

Silicon Communication: A Reply and Case Study

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Article:

In their contributions to this forum, Nadesan, Cloud, and Weaver have critiqued and extended our argument for the benefits of collaboration between organizational communication and cultural studies. Originally (Carlone & Taylor, 1998), we argued that communication scholars should integrate the resources of these fields to fashion new ways of engaging the convergence of organization and culture in the post-industrial, hyper-capitalist new economy. In response, Nadesan has distinguished a variety of arguments concerning the nature and consequences of “post-Fordism,” Cloud has asserted the enduring relevance of materiality and class, and Weaver has called for public relations practitioners and scholars to reflect on the “worldly” affiliations of their work with the hegemonic interests of profit, efficiency, and progress. In this short article, we address these responses and advance our project through a case study of a particular object.

Specifically, we engage Silicon Valley as both a real site of high-technology organizations and as a contested, symbolic site of cultural discourse. On this first plane, analysis foregrounds the 300- square-mile, eight-county region located between the northern California cities of San Francisco and San Jose that forms the location of a network of defense, aerospace, electronics, and computing industries. Here, traditionally, analysis has emphasized the unique features of this organizational/cultural context: its regional values of independence and experimentation; a robust support system of higher educational researchers, venture capitalists, consultants, suppliers, and clients; a self-selected labor pool of young, irreverent, driven, risk-tolerant “players” obsessed with innovation and entrepreneurship; frequent job switching by technically skilled “knowledge workers;” and a climate of urgency mandating rapid development and exploitation of competitive advantage (Delbecq & Weiss, 2000; Rogers & Larsen, 1984). On the second, cultural plane, analysis foregrounds Silicon Valley as a site of intensive exchange between high-technology organizational cultures and their local “host” environment and as a symbolic resource for cultural audiences engaged in sense making around changes associated with the new economy. Examples of these often-traumatic changes include globalization, the development of virtual reality systems, the colonization of public space, the laboring/consuming psyche created by commercial-corporate interests, and the transformation of traditional meanings for *wealth*, *employment*, and *careers* (Solnit, 1995; Winner, 1992). Here, Silicon Valley becomes a text read by journalists and cultural critics. Their representations establish Silicon Valley as a cultural matter because it sensitively registers capitalist trends and satisfies a popular desire to identify the origin of technologies and personae that increasingly affect contemporary forms of work and leisure (e.g., robots, office automation, and hackers). In this cultural circulation, Silicon Valley becomes an object of ambivalent expressions of hope, envy, and anxiety (Cass, 2000). Below, we develop five themes that indicate how communication scholars might engage Silicon Valley as a “noisy” site swarming with the interrelated dialects of organization and culture.

REGION, CULTURE, AND (NON)FUNCTIONALIST VIEWS OF THE ORGANIZATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

The relationship between Silicon Valley organizations and their local, host environment has been an enduring topic of study. This is partly because Silicon Valley is characterized by a dense and partly contained network of organizations practicing both competition and cooperation with each other and with a common pool of infrastructural elements. Of interest here are the various ways that environment can be conceptualized.

Frequently, organizational communication scholars adopt a functionalist orientation to environments, viewing them as external objects, events, figures, and processes that organizations need to, but cannot fully, control. In this view, individual Silicon Valley organizations attempt to manage elements and processes that affect the viability of both new ventures (e.g., barriers to entry such as access to venture capital) and established firms (e.g., the development of favorable relationships with suppliers).

An alternate perspective on the Silicon Valley environment, however, emphasizes the tendency among regional high-technology organizations to collaborate in developing distinctive business cultures whose competencies influence their adaptability to changing conditions. In her well-known comparison of the Silicon Valley and Route 128 (eastern Massachusetts) regions, Saxenian (1994) argued that Silicon Valley displays a superior system of openness, cooperation, and horizontal networks in which organizational members have historically shared ideas, innovations, patents, financial capital, and even labor. Kaplan (1999) provided an example in describing the Silicon Valley venture capital firm of Kleiner Perkins, which established a Japanese-style *keiretsu* of companies linked by mutual interests. During the 1990s, Kleiner Perkins' resources were organized to develop and fund, among other companies, the multibillion-dollar Netscape. In this process, organizational learning and experimentation became public processes that sit at the nexus of culture, society, economics, and politics. Significantly, however, Saxenian's analysis does not elaborate on the processes through which local, regional, and organizational cultures influence each other, nor does it resolve ambiguity surrounding the origins and "true" identities of these cultural phenomena ("Roundtable," 1995). Because of their inherent orientation to the symbolic performance of cultures, it would appear that communication scholars could uniquely address this question of interrelationship (see Taylor, 1999). Paulina Borsook (2000) provided one model in arguing that due to the rising influence of a "techno-libertarian" discourse favoring competitive individualism, Silicon Valley elites temporarily abandoned this cooperative tradition during the recessionary 1980s and suffered as a result.

In addition, scholars might problematize the way in which environments are arbitrarily conceptualized and punctuated for the purposes of analysis. Cultural critics argue, for example, that the development of high-tech organizations creates profound consequences for the unique cultures of their host communities (e.g., in displacing indigenous groups and appropriating their folkways as entertainment; Mugerauer, 1996) and for the material, built environment. Solnit (1995), for example, noted that Silicon Valley hosts the greatest concentration of Superfund cleanup sites in the nation (created by industrial pollution) and that it has a sprawling placelessness that creates a passive mode of inhabitation: "The decentralization of postmodern control in which power is transnational, virtual, in a gated community, not available at this time, in a holding company, incomprehensible, incognito—in a word, nowhere" (p. 228). Because numerous other regions are attempting to develop analogous "Silicon" entities (Rogers & Larsen, 1984), it seems increasingly important to understand the dynamic relationships between these phenomena of organization and culture.

ORGANIZATIONS AS REGISTERS OF CULTURAL DISCOURSE

This theme extends our original argument that the spaces and moments of organization may be usefully read as sites in which speakers appropriate, reproduce, and transform various cultural discourses (e.g., of gender, race, and class) to accomplish goals and reproduce identities. In this way, the ontological boundaries between production and consumption collapse to reveal multifunctional utterances and dialogues that configure the relationship between organizations and larger cultural politics.

One rich topic for this analysis is the performance by Silicon Valley employees—who are notorious for collapsing boundaries between work and nonwork spheres—of various lifestyles. Rogers and Larsen's (1984) somewhat dated inventory reveals numerous Silicon Valley subcultures characterized by distinctive artifacts, rituals, ideologies, and identities: residual Midwestern Puritanism, cohabitation outside of marriage, high divorce rates, high-achieving and stressed-out children, physical fitness buffs, and a cache of hobbies, "goodies," and "toys" (e.g., sports cars) that temporarily alleviate work stress and help competitive spirits to "keep score."

This competitive lifestyle has, of course, evolved in recent years to an extraordinary level of baroque excess. Silicon Valley increasingly mirrors the surreal, hyper-mediated life world of Hollywood in which power and celebrity swirl around a few very wealthy (and often ruthless) business leaders (Bronson, 1999; Kaplan, 1999). Materialism has spiked accordingly: Yachts, homes, vacations, news coverage, and spouses are all strategically deployed and assessed by these elites (and by Silicon Valley's publicity apparatus) as indicators of conflated personal and professional status. Strangely, in this process, technology and organization are minimized as the mundane, taken-for-granted means of accumulating spectacular wealth. Even charity events such as the annual Sand Hill Challenge soapbox derby become scenes for the displacement of ego-driven, corporate competition (Kaplan, 1999).

In addition, we are much taken by two recent analyses of a dominant techno-libertarian discourse that circulates in and as Silicon Valley organizational culture. Ellen Ullman's (1997) poignant autobiography of a middle-aged, White, female, bisexual (and former radical) computer programmer reveals that potentially, knowledge workers are continuously engaged in reflection about the disorienting conditions of the new economy and the official discourses that mediate their relationship to those conditions. Ullman is uniquely concerned with the existential ruptures created by these changes (e.g., that lead her to model the programmer's ideal relationship to rapidly evolving technology as-if serial monogamy: "Don't get comfortable, don't get too attached, don't get married. Fidelity to technology is not even desirable," [p. 102]). Her narrative indicates that the subjectivity of knowledge workers in the new economy is potentially configured in the relationships they construct between the logic, order, rule, and clarity of their computing devices and the ambiguity, discontinuity, and transience of their virtual work lives. In this process, the former may serve as consolation for the ontological disease created by the latter, for "what is a corporation these days but an elaborate verisimilitude spun round with the gauzy skin of electrics" (p. 131).

Relatedly, Borsook (2000) provided a provocative discussion of techno-libertarianism as a heteroglossic discourse blending a variety of neo-conservative, antiregulation, social-Darwinist, philanthophobic, and "bionomic" dialects. Despite this internal diversity, she argued, these discourses converge to produce a number of outcomes: a competitive and narcissistic individualism, a disregard for the traditional ethics of democratic citizenship, the normalization of marketplace mechanisms as the arbiter of all cultural production, and a historical amnesia for the role of federal assistance in developing Silicon Valley's infrastructure. Most relevant here, Borsook documented the role of extra-organizational forums such as professional conferences, industry trade shows, and popular magazines (e.g., *Wired*) in circulating this discourse. Audiences of these forums, subsequently, are encouraged to appropriate this discourse as the vernacular of their organizational cultures. Additional studies might be conducted to examine how this discourse is articulated with the unique registers of particular organizational cultures and how it is accommodated by the members of their subcultures.

GLOBALIZATION AS ORGANIZATIONAL/ CULTURAL PHENOMENA

We agree with Nadesan (2001) that analyses of organizational/ cultural phenomena should be situated in the context of globalization. In regards to Silicon Valley, we may note that most of its computing and electronics firms have long owned offshore assembly plants and generally sought to relocate work internationally and intranationally to exploit cheaper labor costs (Rogers & Larsen, 1984). In addition, scholars might examine the recent controversy surrounding congressional lobbying by Silicon Valley elites seeking to raise the number of HB-1 visas available to their foreign high-tech workers. Labor leaders oppose increased importation of these guest workers as an attempt by capitalists to erode the wages of American labor. This decomposition/recomposition of the high-tech workforce produces a number of relevant consequences, including the diversification of host communities (including the development of niche ethnic markets) and organizational cultures (although the predominant configuration of Indian, East Asian, and White workers in these cultures potentially minimizes the relevance of historical conflict between White, Latino, and African American interests over access to high-technology related capital; Fallows, 2000).

CLASS

Inevitably, an organizational/cultural analysis of Silicon Valley must consider the larger, material—and thoroughly unequal—structures in which wealth, technology, and knowledge are distributed in contemporary capitalist society. Cloud (2001) rightly cautions communication scholars not to lose sight of “old” capitalist structures amid the mystifying rhetoric of the new economy. In this light, Silicon Valley presents a compelling text of class division and struggle. Entry-level positions in the computing industry (e.g., “board-stuffing”) are staffed disproportionately by women, ethnic minorities, and immigrants. This work is intensive, monotonous, and potentially dangerous as a result of exposure to hazardous chemicals (Rogers & Larsen, 1984). Employers increasingly exploit two-tiered structures in which a small number of core knowledge workers are surrounded by a large contingent of temporary and contract laborers whose possibilities for meaningful participation and upward mobility are systematically distorted and minimized (Smith, 1998). The cultural geography of Silicon Valley is sharply divided between the wealthy communities of knowledge workers in the northern counties and the decaying and abandoned communities of working-class minorities in the southern counties (e.g., east Palo Alto). An urgent shortage of affordable housing in the (sur)real estate market has driven desperate workers to assume two or more jobs to make ends meet. Arguably, this condition is perpetuated by an inherent callousness among instrumentally oriented technologists toward the enduring plight of the poor (Cooper, 1996): “Most Silicon Valley tycoons are not concerned with social inequality or injustice; to the entrepreneur, the poor and weak in society are poor and weak because they are inferior” (Rogers & Larsen, 1984, p. 271).

As a resource for analyzing Silicon Valley class relations, we are drawn to Dyer-Witherford’s (1999) recent argument concerning the enduring relevance of Marxist critique for high-technology culture. Briefly, Dyer-Witherford revived an “autonomist” thread of Marxist analysis that foregrounds the moments, spaces, and integrity of labor’s struggle as the dynamic engine that propels capitalist development. He argued that capital is driven in this process to extend and deepen its control over all of culture as a “social factory” in which the institutions of family, education, and consumption are colonized as elements of an infrastructure supporting the reproduction of labor power. Inevitably, however, this extension of control creates a cascade of unintended effects and disperses vulnerabilities that are potentially exploited by labor to enlarge its tactical “margin of maneuver” (Feenberg, 1991). As evidence, Dyer-Witherford is much taken with labor’s current appropriation of computer-mediated communication and cites the recent Justice for Janitors movement in Silicon Valley. In this movement, low-skilled workers organized for better pay and working conditions, partly by threatening to publicize their demands in the schools and universities that form a major market for computer manufacturers and by using sympathetic insiders to communicate more directly with knowledge workers through corporate e-mail systems. These workers exploited possibilities created by the unique linkages established between production and consumption in the new economy. Subsequent studies might apply Dyer-Witherford’s autonomist thesis to other Silicon Valley sites to analyze the ongoing struggle between capital’s strategies and labor’s tactics.

THE WORLD OF MARKETING AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

Weaver (2001) argued in her essay that public relations professionals should be conceptualized as “discourse technologists” engaged in constructing preferred alignments between commodities, subjectivities, and ideologies. What may be most notable about these performances in Silicon Valley are their informality, pervasiveness, and intensity, such that attempts to distinguish between marketing speakers, discourse, and functions and their nonmarketing equivalents may be missing the point. Instead, shameless hyperbole and overvaluation appear to be thoroughly insinuated in the cultural vernacular: Gossip is relentlessly exchanged in hopes of acquiring competitive advantage; strategic attempts to develop personal networks and build product “buzz” (e.g., in restaurants, on cell phones, at parties) are continuous and normalized (Bronson, 1999). This performance of hype—which reaches its apotheosis in the infamous “vaporware” of products promoted but never released—may be tracked at the linguistic level of syntax, in which speakers strategically manipulate temporal referents in utterances such as “promises of product availability” to create ambiguity (Kaplan, 1999). Postmodern critics may, in addition, note the disintegration of objective reference as a condition for the validity of utterances in this milieu. Instead, as speakers conspire through speculation to achieve mutual profitability, the

concerns of effective strategy (e.g., the acquisition of venture capital funding) preclude careful consideration of pragmatic (can it actually be done?) and ethical (should it be done?) concerns.

This discourse is of course subject to correction. The recent, dramatic decline of high-technology stock values is interactionally manifest as more rigorous, sober, and realistic criteria for the evaluation of Silicon Valley hype, particularly in discourse surrounding the Internet commerce industry. In addition, the compulsive discourse of (self) promotion in Silicon Valley is dialectically constrained by the industrial imperative of secrecy. In some organizations, this dialectic produces a culture of near paranoia (e.g., institutionalized in nondisclosure agreements) in which public relations workers actively discipline employee representations of organizational culture and products (Cass, 2000).

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have demonstrated how the resources of organizational communication and cultural studies might be combined to analyze a significant site and symbol of the new economy. In simultaneously considering interrelated organizational and cultural phenomena, this analysis is intended to vex and invite communication scholars. Ideally, those scholars might reflect on how their preferences for theories, methods, and topics of research have been constrained by disciplinary affiliations. We believe that the integration of organizational communication and cultural studies provides needed innovation for adequate critical engagement with the urgent phenomena of post-Fordist society. Instead of conceptualizing communication discretely as either organizational or cultural, we advocate its analysis as simultaneously both organizational and cultural.

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