses per semester without the support of teaching assistants. In addition, our university faces repeated budgetary crises that choke off most internal support. Finally, our department offers no graduate degree, although we have attracted some other master degree students to work within the project. Despite these constraints we had significant assets. Most notably, our students mirrored the diversity of experiences and backgrounds that we were finding in our participant-observation.

The field had indeed come to us, and our students have served as perhaps the project's most important asset both as sources of data and as collaborators in the research. Many students eagerly embraced the opportunities to develop their skills through hands-on experience, and their participation has proved to be vital. Our program of research is designed to adapt to these constraints and assets. It can absorb resources if they become available, but it is robust under varying degrees of poverty. Research is necessarily integrated into undergraduate pedagogy, and we try to attract interested and well-prepared students to participate in our work.

After identifying our constraints and assets we developed four research questions to provide coherence for a project that we anticipated would last for a decade or more. These questions are ongoing, and we presently offer no definitive answers. We ask:

1. How is Silicon Valley defined by various stakeholders?

2. How do individuals construct identities within a community dominated by "official" categories of diversity?

3. What are the models of work organization that reflect assumed changes in the ideology and social organization of work?

4. How do science and technology define, practically and metaphorically, community in Silicon Valley.

The result has been a sustained inquiry into Silicon Valley that has been well-integrated into our curriculum. Most notable has been the creation of a "distributed field school" in cultural anthropology. It is

similar to the familiar summer field schools, but here it is distributed across the courses we teach. It is built on self contained modules that develop student skills and knowledge, and that also generate data for our research.

The array of assignments is extensive. Students conduct self-reportage on incidents that they have experienced, and then analyze them using concepts from class. Many assignments are based on interviews such as working life histories, descriptions of household economies, critical incidents, self-identification, and the nature of community. Observational studies of events, cultural borrowings, and the use of public places are common.

Finally, we have made extensive use of ethnographic futures scenario building in order to elicit assumptions, values, and folk models of the future. Collectively, the descriptive portions of these assignments provides data for our project, and they sensitize us to issues that we then explore in our own research. The analytic portions allow students to grapple with data, and thereby see their lives in Silicon Valley with new eyes.

We have paid great attention to developing skills in basic ethnographic methods. This is done by inviting representatives from local organizations such as The Tech Museum of Innovation, Smart Valley, or the Institute for the Future to "retain" my ethnographic methods class to conduct projects germane to them. Students receive hands-on experience in developing an instrument, conducting interviews, analyzing qualitative data, and presenting results to the "client." More recently, we have developed a practicum in which advanced students can gain additional experience.

Another important component of our research program is contract work for the Institute for the Future. This helps support our own research, but equally important has been its contribution to refining our research questions. Specifically, it has directed us toward the importance of the home-work blurring and the role of information technologies in daily life, as well as allowing us a view of corporate America we would otherwise lack.

Fieldwork a Value-Added Community

The conduct of fieldwork is necessarily shaped by the characteristics of the communities studied, and the very nature of Silicon Valley as a value-added community has transformed our own work. This is especially true in our current project in which obtaining access to corporate sites is a constant struggle. Two themes, both facets of the value-added perspective on life, recur in our discussions with corporate gatekeepers. First, the busy-ness of business is cited as an obstacle to participation. For the individual this can be expressed as, "How can I find time to talk with you if I am as busy as I think I am?" On the corporate level, issues of the efficient deployment of the work force are raised.

The seriousness of Silicon Valley also can affect fieldwork. We are sampling a community which includes true believers for whom faith in Silicon Valley is the sine qua non of rationality and skeptics who view the place with foreboding. San Francisco is often viewed as a city of character and passion in contrast to Silicon Valley's bland efficiency, but local passions run deep. We must carefully present our work in the appropriate way. Despite these concerns, we have found that our informants find the time to submit to our hours of interviewing, and they find the process interesting, educational, and enjoyable.

The second recurring theme is that of corporate self-interest. This theme runs deep in the corporate world, but often it has been tempered by a sense of acting as a good corporate citizen. Gatekeepers today,

however, typically ask how their company's participation will immediately and tangibly benefit very specific segments of it.

Despite the difficulties imposed on the fieldwork by both our institutional constraints and the characteristics of the valley, our project has thrived. There are several reasons for this success.

1. We have persisted and adopted a longer time frame. It is ironic that in the Valley of Galloping Time that we are able to offer a slower paced, more methodical perspective. This allows us to ultimately gain access to sites, to see enduring patterns in them, and to ask questions that others cannot afford to address.

2. We have predicated the project on building relationships with organizational partners, rather than simply using them as sites for collecting data.

3. We have produced tangible and varied results. For our organizational partners we have provided data and insights that they find useful, and which they would otherwise not obtain. For our students, we have seen them transformed from consumers of knowledge to reflective and competent fieldworkers who seriously consider careers in applying their social science skills. For our discipline, we have amassed a growing archive that documents life in a "technified" community.

3. We have built a project that is structured less around lineal phases than the construction of a resilient ecosystem. The latter is based on a rich variety of activities, data, component projects, and linkages to the community.

4. We have closely adhered to our original research questions. They provide a clear focus or goal for a long term project that always runs the risk of wandering down pathways that are interesting but ultimately dead ends.

5. Finally, we may ponder the affects of this undertaking on us, for they are indeed profound since we are constantly compelled to reflect upon our own relationships with the place where we live and work. We must address issues of the proverbial "Other," for we may well be it. Living in the material world is affected, for as we have studied the use of technology we have transformed our own households through purchases. Some of our members began by studying "infomated households," and have since become them. Our relationships to family and work have likewise been altered. We listen to informants discuss the penetration of work into their lives, and are glad that our own lives are different. Yet we transcribe interviews during evenings and weekends, and we hope that our families will not tell us what they really think about our dedication.

We have had to adapt to functioning as academics working in non-academic settings. We must be able to explain our work to diverse audiences, and learn informal codes of conduct both to gain access to sites and to work unobtrusively in them. How we are perceived by colleagues and the wider community is also an on-going concern. Precisely because Silicon Valley is a self-promoting region and its claims are often exaggerated, we risk being taken as dopes or dupes who are thrilled to be allowed to study the elite, rather than as the serious scholars that we are. Recently, we were the subject of a front page article in the San Jose Mercury News and thus we have "surfaced" in a way that is unfamiliar to us. The reporter took great pains to "get it right," the publicity gained is very helpful, and feedback on it has been uniformly positive. Still, we are

represented in a way that is different than how we would present ourselves. For the sake of story line, I became the Silicon Valley boy who grew up to be a "non-techie" angry at the paving of his birthplace, while Jan English-Lueck became the Central Valley farm girl who embraces the digital revolution. Nuances in our arguments disappeared due to editorial policy. For example, we speak of telecommunications devices enabling changes in preexisting social relations, but the editor countered that the word "enable" would not appear in her newspaper. Finally, the representation of our work entered a new form that of the cartoon. The lesson would seem to be that six years of fieldwork can be compresses into four frames in the funnies. We are grateful that we are finally appreciated and understood.