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STATUS UPDATE: CELEBRITY, PUBLICITY  
AND SELF-BRANDING IN WEB 2.0

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Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in the  
Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development  
New York University  
2010

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As anyone who has ever written one will agree, writing a dissertation is a long and arduous process. In my case, it has involved a great number of people who helped along the way, contributed valuable ideas, provided wonderful working environments, or simply listened to me complain about the aforementioned long and arduous process. I feel blessed to have met, befriended, and worked with such fabulous people in New York, San Francisco, Seattle, and Boston. For practical and spatial reasons I must leave some people out, but know you are thought of and appreciated.

First, I must thank my committee. My advisor, Marita Sturken, who “inherited” me after my original advisor left the department, has been an amazing source of pragmatic advice and intellectual commentary. This project would not have been completed without her. Helen Nissenbaum has been an immense influence on my intellectual development at NYU. Through two classes, working as a research assistant on *Privacy in Context*, the Privacy Research Group, the ITS colloquium, the Values in Design workshops and the Values at Play project, I have learned an enormous amount from Helen and I truly thank her for her help and support. Biella Coleman has pushed me to think through my ideas more critically, pointed me to more valuable authors and books than I can count,

bantered with me on Twitter, karaoke-d with me in Japan, and provided a solid anthropological grounding that I dearly needed. All three women exemplify both forward-thinking research and supportive collegiality.

I very much appreciate the lively graduate student community in the Department of Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University. My cohort, particularly Rachelle Sussman and Wazhmah Osman, have been there with me through the whole process. Brett Gary and the members of his fall 2007 Dissertation Proposal seminar helped me to conceptualize and refine the entire project. Thanks to all my colleagues, past and present, who listened to me whine or helped me think through complex ideas, especially Solon Barocas, Cynthia Conti, Marissa Kantor Dennis, Marco Deseriis, Hatim El-Hibri, Travis Hall, Jen Heuson, Carolyn Kane, Dave Parisi, Jessica Shimmin, Sarah Stonbely and Michael Zimmer. I must also thank my many smart, savvy and entertaining undergraduate students, who reminded me again and again why I chose this profession.

The faculty in the Department of Media, Culture and Communication has been immensely supportive throughout my graduate career. Sue Murray was extraordinarily helpful throughout my exams, grant-writing, and proposal process. Ted Magder was a fantastic chair during my first few years in the department. I benefited from discussions with Erica Robles, Aram Sinnreich, Finn Brunton, and in the Department of Anthropology, Faye Ginsberg, Bambi Shieffelin, and Arlene Davila. Judi Stevens and Mandy Ellenwood guided me through endless grant

applications, paperwork, and (failed) attempts to bend the rules whenever possible.

I must also thank everyone who helped me during my fieldwork in San Francisco. My roommate, Aubrey Sabala, was an endless fount of information, juicy gossip and support, as well as the pink pajama pants I wore while writing an embarrassingly significant chunk of this work. My awesome friends Ali Watkins, Willo O'Brien, Fred Blau, Nate Bolt, Carla Borsoi, April Buchert, Corey Denis, Stephanie Dub, Sean Kelly, Ryan King, Manlio Lo Conte, Jess Owens, Micah Saul, Mike Sharon, Cameron Walters, and Rick Webb all provided insights and friendship.

Without my informants, this project would have been impossible. Thank you to Adam Jackson, Adrian Chan, Andrew Mager, Annalee Newitz, Anu Nigam, April Buchart, Ariel Waldman, Auren Hoffman, Jim "Barce" Barcelona, Caroline McCarthy, Dale Larson, Dan Nye, Derek Overby, Gabriel Benveniste, Garrett Camp, Glenda Bautista, Hillary Hartley, Kara Swisher, Kevin Cheng, Kevin Rose, Julia Allison, Leah Culver, Marianne Masculino, Megan McCarthy, Melissa Gira Grant, Nick Douglas, Owen Thomas, Sarah Lacy, Scott Beale, Stowe Boyd, Tantek Çelik, Tara Hunt, Thor Muller, and Veronica Belmont for their generosity of time and spirit. Thank you also to the many other San Francisco and Silicon Valley denizens who spoke to me at events, parties, in coffee shops, and on the street. Thanks to everyone in the New York City tech scene, especially Dennis Crowley, Soraya Darabi, Emily Gannett, Matt Lehrer,

Alli Mooney, Brooke Moreland, Naveen Salvadurai, Chelsa Skees, Rachel Sklar, Sarah Simmons, Rex Sorgatz and too many other people to mention for their insights and long, nerdy conversations.

My mentor danah boyd has enormously influenced my life and career for the better. I wrote her a fan letter while I was a lowly first-year MA student and it paid off a hundred-fold. Danah pushes my ideas and my writing and has made me a better academic. Thank you also to Theresa Senft for originally conceptualizing “micro-celebrity” and hashing it out with me over many caffeinated conversations about feminism and pop culture. My former advisor Siva Vaidhyanathan has been my biggest champion since I was a prospective student, which I really appreciate! Similarly, during my MA I was lucky enough to work with three superlative scholars, Crispin Thurlow, David Silver, and Beth Kolko. I hope our paths continue to cross.

Thank you to colleagues at the Oxford Internet Institute, the Berkman Center for Internet and Society, the Values in Design community, the Information Law Institute at NYU, the Interactive Telecommunications Program at NYU, and the Association of Internet Researchers. The community of internet scholars is a really terrific one, and I must acknowledge Morgan Ames, Fred Benenson, Geoffrey Bowker, Nicole Ellison, Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Elizabeth Goodman, Cory Knobel, Lilly Irani, Amanda Lenhart, Larisa Mann, Lilly Nguyen, John Palfrey, David Phillips, Amanda Rotondo, Travers Scott, Clay Shirky, Elizabeth Stark, Fred Stutzman, and Alla Zollers. Thanks to the great people at Microsoft

Research, especially Lili Cheng and Jennifer Chayes, and the other interns in the Department of Twitter Studies, Scott Golder, Sarita Yardi, Grant Schoenebeck and Daniel Romero.

I am lucky enough to have a wonderful group of friends who I cannot thank enough for feeding me coffee and ice cream, listening to me complain, going to bad action movies with me and watching *Mad Men* and *True Blood*. Special thanks to my friends who read drafts of the dissertation, Bess Williamson, Taha Ebrahimi, and Jasmine Guillory. Thanks to the members of my Wellesley alumna group, Maryjane, for their virtual support. My NYC friends, Camille Fournier and Chris Kaiserlian, Taha Ebrahimi, Jocelyn Malheiro, Marci DeLozier and Ben Haas, Nora Riemenschneider, Misha and db Paskar-Doubrovkine, Tammy Han and Aurore Hamazoi kept me sane with their love, support, and ridiculousness. Thanks to Grace “Powkang” Kang for always being there during the day when I needed to Gchat, watch a bad movie, or gossip about reality television. Matt Dawsey and Spencer Thorson, representing Seattle’s GED Squad, are always in my heart. Thanks to my other BFFs, Angel Nelson and Catrin Morgan, for phone calls, care packages, and text messages. Thanks to my friends in Boston, especially Greta Aanensen and Emma Welles, for keeping me sane during my long time away from home. And special thanks go to my Twitter followers, who constantly demonstrated that Twitter is not a useless font of trivial information.

I abundantly appreciate my brother, who lived in San Francisco while I was doing fieldwork and provided a shoulder to cry on and vegan food whenever I liked. Dave, you are awesome. Huge thanks to my mom and stepdad, Gordon Russell, for their open hearts and home. Thanks to my father, the original Dr. Marwick, for his always spot-on career advice and commentary, and my stepmother, Ilene Avery, for their support.

And of course, the most effusive thanks go to Harryh, without whom this project would literally never have been completed. Harry read early drafts, discussed every element of the project with me, and lived vicariously through coursework, exams, the proposal, fieldwork, dissertation writing, four or so jobs, six or so moves, one huge dresser, and counting. I love you baby.



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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Summary

Social media or “Web 2.0” is an umbrella term for websites that combine social interaction with functions like bookmarking, video-sharing, and content creation. Web 2.0 sites like YouTube, MySpace, Facebook and Twitter have had an enormous impact on the lives of millions of users worldwide and are part of popular culture. The Pew Internet project estimates that three-quarters of people online under the age of thirty use social networks (Lenhart et al. 2010).<sup>1</sup>

Facebook’s popularity—the site claims to have 400 million active users (Facebook 2010)—has made a celebrity out of the young founder Mark Zuckerberg; *Fight Club* director David Fincher has made a movie about the site’s origin called *The Social Network* which will be released in 2010. High-profile people from Senator John McCain to pop star Britney Spears are committed Twitter users, and YouTube serves one *billion* online videos a month.

The rapid popularization of these technologies has made social software part of day-to-day interactions between friends, families, and coworkers. The historical separation between “online” and “offline” life is blurring as people use technology to manage their relationships.<sup>2</sup> People use social media for

entertainment, to talk to friends and family, to make and spread their own creative content, for political and social activism, work, and play. Wishing someone happy birthday on Facebook is a visible display of emotional ties, a reinforcement or strengthening of a social bond, and an adherence to modern etiquette. Thus, the way people are regarded online has an impact on how they are viewed in “real world” or face-to-face interactions.

The popularity of Web 2.0 technologies like social network sites, wikis, blogs and the user-created content they facilitate prompted the re-emergence of a technologically determinist discourse, which attributes transformative social change and economic success to social media. Writers like Yochai Benkler, Lawrence Lessig, Henry Jenkins, Jonathan Zittrain, and Cory Doctorow argue that internet technologies usher in a new era of increased participation, democracy, and creativity compared to inefficient business models, corrupt governments, and tightly-controlled corporate culture, and must be protected against these dinosaurs at all costs (Lessig 2004; Benkler 2006; Jenkins 2006; Doctorow 2008; Zittrain 2008). These authors, and many others, claim that Web 2.0 makes possible a nodal, de-centralized creative network, emphasizing grass-roots collaboration over monolithic control. The term “Web 2.0” suggests a major shift in online communication, positioning these dynamic, interactive applications as something completely new in comparison with the static content and e-commerce favored by the ill-fated dot-com companies of the late 1990s.



At the same time, business media, marketers, venture capitalists, and technologists hail companies like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube as the latest lucrative iteration of technology-generated wealth (Lacy 2008; Li and Bernoff 2008; Qualman 2009). Both academic and popular discourse claim that social media provides a more democratic, transparent, participatory and profitable alternative to flawed and failing social institutions.

This belief is partially rooted in counterculture social movements like free/open source software and counter-globalization activism, which identify government and corporate institutions as threats to freedom, democracy, and human rights. For example, grassroots media activists claim that “Big Media” homogenizes global culture, promotes pro-business content, and fails to impart the civic knowledge which is the basis of democracy. This analysis further implicates the U.S. government by arguing that large media companies monopolize the public utility of the airwaves and sponsor legislation which supports the business models of traditional media. Much of this institutional critique echoes the progressive evaluation of neoliberalism, or late capitalism, which is linked to the widening of the rich-poor gap, environmental degradation, imperialism, neo-colonialism, and the human cost of capitalist development. In contrast to failing institutions, the internet promised a publicly-funded, democratically accessible alternative that would allow individuals to create and collaborate on easily-distributed independent content.

But this promise has not been realized. The pundits, bloggers, and technology makers who celebrate Web 2.0's revolutionary potential further a totalizing discourse which identifies deep structural problems but positions social technologies as solutions to all of them. The technology cannot encompass so much complexity, and in furthering a discourse of egalitarianism, whitewashes important differences within the often-radical ideologies of Web 2.0's discursive ancestors and the business models of Web 2.0 companies. The reality of social media use stands in stark contrast to this discourse of ideals that functions to collapse and hide. This dissertation, based on fieldwork in the San Francisco technology scene, is an ethnography focused on the effects of online status and self-presentation within a community of social media users. I aim to bring to light some of what the predominant discourse of Web 2.0 has obscured: social media's physical and contextual location in a particular entrepreneurial techno-culture of Northern California. This is a highly commercial milieu which draws partly from a rich history of Silicon Valley technology development, valorizing the young entrepreneur, the possibility of massive wealth, and self-actualization through constant labor. These capitalist, status-conscious values have influenced the affordances of contemporary social media, and how they are perceived and used.

In this dissertation, I argue that while social media technologies provide expansive new opportunities for content creation and dissemination, collaboration, and creativity, looking at their use by one specific group— a set of Northern California Web 2.0 workers which I refer to as the “technology

scene” — reveals exactly how and why these tools and applications have not lived up to the internet’s early promise. Rather than democratic, collective action, Web 2.0 applications as they are used in this milieu further a view of the self and relationships that is entirely in line with current corporate business models. Drawing from advertising, marketing, and celebrity culture, social media applications engender an individualistic subjectivity which encourages competition for social benefits. To boost their status, these young professionals adopt self-consciously constructed personae which are marketed, like brands or celebrities, to an audience or fan base. These personas are highly edited, controlled, and monitored, conforming to ideals of a work-safe, commercial self-presentation. The specific modes of status building enabled through social media (that is, life-streaming, micro-celebrity, and self-branding) are not accidental but, rather, are afforded by the design characteristics of the technical foundations of social media. These, in turn, are also not accidental, but reflect the values of a network dominated by commercial interest. Although freewheeling creativity, rebellion, and non-hierarchical communality still exist online, they are being dwarfed by social media applications which are transforming social graphs into networks of personal brands competing for the very real benefits of high online status.<sup>3</sup>

While people all over the world create social media technologies, the center of Web 2.0 development is the Bay Area of Northern California. Prominent tech companies like Google, Facebook, Twitter and Flickr are headquartered

nearby, and the Silicon Valley area has been home to cycles of boom-and-bust technological development since the 1960s, resulting in a rich infrastructure. In the city of San Francisco, the “tech scene” is a lively community of social media enthusiasts devoted to Web 2.0 technologies, who socialize in person and online. It includes people working at venture-backed technology startups and large companies, freelancers, social media “gurus,” engineers, academics, fanboys, and designers, many of whom moved to San Francisco to participate in the community. People in the scene create software, form companies, work together, and use each other’s products. Their interactions are chronicled and publicized by blogs like TechCrunch, Mashable, and Valleywag, and followed vicariously by people all over the world. This scene is in some respects a subset of the much larger Silicon Valley technological infrastructure and thus reflects many of its values, but is distinct in crucial ways from the cultures of immigrant engineers, old-school computer geeks and business people which predominate in the southern suburbs (Hayes 1989; English-Lueck 2002; Saxenian 2006).

The highest-status people in this scene are *entrepreneurs*, those who have successfully created and sold a technology company. The tech scene is rife with a powerful mythology of entrepreneurship which places a high value on innovation and competitiveness, and frames technology work as a meritocracy where the smartest and hardest-working people should be rewarded with immense wealth. These young professionals are deeply immersed in social technologies, and live in an always-on world where the internet augments virtually every human

interaction. The social world of the tech scene is as much comprised of and organized around digitally mediated communication and interaction as the physically proximate. Members of the tech scene use Web 2.0 technologies like Facebook and Twitter to present themselves to people in their social lives, including friends, family members, and coworkers.

The San Francisco tech scene is the “design constituency” of Web 2.0 technologies, the people who create technological artifacts and the myths, contexts, and rituals surrounding them, shaping social systems with a context and social agenda (Pfaffenberger 1992). Web 2.0 workers function as both users and designers, imbuing social media with values drawn from the larger Silicon Valley technology community and contextualizing this software within an idealistic ideology of revolutionary change. These values (wealth, visibility, access, entrepreneurship) ultimately shape their general interpersonal interactions and self-presentation, including how they seek status, and leave traces in the social media applications themselves. Studying their highly mediated social lives reveals two other characteristics of this distinctive group.

First, in the tech scene, there is no split between “online” and “offline” life. The popularity of always-on mobile devices and wireless networking creates a set of complex overlaps and interactions between internet and face-to-face communication that cannot be explained in terms of “convergence” or “mediatization,” especially when compared with video, phone, and other communicative forms (Jensen 2010). Not only does online status affect face-to-

face interactions and vice versa, but when all parties are connected through social media, it forms what I call a *networked audience* (Marwick and boyd 2010). The networked audience is the real or imagined viewers of digital content who are connected to the content creator and each other. Many Web 2.0 sites digitize formerly ephemeral social information, causing all manner of complicated social problems as this information moves across boundaries and contexts. Examining a group in a relatively geographically bounded area who are heavy social media users made it possible to observe both how people talked to each other face-to-face and using social technologies, showing how online status serves as social currency in the “offline” world.

Second, the technology scene privileges a wealthy, white, male experience of technology. Although the larger Silicon Valley area boasts a racially and economically diverse workforce, within the “tech scene,” the most celebrated members are usually white (sometimes Asian or South Asian) and primarily from wealthy or middle-class backgrounds.<sup>4</sup> This community emphasizes meritocracy and frames virtues like intelligence and persistence as gender neutral. Despite this, the Web 2.0 press, blogs, and conferences consistently portray entrepreneurs as rich, young, white men, prescribing a normative maleness to entrepreneurialism which systematically excludes women and people of color from the networks necessary to achieve success. Women’s contributions to technology are further devalued through gossip, backstage talk, and media discourse. This suggests potential conflicts between the community that creates

social technologies and the values of egalitarianism and participation these technologies purportedly espouse.

To understand these complexities, I focus on *social status*, one's position in a social hierarchy, which is present in virtually every human association. Status may be reflected in skill, credentials, reputation, social or cultural capital, resources, or cultural competency (Malaby 2009, chap. 1). The desire for status motivates social participation and affects how people present themselves to others (Turner, 1988). Because status primarily involves how one is seen by the world, it is almost entirely determined by *public display* and self-presentation (Elliott 2004; De Botton 2005). This is no different in internet technologies. Status is omnipresent online and a major motivator for online activity (Lampel and Bhalla 2007). Because online self-presentation inherently involves representing oneself digitally, online identity presentation may be *more* self-conscious than its face-to-face equivalent and therefore more instrumental at seeking status. I found that all social media technologies demonstrate status, either through features built into the application (*status affordances*) or through user-created mechanisms that stem from interaction (*emergent mechanisms*). In the scene, social media encourages a type of radical individualism over collective action, a focus on the self and competition with others. These techniques are influenced by technological affordances, the design constituency, and the intertwined histories of Northern California counterculture and Silicon Valley capitalism.

I offer a comprehensive account of how status operates in the social media scene, identifying three online self-presentation techniques (that is, life-streaming, micro-celebrity, and self-branding) which have emerged in response to social media's popularity. I argue that they are linked to commodified notions of the self drawn from branding, celebrity culture, and neoliberal ideas of self-governance. Social media promotes an individualistic view of technology use which encourages and rewards focus on the self and competition with others in a process similar to the mythology of an unfettered free market. Self-presentation becomes a strategic way to display and garner status, and tangibly translates into material rewards. That Web 2.0 has given rise to this sort of self-presentation should not be considered obvious or inevitable; in fact when computer-mediated communication first emerged, it was theorized as a utopian playground that would break down identity constructions (Turkle 1995; Stone 1996). I ask two questions: why was Web 2.0 painted as a democratic revolution, and why has it turned out differently?

I claim that elements of both San Francisco counterculture and Silicon Valley capitalism co-exist in Web 2.0, giving rise to self-presentation that is portrayed as a revolutionary solution to institutional corruption and simultaneously deeply rooted in consumer culture. Silicon Valley culture values quantitative, measurable status metrics, the incorporation of business ethics into social life, and risk-taking entrepreneurialism (English-Lueck 2002). These values have emerged through decades of technology development, of which the dot-com and Web 2.0 booms are the most recent. San Francisco has a parallel history of



social activism spanning many decades, from 1960s counterculture to the counter-globalization and copyleft activists of the 2000s (Saxenian 1996; English-Lueck 2002; Markoff 2005; Turner 2006). Traces of both histories exist in Web 2.0. Scholars have chronicled how early computing pioneers mapped 1960s countercultural ideals on to the creation and dissemination of computer technologies, resulting in a deep faith in technology's ability to bring about decentralization, participation, and transparency (Markoff 2005; Turner 2006). I argue that counter-globalization protesters, media reformers, free/open source advocates and other contemporary activist movements similarly critique legal, governmental, and corporate practices for encroaching on freedom and traditional liberal values. Many of these cultures viewed the early internet as a burgeoning alternative, and the Silicon Valley ideology of computerization has positioned Web 2.0 as a solution to these institutional failures. Thus, social media applies contradictory, yet intertwined ideals of counterculture and capitalism to the self, friends, relationships, and interpersonal interactions. People can spread ideas and creations to a formerly inconceivable mass audience, but in ways bounded and influenced by the confines of modern neoliberal capitalism.

David Harvey defines neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey 2007, 2). Neoliberal policies emphasize “trade openness, a stable, low-

inflation macroeconomic environment, and strong contract enforcement that protects the rights of private property holders” (Ferguson 2006). Margaret Thatcher, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Tony Blair are notable for their adherence to neoliberal policies such as welfare reform, deregulation, and privatization (Larner 2000).<sup>5</sup> Neoliberalism is also an *ideology* of the integration of these principles into daily life; neoliberal discourse reproduces by encouraging people to regulate themselves “according to the market principles of discipline, efficiency, and competitiveness” (Ong 2006, 4). Aihwa Ong identifies “technologies of subjectivity,” which use knowledge and expertise to inculcate this expertise in individual subjects. Exploring such technologies reveals how neoliberalism is experienced, and how these subjectivities are formed.

I argue that social media is a *technology of subjectivity* which educates users on proper self-regulating behavior. Internet and mobile technologies create the expectation that white-collar professionals should *always* be on the job, decreasing personal agency and creating conflicts between the often-contradictory demands of work and home life (Middleton 2007). Social media encourages status-seeking practices that interiorize the values of Silicon Valley, which is a model of neoliberal, free-market social organization. In the technology scene, market-based principles are used to judge successful social behavior in oneself and others, extended through social media. Status increases up to a point with the ability to attract and attain attention online. The ability to position oneself successfully in a competitive attention economy becomes a marker of reputation

and standing. Web 2.0 discourse is a conduit for the materialization of neoliberal ideology. I isolate three self-presentation techniques rooted in advertising and marketing to show how social media encourages a neoliberal subject position among high-tech San Francisco workers: micro-celebrity, self-branding, and lifestreaming.

Micro-celebrity is an emerging online practice that involves creating a persona, sharing personal information about oneself with others, performing intimate connections to create the illusion of friendship or closeness, acknowledging an audience and viewing them as fans, and using strategic reveal of information to increase or maintain this audience. In other words, the micro-celebrity practitioner thinks of him or herself as having a fan base, and works strategically to entertain and increase this audience. Regardless of how many people are actually watching the micro-celebrity, he or she positions him or herself as something to be watched. Contemporary American popular culture ascribes immensely high status to celebrities, but the fragmentation of mass culture has created ever-increasing concentric circles of tabloid fixtures, reality stars, and subcultural heroes who are familiar to far fewer people than pop star Madonna or actor Brad Pitt. Combined with the popularity of social media, the twin processes of celebrification and fragmentation have transformed celebrity into set of practices, self-presentation techniques and subjectivities that spread across social graphs as they are learned from other individuals (Marwick and boyd 2011). Social media's accessibility has transformed celebrity from

something a person *is* to something a person *does*, and exists on a continuum rather than as a singular quality.

I distinguish between two types of micro-celebrities: *achieved* and *ascribed*. *Achieved* micro-celebrity is a conscious set of choices an individual makes to boost their visibility, status, and popularity, such as becoming an online model or hosting a video show. *Ascribed micro-celebrities* are assigned celebrity positions through the production of celebrity media about them, such as paparazzi photos or gossip blog posts. For example, neither Apple founder Steve Jobs nor Mark Zuckerberg strategically *try* to increase their audience, but Silicon Valley gossip sites have ascribed micro-celebrity to them due to their other accomplishments, fostering interest in their private lives and non-work activities. The creation of celebrity media for and about the tech scene interpellates technology workers as an audience, assigning worth and status to their industry. Micro-celebrity strategies draw heavily from the celebrity and entertainment industries, producing discourse about individual tech workers rife with familiar tropes and symbols such as the femme fatale or the aspiring Young Turk. And like these discourses, they are full of ideological presumptions about appropriate and normative behavior. For example, tech blogs and scene members consider Julia Allison, a New York media personality, to be a “famewhore” and “oversharer” and castigate her accordingly. She fits a pre-existing trope of the fame-hungry starlet which regulates acceptable feminine behavior. Fully

understanding micro-celebrity as a set of practices reveals many such ideological underpinnings.

The second self-presentation strategy, self-branding, is an example of enterprise discourse. In enterprise discourse, “certain enterprising qualities—such as self-reliance, personal responsibility, boldness, and a willingness to take risks in the pursuit of goals—are regarded as human virtues and promoted as such” (Du Gay 1996, 56). It is a technology of subjectivity (Ong 2006) which encourages people to regulate their self-presentation along strictly work-friendly lines. Self-branding, or the strategic creation of identity to be promoted and sold to others, is a staple of career counseling and employment advice as chronicled in bestsellers like *Crush It* (Vaynerchuk 2009) and *The Four-Hour Work Week* (Ferriss 2009a). The need to self-brand is thus offered as a solution to economic uncertainties. Self-branding intrinsically requires social media technologies, since self-promotion on a wide scale is impossible without the affordable distribution that the internet provides. Although Web 2.0 discourse positions self-branding as a way to find personal fulfillment and economic success, it explicitly instructs people to inculcate a self-conscious persona which positions self-promotion, visibility, and comfort with idioms of advertising and commercialism as positive, high-status virtues. A successful self-branding is a tireless self-promoter who focuses entirely on work. I argue that this persona is an “edited self,” requiring emotional labor to maintain a business-friendly self-presentation despite the advocacy of transparency and openness by social media culture. This self-

monitoring can be quite stressful for its practitioners. Although the type of freelance project-based culture that is optimal for self-branding can be creatively fulfilling, the difficulty in continuous self-monitoring demonstrates the disconnect between neoliberal ideals of identity as self-regulating, entrepreneurial, enterprising, and responsible, and the reality of day-to-day life. Successful self-branding is possible only for a few, yet advocates position it as a universal solution to the structural problems of neoliberal work conditions.

Lifestreaming is the ongoing sharing of personal information to a networked audience, creating a digital portrait of one's actions and thoughts. Lifestreaming consists of two parts, tracking personal information and broadcasting it to an audience. The tracking portion involves the *codification* and *digitization* of previously ephemeral material such as food eaten or books read, while the audience component requires people to make ongoing choices about the information they will publicize. Because most people in the tech scene lifestream, the audience is *networked*, meaning that they are connected to the lifestreamer and each other. The *social digitization* of information combined with the networked audience creates *emergent social information*, revealing relationships and actions that were previously obscured. This creates conflict and drama in the lifestreaming community. However, lifestreaming has affective benefits like intimacy, social bonds, and support. Each lifestreamer defines his or her limits of personal information disclosure to maximize status and positive benefits while

minimizing negative impacts. While the individual is rarely so calculating, the ongoing maintenance of the lifestream is a recognized form of labor.

Although I present these three strategies as distinct, they are interlinked and overlapping. Celebrity discourse is different from self-branding jargon, but since the celebrity is literally a person-as-commodity, it serves as a model for both micro-celebrity and self-branding practitioners. As a result, there are themes which permeate all three techniques. Two of these themes are authenticity and the networked audience.

### Authenticity

The three strategies, life-streaming, micro-celebrity, and self-branding, share an emphasis on *authenticity*, *transparency*, and *truthfulness*. This value stems partly from the belief in transparency as a check on abuse of power, which is found in many contemporary social movements. For example, free and open/source software advocates promote the availability and modifiability of source code as a way to “reorient power and knowledge” (Kelty 2008, 10-11). There is also a strong cultural belief in the value of being oneself. Carl Elliott calls this “the notion of authenticity as a moral ideal: the idea that we each have a way of living that is uniquely our own, and that we are each called to live in our own way rather than that of someone else” (2004, 29). But authenticity is not an absolute property that can be excavated. David Grazian writes, “authenticity itself is never an objective quality inherent in things, but simply a shared set of beliefs

about the nature of things we value in the world” (2003, 12). Authenticity is a social construct that is always positioned in contradistinction to something else. In this case, authenticity is positioned as a more honest and valuable alternative to the banal conformity of middle-class life (Grazian 2003), particularly the homogeneity supposedly furthered by mass culture and large corporations.

Much of Web 2.0 ideology claims that social media allows for more authenticity than broadcast media, as it cuts out the corporate and institutional middle-men which constrain individualism and self-expression. Because self-presentation online is often tightly constrained, the normative impetus to be honest and truthful results in a *performance of authenticity*. Micro-celebrity is framed as a more authentic and interactive version of “traditional” celebrity because micro-celebrity intrinsically involves direct interaction with fans using social media (Senft 2008). Even traditional celebrities are seen as more authentic when using tools like blogs or Twitter, because they sidestep the filters of corporate entertainment, such as agents or managers (Marwick and boyd 2011). In both these situations, successful self-presentation requires an appearance of authenticity. Celebrities who use Twitter to broadcast press releases rather than answering fan questions or sharing tidbits of information about themselves are looked down upon. As a result, revealing personal details becomes a way to appear authentic while maintaining carefully constructed personae that fit within an acceptable image. Similarly, virtually all livestreamers publicize an edited version of their day-to-day actions rather than an uncensored dump of



information. While authenticity is held up as a virtue, social media encourages highly constructed and edited forms of self-presentation that are carefully created to boost popularity and gain status without alienating potential “customers.”

### The Networked Audience

The common phrase ‘I think, therefore I am’ is woefully inadequate in cyberspace. Even ‘I speak, therefore I am’ is not enough. In cyberspace, the more appropriate phrase is ‘I am perceived, therefore I am’ (Markham 2005, 795).<sup>6</sup>

Self-presentation is dependent on context and audience (Goffman 1959).

In linguistics, studies of “code-switching” examine how language is leveraged for different communicative ends based on “domain,” or situation (Stockwell 2002, 9). In contemporary American culture, the ability to culturally code-switch is associated with high-status, elite individuals (Peterson and Kern 1996). Online, perception from others is *necessary* for identity construction (Markham 2005). Online identity is both the sum and traces of a person’s online content and actions; identity cues can be gleaned from an e-mail address, a nickname, or a digital picture. More self-conscious identity performances have been analyzed in internet spaces like social network sites (boyd 2007; Livingstone 2008), blogs (Reed 2005; Hodkinson and Lincoln 2008), dating sites (Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs 2006) and personal homepages (Papacharissi 2002; Schau and Gilly 2003). The ability to code-switch or vary identity presentation is compromised in many online spaces which exhibit “context collapse,” or the simultaneous existence of

multiple audiences such as friends, co-workers, relatives and so forth (boyd 2008; Marwick and boyd 2010).

The predominant popular way of thinking about audience comes from broadcast media. This audience model implies a shared experience of viewership: people in a movie theater collectively focused on the screen, or a family clustered around the television. The traditional broadcast audience follows a one-to-many content model in which a single institutional source provides content to a mass, undifferentiated audience.

Work in media studies during the 1980s reconceptualized audiences as *active*, maintaining that the meaning of a media text is negotiated. Rather than consuming without thought, audiences use interpretive lenses and bring individual experiences to bear when making meaning from media (Radway 1984; Fiske 1989). Conceptualizing the “audience” as a stable entity that congregates around a media object has been displaced with the “interpretive community,” “fandom,” and “participatory culture,” concepts that assume small, active, and highly engaged groups of people who do not simply consume content, but produce their own as well (Baym 2000; Jenkins 2006).

In contrast, the networked audience consists of real and potential viewers for digital content that exist *within a larger social graph*. The viewers are connected to each other as well as the content creator, using social media to maintain an active, communicative network. While the broadcast audience imagined a mass audience for institutional content, the networked audience

flattens a person's social connections into a singular digital mass, the "friends list." Although digital content creators do not know, and can never know, precisely who exists in the networked audience, it contains familiar faces; it is both potentially public and personal. Like the broadcast audience, the networked audience includes random, unknown individuals, but, unlike the broadcast audience, it has a presumption of personal authenticity and connection.

Members of the networked audience take turns serving as creator, commenter, spectator, and lurker. Facebook users write status updates to be seen by their audience as they simultaneously watch videos or read notes posted by friends. Because social media users broadcast content to people who in turn broadcast content to each other, there is a rich social context for each piece of digital information. This opportunity for communication influences how speakers respond and what content they create in the future.

In social contexts like the tech scene, where boundaries between offline and online are liminal and constantly shifting, the networked audience becomes the norm for social media use. While every site has lurkers and much social media content is theoretically available to the larger public, using such sites does not simply involve creating and disseminating content, but viewing what other people have contributed. When there are existing relationships between people connected through social media, whether strong ties or weak acquaintanceships, the networked audience comes into play. It is the networked audience that perceives the user, determines social norms, and gives feedback.

## Case Study: The San Francisco Tech Scene

### Context

Technology use is context-dependent. Popular narratives about Web 2.0 often fall into familiar technologically determinist tropes, which assume that adoption of a particular technology causes similar behavioral changes and social effects regardless of context (Smith and Marx 1994). In contrast, historical analyses of science and technology show that political, economic, and social differences in places and times affect how technology is deployed, used, and regarded. The printing press, for instance, is often positioned as the cause of the Protestant Reformation via the Gutenberg Bible; this ignores the rise of anti-clericalism, the breakdown of feudalism, the rise of urbanism and the merchant class, the Renaissance, and so forth (Eisenstein 1980; Howell and Prevenier 2001, 137). Likewise, American teenagers, Japanese teenagers, West African entrepreneurs and Egyptian activists demonstrate different patterns of mobile phone use, and understand and talk about their own technology use distinctly (Ito, Okabe, and Anderson 2009). When technology use is generalized, it often has a North American bias. Although my fieldwork took place in California, I am cognizant that this project involves a very particular, and in many ways unusual, set of technology users.

The discipline of media studies has developed a sophisticated understanding of the importance of context. In contrast to virtual ethnographies of

online communities with participants drawn from across the globe, media ethnography emphasizes how people in a particular place understand their own media use (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002). Since the same media product can be interpreted in wildly different ways by audiences in different countries—Katz and Liebes’s study of the prime-time soap *Dallas* showed that it was understood variously as an imperialist screed, a cautionary tale about capitalism, and mindless entertainment—the audience’s meaning-making processes must be taken into account when interpreting a text (1993). This project applies the principles of media ethnography to online social media in order to understand praxis, understanding, and discourse around social media among Web 2.0 workers in San Francisco.

This is particularly necessary when investigating social status. Status is always relative; the social psychology literature defines status as “rank-ordered relationships among people associated with prestige and deference behavior” (Huberman, Loch, and Öncüler 2004, 103; Ridgeway and Walker 1995). While traditional conceptions of high and low culture assumed a single cultural field (Bourdieu 1984), other theorists reject the model of a single space of distinction in favor of one in which multiple, overlapping taste cultures exist (Gans 1974; Ollivier and Fridman 2001). Gans’s concept of a taste culture acknowledges modern diffuse networks which share values and “aesthetic standards” (Ollivier and Fridman 2001, 3). Although attributes like wealth or education are symbolically significant across different social groups, “taste cultures” may share

complex systems of status markers and practices, such as knowledge of television shows or possession of a designer purse. In this case, I am examining the status structures, markers and practices among technologists in San Francisco.

While I could have chosen to study Web 2.0 in any culture with high rates of social media use, I chose the San Francisco tech scene for three reasons. First, this group conceptualizes and builds social media technologies; their social sphere is the intended context for Web 2.0. The Bay Area is considered the global home of social media applications and discourse and many of the most influential people in technology live here. Examining their environment, interactions, and norms reveals that the values of the tech scene are reflected in the software they build. Second, San Francisco tech workers have extraordinarily high rates of social media use. They are early adopters of many social media platforms—Twitter was popularized within this group years before it disseminated into the mainstream—and epitomize the crumbling division between online and offline life. Although the tech scene represents one end of the bell curve of Web 2.0 adoption, it presents an opportunity to identify social patterns that exist elsewhere. Finally, I wanted to avoid the discourse of “digital natives” that maps technical proficiency to young people and often furthers a paternalistic attitude towards things like social network sites, video games, and texting (Livingstone 2008; Marwick, Murgia-Diaz, and Palfrey 2010). The tech scene is made up primarily of twenty-to-fifty-something professionals, and this project shows that such practices are not dependent on age, and are by no means restricted to teenagers.

### The San Francisco Tech Scene

Generally if you don't say you're based in SF, people think you're not relevant (Loic LeMeur, founder of Seismic, 2009).

To examine the impact of social media on social status, I conducted ethnographic work from 2006-2010 in a community that has developed around San Francisco social media companies, which I call “the tech scene.” There have been several excellent critical studies of the technology culture of Santa Clara County, also known as Silicon Valley, centered in the cities of Palo Alto, Mountain View, Cupertino, Sunnyvale, and San Jose (Saxenian 1996; English-Lueck 2002; Saxenian 2006). This area is synonymous with the technology companies located there, such as Apple, Google, Intel, Oracle, Sun, and Yahoo. It boasts a diverse population with skilled immigrants, expensive real estate, well-funded public schools, and technological saturation (English-Lueck 2002, 11). The political sensibility of Silicon Valley is of a decidedly libertarian bent, espousing self-improvement, social mobility, and a deficit of “work-life balance” (Rogers and Larsen 1984; Bronson 2000; Borsook 2001; English-Lueck 2002). The mix of ethnic diversity and higher-than-average technology use has created an image of Silicon Valley as ultra-modern and representative of the future. English-Lueck writes, “The things that make Silicon Valley distinctive—its technological saturation and complex range of identities—are not merely interesting cultural artifacts in themselves. They are significant because both the pervasiveness of technology and identity diversity are coming to define the

emerging global culture” (2002, 8). Like New York advertising men in the 1950s, Silicon Valley technology workers embodied modernity in the 1990s.

The City of San Francisco is north of Silicon Valley. It is a very different landscape from the Valley; Apple and Google run shuttle buses to-and-from their “campuses” so that younger, hipper employees can choose to live amongst the lively social life of the city, rather than the family-oriented climate of the southern suburbs. In contrast to the tech monocultures of Silicon Valley, technology companies headquartered in San Francisco tend to be startups: smaller, newer, with younger employees, longer hours, and a greater possibility of being acquired by Google or accruing lucrative pre-IPO stock options. While San Francisco and Silicon Valley are both parts of the overall Northern California technology community, the city’s tech enthusiasts tend to be younger, “cooler,” less family-oriented, and more likely to work for a risky, high-pressure startup. San Francisco also has a lengthy and storied history of countercultural activism, art, and liberal politics, which are largely absent from the more staid cities of the Valley. Despite these important differences, technology workers in both San Francisco and Silicon Valley largely share an ideological belief in technology as a solution to social problems.

I conducted fieldwork in a technologically-saturated group of people who primarily live in San Francisco and work with social media in some capacity, whose members refer to it as the “tech scene.” This scene is sprawling and inclusive, containing founders of venture-backed startups, rank-and-file corporate



workers, freelancers, people in other industries who love social media, “carpetbagger” opportunists, and a mishmash of students, designers, artists, businesspeople, and “internet celebrities.” People in the tech scene enjoy socializing, and hold events nightly, primarily in San Francisco proper. Community members hang out face-to-face at parties, workplaces, events, and conferences, and keep in touch using social technologies, mobile devices, instant messenger, and e-mail. Their immersion in social technologies is incredibly high and online interaction plays a large role in forming and maintaining social bonds.

There are significant differences between the technology scene and the hacker-engineer culture of Silicon Valley studied by June Anne English-Lueck (2002). Often, Silicon Valley engineers are stereotyped as socially maladjusted, unable to make friends, working late hours into the night, weird, or cranky. In contrast, social software workers are undeniably *social*. They are “hipster nerds.” They consume popular culture, dress more-or-less fashionably, go to bars, clubs, and restaurants, rent houses in Tahoe, snowboard, date, have lots of friends, throw big parties, and go to see bands. I cannot say whether these differences are real or a matter of perception, and, if they are real, whether they can be attributed to location, job types, the products that they work on, or something else entirely. Nevertheless, despite these differences, there are some ideological similarities between social media enthusiasts and more “traditional” hacker-engineers.

Many of the social norms documented by anthropologists and journalists in Silicon Valley are equally applicable to San Francisco’s tech-obsessed culture.

In fact, these mores may be common elements of what Manuel Castells calls the four layers of Internet culture: “the techno-meritocratic culture, the hacker culture, the virtual communitarian culture, and the entrepreneurial culture” (Castells 2001, 37). These layers are difficult to separate, but they include a strong belief that intelligence and drive is an indicator of success, an almost mythological belief in entrepreneurialism, the “do it yourself” ethic common to zine writers, hackers, grassroots media activists, and cyberdelic freaks, and an idealized view of the internet as a utopian space. Silicon Valley culture also includes a deep faith in technological solutions, specifically computerization, or the idea that widespread adoption of computer technologies will lead to positive social change, in this case, increased participation, democracy, and community (Iacono and Kling 1995). This almost-contradictory combination of “technological determinism and libertarian individualism” that runs through Silicon Valley and San Francisco was dubbed “The Californian Ideology” by Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron in 1996 (p.3).

Although the culture of social media is geographically centered in San Francisco, it simultaneously exists as a *social imaginary* which transcends a particular place. Silicon Valley is a “technopole,” a model for technologically-aspiring regions (Castells and Hall 1994) and idealizes an ultra-modern, economically dynamic future (English-Lueck 2002, 8). As a model of neoliberal economic development, there are Silicon Valley equivalents, or *siliconia*, worldwide—Silicon Alley in New York, Silicon Gulf in the Philippines, Silicon

Wadi in Israel, Silicon Saxony, Cwm Silicon in Wales, Silicon Beach, Silicon Corridor, Silicon Prairie, and so forth—with varying levels of success (Dawson 2001; Wikipedia contributors 2009). Silicon Valley as an imaginary exports the Californian Ideology as a universal solution to localized problems. Similarly, the media visibility and idealization of successful Northern California tech companies like Facebook and Twitter have engendered a world-wide fan base which follows business developments and social machinations of the Web 2.0 scene through blogs and Twitter feeds. San Franciscans have a vested interest in maintaining this image, and are quick to argue that they are at the epicenter of world-wide technology development (their use of the term “*the tech scene*” to describe what is actually a technological sub-culture is revealing).

The scene also functions somewhat as a mythic center. Far-flung entrepreneurs, academics, and venture capitalists who live across the world imagine themselves to be connected through technology (and thus beyond place), but still ground themselves in the Californian Ideology of the Bay Area. Social media workers from San Francisco, New York, Tokyo, Paris, Austin, and London stay in close touch via instant messenger, blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and Skype, touching base at conferences and industry events, often forging strong personal and professional relationships between people who only meet in person once a year. While there are geographic and cultural differences between technopoles, the scene functions as a shared set of assumptions, beliefs, and norms that maintain common interests across geographical boundaries.

### The Community, the Scene

I primarily use the word “scene” to refer to the social network of San Francisco technologists because that is how informants describe it. Although the unquestioned use of emic terminology can be problematic, I think the widespread adoption of “scene” reveals the great importance attributed to both socialization and participation by its members. Computer enthusiasts are often viewed as isolated or strange, but “scene” affiliates often-geeky technologists with something young, cool, and exciting. A scene is a “social scene,” referring to a network of friends and acquaintances that socializes around a common interest, such as the music scene, where the term originated (Hesmondhalgh 2005). While this term has been widely used in popular music scholarship and youth studies, it has not gained wider currency (Straw 1991; Shank 1994; Straw 2002; Hesmondhalgh 2005). Although “scene” is somewhat contested within these disciplines, its origin in the music scene provides two valuable insights.

First, “scene” implies the simultaneous existence of geographic specificity and globalization. Will Straw uses the term to emphasize how a community in a particular time and space can connect to larger cultural forces. Straw argues the spatiotemporal location of a scene, such as Northern California in the first decade of the twenty-first century, provides a historical tradition that members can draw upon but are not limited to. Scenes exhibit “attentiveness to change occurring elsewhere” (Straw 1991, 374) and respond to global trends and forces. With

regard to the tech scene, Northern California has a long history of innovation with deep traces that strongly affect contemporary internet and software production. However, members are connected through social media to a global network of enthusiasts. The boom-and-bust cycles of the Bay Area have given rise to constantly renewed and updated technologies that are enthusiastically adopted by scene members.

Second, Barry Shank argues that the music scene produces a series of “temporary identifications” which encourage people to participate in cultural production: “spectators become fans, fans become musicians, musicians are always already fans” (1994, 131). Like local music scenes, the technology scene creates popular cultural products with low barriers to entry and myriad opportunities for participation. This fertile creative environment encourages the pursuit of personal projects. When a member of the tech scene begins attending conferences, she may first imagine herself as a speaker, and later take steps to become a speaker, or even organize her own conference. Like musicians, technologists believe that their scene reflects the spirit of “do it yourself” culture which emphasizes openness, meritocracy, and discovery.

There are other commonalities between music and technology scenes. Both scenes make media, which has a broader reach, a sense of audience, and the presence of fans and fannish dynamics. Each scene has a complex mythology of “making it big” which functions as a persistent motivation for participation, whether by signing a major-label contract or selling a company. Because the

music scene is the epitome of a cool, hip social milieu (Leland 2004), its use by technologists allows them to shed their geeky, antisocial image in favor of one that is dynamic, fun, and aspirational.

I also use “scene” because it allows me to skirt the endless debates over use of the term *community* when applied to technologically-mediated groups. The traditional definition of community involves solitary groups of densely-knit neighbors located in a common geographical space (Wellman and Gulia 1999). This idealized *gemeinschaft* is often valorized as an ideal state, before urbanization, media, crime, television, etc. alienated neighbors from each other. By this measure, *virtual community*, which Howard Rheingold defines as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human, feeling to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (2000, xx), is simply a weak substitute. This division between “offline” and “online” communities has been debated at length, with some scholars arguing that the internet decreases community, some that it increases community, and still others that it changes community (Markham 1998; Rheingold 2000; Wellman, Boase, and Chen 2002; Wilson and Peterson 2002). The interaction and blending of “online” and “offline” has rendered many of these debates moot, but the word “community” is no longer analytically useful primarily because it is so contested. However, my informants often used “community” in a colloquial sense, and when asked, firmly agreed that the scene functioned as a community. As a result, my use of community is in this vernacular

sense rather than a precise analytic terminology, similar to how Annalee Saxenian uses the term to describe Silicon Valley as “a prototypical high-tech community” (1996, 18).

### Gender

It is impossible to discuss “status” without understanding how gender’s role in determining status undermines claims of the tech scene as meritocratic and Web 2.0 technologies as democratic. Although there are high-status, visible women in this social context, the valorization of entrepreneurship and engineering, along with a systematic devaluation of women’s contributions, maintains a status hierarchy in which the primary beneficiaries are male. In the omnipresent status mythology of the scene, success comes when a brilliant, hard-working man builds a company from scratch. The entrepreneur is *always* gendered male in press coverage and at conferences, unless there is a special event for “women entrepreneurs.” In this mythology, women are girlfriends, wives, or even “secretaries” or “receptionists.” It is intensely difficult for a woman to fit into an entrepreneurial subjectivity which has remained virtually unchanged since the 1980s, creating a vicious circle in which there are few women entrepreneurs to serve as role models or mentors for younger women.

This sexism does not manifest in obvious barriers to professional advancement. In fact, several female engineers I talked to vociferously opposed the idea that the scene was sexist. They claimed that if a woman was “good” (technically skilled), she would succeed. Organizations that advanced “women in

tech” were sometimes viewed with suspicion as raising the profile of unqualified women.<sup>7</sup> That there is an absence of obvious barriers to advancement in employment does not, however, mean that the scene is not sexist. In fact, this is a very basic understanding of structural oppression in which a lack of brute barriers signifies a lack of bias. To the contrary, my interviews and interactions with members of the scene revealed subtle sexism and bias towards women in all levels of the community.

First, employment numbers show the male domination of the larger tech industry. Only 3 percent of tech companies and 1.9 percent of high-tech companies are founded by women, and women-founded business receive venture capital at far lower rates than men (Robb and Coleman 2009). This is despite recent studies which have found virtually no differences between female and male entrepreneurs in terms of education, wealth, or technical knowledge (Cohoon, Wadhwa, and Mitchell 2010). According to the Bureau of Labor statistics, women make up 19 percent of hardware engineers, 21 percent of software engineers, and 22 percent of computer programmers. Overall, computer and mathematical professions are 75 percent male (National Center for Women and Information Technology 2007; Dines 2009). In Free/Open Source software development, researchers estimate that only about 1.5 percent of contributors are women (Nafus, Leach, and Krieger 2006; Holliger 2007). While some of these numbers can be explained by the lack of women in computer science, this begs the question of why there are so few women in computer science, and why that



number has decreased since the 1980s (National Center for Women and Information Technology 2010).<sup>8</sup> Professional roles which do attract women, such as project management, marketing, graphic design, human resources, and public relations are low-status in the scene, dismissed as not “real” tech jobs, or framed in opposition to the more masculine work of programming. While there are many women in the tech scene, and many men who do not program, the gender inequities within the computer industry affect how women are perceived overall.

Second, men and women are treated differently in both private and public discourse. Women are sexualized and their accomplishments are frequently underestimated or dismissed. I repeatedly heard informants attribute a women’s success to her involvement with a successful man, which was echoed in blogs and online discourse. Women’s appearances and dating lives are publicly judged and commented upon and used as ammunition against their professional success. A venture capitalist told me that he believed women were like children who could not control their emotions. A female entrepreneur told me she would not be taken seriously if she wore jeans and a t-shirt to a meeting like Digg founder Kevin Rose, but if she wore a suit venture capitalists assumed she had no technical knowledge and ignored her. Men’s participation in technology is taken for granted, while women’s is de-emphasized and even discouraged. These attitudes are not atypical for male-dominated professional cultures, but they are still troublesome.

Third, there is a deeply-gendered boundary between information-sharing and “TMI” (too much information). Using social media for self-disclosure increases status *up to a point*, after which the person is typically categorized as an “attention whore,” “oversharer,” or “desperate.” Anthony Hoffman’s critical discourse analysis of media coverage of oversharing found that the term was overwhelmingly negative, primarily applied to women, and had “the effect of creating a devalued subclass of information sharing online,” mostly comprised of “sex and romance, intimate relationships, parenthood and reproduction, and so on” (2009, 71). I observed a similar pattern of normative judgment around information-sharing, as the most prominent examples of “attention whores” in the scene were women and gay men. This suggests that people whose gender presentation is not heterosexual and male are more likely to be criticized for their information disclosure and lose status as a result. Analyzing gender demonstrates disconnection between the ideal of meritocracy and the reality of structural inequality.

## Research Methods

### Fieldwork

This ethnography is based on nearly four years of fieldwork among Web 2.0 workers in the San Francisco technology scene (2006-2010). I became interested in this community the summer after the first year of my Ph.D. program, when I took a job working for a social networking startup in San Francisco.

During those three months, I went to tech parties and events, made friends with tech professionals, and found inspiration in the enthusiasm and excitement of the second internet boom, which reminded me of my experiences working in the Seattle dot-com boom from 1998-2001. These friendships gave me broad access to the technology scene, and I returned the next summer to conduct some pilot interviews for what I began to conceptualize as a project about online status. From September 2008 to May 2009, I lived in San Francisco for the purposes of fieldwork. I have since stayed in touch with many of my informants via e-mail, seen them at conferences, and conducted informal fieldwork among their equivalents in New York City. Fieldwork included three primary parts, interviews, participant observation, and online ethnographic observation.

### Interviews

I conducted formal interviews with thirty-four members of the technology scene and talked to many, many more in casual settings. I used three criteria to pick interviewees: people who spanned a range of genders, ages, roles, and familiarity with the scene; people who frequently came up in conversation or were recommended by others, a technique called “snowball sampling” (Patton 2002, 237); and people willing to talk to me. Even the most novice members of the scene had very specific ideas of who was important, and while I failed to get interviews with some of the most prominent people in the scene,<sup>9</sup> my interviews provided a basic understanding of how the scene was structured and allowed me

to begin mapping out who “mattered.” I believe I successfully chose a diverse group of people for formal interviews. I interviewed nineteen men and fifteen women, of which seven were people of color, and five identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, polyamorous, or queer. They ranged in age from early twenties to fifties, and employment status varied from CEO to unemployed. Some of my informants had lived in San Francisco for decades, while others had lived there for less than a year.

The interviews were between forty-five minutes and three hours, and usually took place in a public setting like a coffee shop or restaurant, although sometimes I interviewed people in their apartments. All participants signed consent forms and allowed me to use their own names, but several talked about subjects during their interviews which they indicated were “off the record” or required the use of a pseudonym. I conducted semi-structured interviews, meaning that I had a standard set of questions but usually let each interview take its own course. During my first few interviews, I took hand-written notes, but quickly learned to tape-record so I could better pay attention to my subjects. After I had completed about twenty interviews, it became much easier to find informants as other people in the scene could vouch for me. The interviews were transcribed by an online service. I proofed the transcriptions by listening to recordings of the interviews as I coded them, in most cases re-transcribing the majority of the interview. I used Atlas.ti to code each interview using an emergent

coding scheme. I coded each interview two or three times, and referred back to the interviews frequently while choosing quotes and writing individual chapters.

### Participant Observation

I participated in the tech scene both in-person and using social media technologies. For the former, I attended between two and five tech events a week, sometimes several on the same night. I went to meetups<sup>10</sup> about mobile technology, virtual currency, using Web 2.0 to improve the urban environment; I went to Mashable parties, TechCrunch parties, the Facebook Christmas party; I attended to Women 2.0 events, Girls in Tech events, lectures, round-tables, panels, book launch parties, and conferences. I also participated in many informal social events, like rock shows, birthday parties, picnics, restaurants, and bar gatherings. I learned what coffee shops were the most popular places to work (Sugarlump, Ritual Roasters, and Coffee Bar) and spent hours there, sometimes joining other people for “co-working” sessions.<sup>11</sup> I also co-worked at spaces formally set up for this purpose, including CitizenSpace and PariSoma. I took regular fieldnotes on these excursions; I was asked several times if I was a journalist, as I would be standing on the sidelines of an event scribbling in my notebook. I typed up my fieldnotes and coded them both by hand and using Atlas.ti.

To contextualize my involvement in the scene, I will relate the story of the first event I went to upon moving to San Francisco in 2008. This was one in a

series called “Lunch 2.0,” open networking events (with free food!) held at tech company offices. I arrived exactly on time and was, awkwardly, one of only four or five people there. Thus I learned my first lesson: scheduling is much less precise in San Francisco than in New York. The office was a floor of a large office building in downtown San Francisco, sparsely populated with scattered cubicles, fluorescent lights and long tables stacked with sandwiches and salads. We were greeted by professionally-dressed women who ushered us in and instructed us to choose nametags with colored dots to identify our roles. We could pick from “engineers,” “headhunters” (recruiters who work for many companies), “CEOs,” “VCs,” or “journalists” (I chose the latter, figuring it at least implied information-gathering). As people trickled in—probably 60-70 percent men in their twenties to fifties, white, Asian, and Southeast Asian—I had my first taste of tech scene networking. Go up to someone you don’t know, say hello, exchange business cards, explain what you do, determine mutual interest or some sort of networking possibility, and move on to the next person. As a doctoral student who had just started fieldwork, I lacked an “elevator pitch.” This is a short (one- to three-minute) summary of your company or project which you can rattle off to others. Successful VC’s (venture capitalists), recruiters (who look for “talent,” aka developers and engineers), and CEOs are extraordinarily effective at this. By the end of fieldwork, I had become very good at it, as well as the small talk and questions that are necessary to network successfully. But at this event, I stumbled over my words and lost the attention of my co-networkers.

Because I was a researcher, most people were not interested in my work, and, by extension, me. A woman named Vickie told me “This is just a recruiting event, hi5 is just looking for engineers.” The company didn’t provide a presentation or any sort of speech; everyone showed up for the free lunch and to make connections within the community, and hi5 hoped that it might attract talent to their company (they also gave out free t-shirts). If you were an engineer looking for a job, a recruiter looking for an engineer, a CEO looking for funding, or a VC looking for an investment opportunity, you were of interest. The instrumentality of these events quickly became clear to me. You met people to see if you could potentially get anything from them; you did not necessarily want to meet people for friendship, dating, or any other reason. I did meet two of my future informants at this event, Dale Larson and Anu Nigram, as well as a CEO who later hired me for a freelance writing gig. By any standards, this would be counted as a success. But at the time, I felt like an outsider, awkward and gawky. It took many months of talking to people and reading blogs and tweets to become familiar and comfortable with the practices I saw on display at this event.

### Online Observation

I participated in the life of the community online as well as in-person. I read Twitter every day, many times a day, although it did not become fully integrated with my life until I bought an iPhone in December 2008, and I did not start using TweetDeck, a more “advanced” Twitter client, until May 2009. I also

observed Facebook, Flickr and various blogs, particularly Valleywag, TechCrunch, and Mashable, on a daily basis. I consider this project to represent multi-sited ethnography, but it was difficult to draw a distinct boundary around data collection. This is due to the networked nature of modern internet communications where, unlike discrete tools like Usenet or Second Life, comments, links, and aggregators mix and mash-up information in very non-discrete ways. To find relevant online sites, I relied on my own experiences, links posted on Twitter, information from informants, and news stories.

My primary tool for participation was Twitter. Although I had signed up for Twitter in February 2007, it was not until I began fieldwork in September 2008 that my Twitter use increased significantly (see **Error! Reference source not found.**)<sup>12</sup> (This participation included actively monitoring my followers; when I started fieldwork, I had 447, but by the time I left San Francisco in May 2009, I had over a thousand). I tweeted about mundane subjects, talked to informants, shared information from my own life, and met interviewees using Twitter.



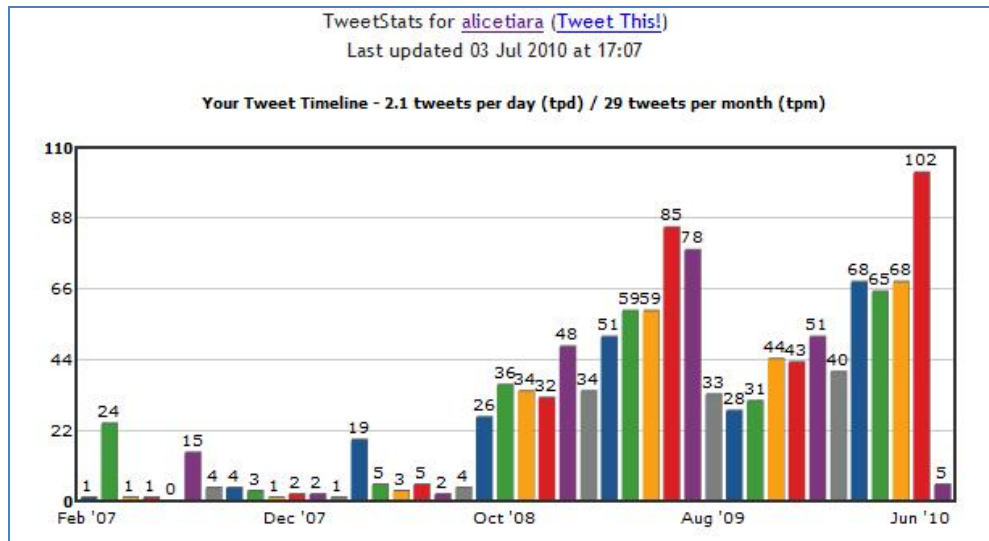


Figure 1: TweetStats for author’s Twitter account (courtesy of TweetStats.com)

Formally collecting online data was difficult for two reasons: access to the applications, and the sheer volume of information I was collecting. While virtually all the Twitter accounts I monitored were public, Twitter’s search function is limited to two to three weeks, making it difficult to find older information. To save public tweets, a friend built a simple application called “TweetCatcher” which output all the public tweets of people I was following into a .csv file. I used Friendfeed and the RSS reader built into my e-mail client to capture as many of my friends’ tweets as possible. I saved thousands of tweets, which were prohibitively time-consuming to hand-code and organize. As a result, I used tweets as a different sort of data, on a somewhat ad-hoc evidentiary basis to flesh out descriptions and perspectives on events and anecdotes that appear in the dissertation. In this document, Tweets appear in Courier font for easy identification.

Facebook was virtually impossible to use for data collection. I could not use my own personal Facebook account, as I was connected to many more people than my ethnographic subjects, and because social network sites are not “public” in the same way that Twitter accounts are. Much data is restricted to friends. I believe it is unethical to use protected data without gathering full consent from informants, so I declined to use my personal account for formal data collection. Creating an additional account for research violates the Facebook terms of service, and repeated requests to the service for greater access for research purposes went unanswered. As a result, while I observed interaction on Facebook on a daily basis, I did not formally collect Facebook data. The blogs and Flickr accounts of most of my informants were public, so I judged them allowable for data collection.

### Reflections on Method

#### “Virtual” Ethnography?

Ethnographic studies of computer-mediated communities during the 1990s and early 2000s primarily conceptualized online spaces such as Usenet groups or single chat rooms as discrete, and studied them in isolation (Reid 1994; Cherny 1999; Baym 2000; Hine 2000; Kendall 2002). There were several reasons for this. At the time, internet communication was primarily conceptualized using spatial metaphors, which positioned the “online” realm as a separate “cyberspace” or “sphere.” This differentiation gave credence to the heady utopian claims of

“rupture and transformation” (Coleman 2010b) that the internet would herald in post-humanism, break down gender and racial barriers, and create new subjectivities (Negroponte 1995; Turkle 1995; Stone 1996). This also allowed pundits and policymakers to compare the “virtual” and “real,” debating the validity of “online” communities or communication. Second, because there were far fewer internet users, meeting and befriending strangers online was common. While even the earliest ethnographies of computer-mediated communication chronicled in-person meetings of online community members, it was still possible to isolate a group of people whose primary communication was through a single online medium. Third, using the internet required sitting down at a computer and using a modem to “log on,” which made it possible to draw a clear, bright line that divided internet use from non-use.

While some ethnographies still focus on single online spaces (Boellstorff 2008), internet researchers have since recognized the necessity of an anthropology of the internet that breaks down the divisions between “virtual” and “real” or “online” or “offline” (Orgad 2008; Baym 2009; Garcia, Standlee, and Bechkoff 2009). Media convergence has created a *multiplexity* of communication options, including face-to-face contact, instant messenger, e-mail, text messaging, mobile and landline telephones, and a cacophony of emerging technologies like Skype, video chat, YouTube videos, blog comments, tweets and Facebook wall posts (Van Cleemput 2010). While there are social norms and technological affordances that govern the appropriate uses of these media (for example, is it appropriate to

break up with someone with a text message?), people use combinations of these media to talk to their friends, family, and acquaintances (Kim et al. 2007; Stephens et al. 2008; Van Cleemput 2010). Which of these are “real” and which are “virtual”? Is using a mobile phone to call someone “offline” communication, but using that same phone to send a Twitter direct message “online”? These unanswerable questions show that these divisions are no longer analytically useful terms.

So what are the methodological implications of this move away from a strict delineation between online or offline? Just as media anthropology has called for situating media use as embedded practice, I believe that digital media must be studied *as* a practice that takes place in a specific geographic location (Abu-Lughod 1998; Mankekar 1999; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002). Ten years ago, Miller and Slater wrote that “[internet] spaces are important as a part of everyday life, not apart from it” (2000, 7). Moreover, internet use *informs* social and cultural processes and discourse; as Christopher Kelty writes:

In the 21st century, in which e-mail, chatrooms, instant messaging, independent media, blogs, Google, mobile phones, pagers, Friendster, and other media are also concrete means of discussion, argument, and assertion, we can broaden the notion of *Tischgesellschaft* (coffeehouse society) to that of a far-flung, technically mediated, and dynamically networked *Schreibtischgesellschaft* (desktop society) (2008, 203).

This both implies the necessity of multi-sited fieldwork rather than isolating a single online component, and of examining technologically-mediated communication when conducting primarily “offline” ethnography (Burrell 2009).

Garcia et al. agree: “Rather than deciding in advance to conduct an ethnography of an online site or community, the ethnographer should first choose their topic of interest, and then define the field in terms of whether and how that topic involves different modes of communication or technological locations” (2009, 56).

Examples of this approach include studies of free/open source communities (Kelty 2008; Coleman 2010a), danah boyd’s look at teenage use of social network sites (2008), Jeff Juris’s examination of the anti-corporate globalization movement (2008), Ito et al.’s exploration of teenage mobile phone use (Ito, Okabe, and Anderson 2009), and several excellent ethnographies of Silicon Valley employees (English-Lueck 2002; Malaby 2009). This work positions technology use within broader social frameworks which affect how technology is used and viewed. Such studies help to illuminate the complex interactions between people, places, and devices, and reveal how people make social meaning of their relationships to technology.

### Studying Up

Studying privileged American professionals like technology workers calls into question the validity of “studying up” to answer larger cultural questions; in other words, why I chose to study a wealthy, advantaged group. Laura Nader’s germinal article “Up the Anthropologist” (1972), called for American anthropologists to turn their analytical lenses on their own country, particularly in regard to what Hugh Gusterson calls the “capitalist processes of production and

stratification” like banks and law firms (1997, 115). Nader’s essay responded to Cold War governments’ use of anthropology for colonization and counter-insurgent tactics, and urged anthropologists to trace connections between elites, systems, and politics as a way to restore democracy (Nader 1999). But “repatriated ethnography,” or the study of one’s own culture, primarily resulted in studies of marginalized American populations like drug addicts and prostitutes rather than corporate executives or politicians (Gusterson 1997). Gusterson writes, “The cultural invisibility of the rich and powerful is as much a part of their privilege as their wealth and power, and a democratic anthropology should be working to reverse this invisibility” (1997, 115). Priyadharshini writes,

Because the task is one of "blowing the cover" of power, or, as Saskia Sassen (2000) puts it, to "excavate" the workings of such power in both its productive and repressive manifestations, the questions that studying up can usefully investigate include: How does power accrue at some points within dominant discourses? How are those who appropriate and enjoy power enabled to do so? What are the terms and conditions that make this possible? (2003, 429)

Ethnographies of privileged groups can provide a sophisticated understanding of the operation of power in spaces where access is typically restricted, and thus made invisible.

I chose American technology workers precisely so I could uncover the power that they wielded in technology. Like movie producers or television show runners, the creators of new media shape the images and frameworks through which we see ourselves and others. But while the political economy and social context of the mass entertainment industries have been analyzed at length, there

are very few critical examinations of the production culture of Web 2.0, and its specificity is obscured. It is my goal in this work to uncover the assumptions about power and privilege that go into normative prescriptions of technology use, and to unravel the mythological image of the industry in favor of one that is more nuanced.

Studying up is not without methodological and ethical dilemmas. Esther Priyadharshini points out that unlike marginalized groups, “the powerful are those who are in a position to determine not only who studies them, but also how they are studied, for how long, and the manner in which they are represented” (2003, 427). Diane Forsythe, who studied doctors and computer scientists, warned that “if you publish things about powerful people that they do not agree with, they will not necessarily like it... unless they are people of great generosity, they may not wish you to write more of the same” (1999, 8). Not only was my access to many powerful people restricted, there is a significant overlap between academia and industry in technology studies. As a graduate student, it was not in my best professional interests to alienate members of this group. To the contrary, increasing my status in the scene could potentially lead to tempting rewards, such as conference invites and press coverage. My goal in this project was to provide a measured critique of the technology scene, not an obsequious or celebratory biography, but I found myself admiring the intelligence, drive, and creativity of its participants. I struggled with potentially alienating people who were very kind to me, who I respected, and who might help me professionally.

I thus attempted to strike a balance between measured, objective critique and the realities of my situation. While interviewees signed consent forms and authorized the use of their real names, I was mindful of the more controversial statements they made and have anonymized remarks that seemed particularly damaging; after all, I am not writing an exposé. I also expect many of my informants to read—well, perhaps skim—this project. While most graduate students are overjoyed if anyone besides their committee reads their dissertation, I kept the possibilities of a larger audience in the back of my mind as I wrote. I am fully aware that some of my claims, particularly those pertaining to sexism, may be received poorly, but I stand behind my data and analysis and am prepared to defend it if necessary.

Another methodological issue involved the difficulty in interviewing people with extensive media training. I found that people who were used to giving interviews, particularly CEOs, gave smooth answers to questions without revealing anything inadvertently, making it very difficult to get below this practiced surface. My interview with LinkedIn CEO Dan Nye, for example, was saturated with public relations material; Nye steadfastly avoided discussing his own experiences or expressing anything besides the carefully-vetted company party line (I had similar experiences with Rapleaf CEO Auren Hoffman, StumbleUpon CEO Garrett Camp, and Digg CEO Kevin Rose, although they veered off-book a bit more than Nye). Using these interviews as evidence required understanding that how people choose to represent themselves to



interviewers is as important as the content of their interviews. A few days after our interview, I bumped into Garrett Camp at a bar. He expressed visible concern that he had said something inappropriate during our interview; it was clear that he had been worrying about it. I was surprised, as it was a very safe, bland, interview by my standards, particularly compared to subjects who had discussed their relationships and gossiped about others at length. A CEO is the public face of his or her company, and is required to self-censor to seamlessly reflect a flawless surface. Significantly, it is exactly this type of self-censorship that I identify in status-seeking self-presentation.

### Situating Myself

After four years in this sub-culture, I am accepted as an insider. I am close to many people in the scene (for the most part I did not interview close friends, but grew friendly with several interviewees). While most people I spoke to knew I was conducting ethnographic work, people frequently shared personal information and anecdotes with me because of our friendship that I do not feel comfortable using. I struggled between insiderness and objectivity, a well-documented tension among ethnographers. Raymond Madden writes, “The ethnographic manner of being with people is to find a way to get close, but not so close one can’t step back again... One acculturates and socializes to the point of being comfortable with representing the ethnographic context, but one doesn’t give over totally to the cultural and social immersion” (2010, 79).

My ability to maintain a “step back” is complicated by my own status position in the scene, which has risen since I began this work. This can be attributed to several things. First, I participated in the technology scene. While I did not go so far as to adopt the principles of self-branding or micro-celebrity (although I briefly considered it as a sort of extensive participant observation), I spent a lot of time networking and attending events, met journalists and bloggers who referred to me in print and online, and appeared in the lifestreams of my informants, increasing my visibility. This showed that I had access to high-status people, a major status symbol in the scene. Second and more importantly, my partner quit his programmer job at Google to become the third employee of Foursquare, a location-based social software product which went from three employees in 2009 to “the next Twitter” in 2010, receiving two rounds of venture capital and a lot of mainstream press coverage. I learned a lot about the inner workings of venture capital, networking, and the technology press, including watching his co-founders transform into tech celebrities as they appeared on the covers of magazines and spoke at major conferences. This insider perspective was deeply useful to me in my research, but it also presented something of a conundrum. While I do not believe in true objectivity, I do think researchers should at least *strive* to be objective in their work. I cannot, in any way, be objective about a company that I am so close to. As a result, I try not to comment on Foursquare in the press, at conferences, and for the most part, in this dissertation. After a few missteps, I have decided that it is unethical for me to talk

about the company from a research perspective. When Foursquare appears in this dissertation, it is with these disclaimers (it is mentioned infrequently, since it did not launch until a month before I concluded fieldwork, although my partner also worked on its predecessor, Dodgeball).

This project reveals many of the difficulties and tensions inherent in conducting ethnography in mediated social contexts. Throughout the dissertation, I draw from both online and offline interactions to understand how they collectively compose a fragmented, overlapping, but coherent community. In the next section, I walk through each chapter of the project, highlighting the primary theoretical contributions to the disciplines of media and internet studies.

### Chapter Summaries

The second chapter of the dissertation examines the origins of the San Francisco technology scene, questioning how social media technologies became “Web 2.0” and linked to the promise of institutional rupture. I argue that Web 2.0 discourse is technologically determinist, attributing transformative social change and economic success to social media. This chapter’s historical exploration contextualizes the development and popularization of social media in order to understand *why* it has been framed this way. I do this by tracing three threads of technological and historical roots that give rise to the modern concept of Web 2.0: technology, ideology, and community.

First, I position contemporary social media as the latest instantiation of computer-mediated communication technologies like Internet Relay Chat, Multi-User Dungeons, Usenet, bulletin board systems and proprietary networks like Prodigy, AOL, and CompuServe. This history shows that Web 2.0 is not a radical schism with the past, but simply a different way to frame pre-existing technologies. Two developments have facilitated social media's current prevalence: the popularization of broadband internet access, and Ajax, a combination of JavaScript and XML which makes it possible to build web applications that rival desktop software in functionality. But for the most part, the technical capabilities of social media are not groundbreaking.

Second, claims of Web 2.0's revolutionary nature are influenced by a myriad of different subcultures and historical developments that portray institutions as *undemocratic* and doomed to fail, while believing that internet technologies are capable of solving structural social problems. I examine four counter-cultural movements (hacker culture, zines, grassroots media activism, and techno-utopianism) which formulated parallel institutional critiques of government and multinational corporations, identifying these behemoths as threats to democracy and freedom. At the same time, Silicon Valley's long-term technological history engendered a mishmash of libertarianism, techno-utopianism, and meritocracy identified as "The Californian Ideology." I examine this ideology as well as the origins of Web 2.0's emphasis on "entrepreneurial labor" and creative workplaces, pioneered during the dot-com era (Neff,

Wissinger, and Zukin 2005). This history leaves certain capitalist structures unquestioned, while relegating others to the heap of the past. Capitalism as a system, the technology industry, and free market competition are accepted, while the ideology—not necessarily the reality—of Web 2.0 paints intellectual property, copyright, “Big Media” and government as hopeless relics.

Third, the technology scene was brought into being through a series of events, including the Webzine conferences, Tim O’Reilly’s Web 2.0 and FooCamp conferences, the SuperHappyDevHouse “hackathon,” South by Southwest Interactive in Austin, and BarCamp. These events brought together predominantly young, white male developers who were committed to both the core Web 2.0 principles of openness and transparency and the validity of entrepreneurial, venture-backed startups. This chapter establishes the cultural and technical roots of Web 2.0 ideology and argues that it embodies a strain of revolutionary activism that, rather than rejecting institutional capitalism, embraces it. Web 2.0 as a discourse trumpets the radical principles of counter-cultural movements, but dampens them through the emphasis on profit and business context.

In the third chapter, I introduce status as my primary analytical concept. Status allows examination of the interplay of social relations with factors like reputation, social capital, knowledge, money, occupation, accomplishments, race, gender, and class. In this chapter, I outline the status structure of the Web 2.0 tech scene and look at how it is replicated in the media created by and used for

socializing in this milieu. In the tech scene, status is contingent on valuing openness, transparency, and creativity, which manifests as participation in the culture of techno-business, sharing personal information online, and the ability to command and maintain a large audience. These values are integrated with the entrepreneurship, technical knowledge, wealth, and intelligence long-valued by Silicon Valley, creating an atmosphere more akin to celebrity culture and marketing than the idealism of a democratic open society. I use a Values in Design approach to understand how social media displays and maintains the complex inequalities between high and low status people in the scene. I look closely at the *status affordances* and *emergent status signals* of the microblogging platform Twitter to explain how technical infrastructure affects the way that status plays out in different contexts. I show how the status structure of the scene is deeply influenced by the ethos of Web 2.0 as described in the first chapter. Thus, the self-presentation practices described in the rest of the dissertation are deeply influenced by the commercial networks of the technology scene.

The fourth chapter discusses micro-celebrity. I briefly overview the history of celebrity, different perspectives on celebrity and fame in media and cultural studies, and identify and explain the changes in celebrity brought about by social media. I then examine micro-celebrity as a practice. Micro-celebrity can be understood as a mindset and set of techniques in which the subject views his or her friends or followers as an audience or fan base, maintains popularity through ongoing fan management, and carefully constructs and alters online self-

presentation to appeal to others. I look closely at how micro-celebrity operates within the technology scene, using a case study of relative newcomer Adam Jackson to exemplify micro-celebrity practice. Next, I look at how people in the tech scene talk about micro-celebrity. Micro-celebrity can be understood as either a status people *achieve* or an *ascribed* position people are assigned. I discuss the Silicon Valley gossip blog Valleywag in depth, analyzing how the blog ascribed celebrity to certain people but still distinguished between ascribed and achieved celebrities.

I also discuss the *experience* of micro-celebrity, the motivations for it and the positive and negative consequences. I use New York tech celebrity Julia Allison as a case study to show how micro-celebrities are scrutinized and their actions policed, much like mainstream celebrities. Many micro-celebrities experience the negative aspects of mainstream celebrity without the protections and benefits available to the truly famous. Finally, I look at celebrity as a status system and analyze the pictures, blogs, tweets, and so forth produced as part of micro-celebrity which exemplify what I call *aspirational production*. Aspirational consumption is the act of buying things in an attempt to occupy a class or social position higher than one's current status, but aspirational production is the production of cultural content in an attempt to claim a certain status position. Aspirational production also applies to community creation of media about micro-celebrities to emulate a mass celebrity culture. It interpellates members of the

technology scene as spectators in a culture that is as high-status as that of celebrities.

The fifth chapter looks at the discourse and practice around self-branding in the social media scene. Self-branding is a *technology of subjectivity* that encourages the creation and presentation of an “edited self,” which requires emotional, immaterial labor to successfully pursue. I explain my choice to use the often vague and overused concept of neoliberalism, specifically positioning neoliberal ideology as a form of governmentality which furthers methods of self-governance. I review the concept of self-branding and how it is talked about and experienced in the technology scene. To understand how people learn to self-brand, I look at two business self-help texts, Gary Vaynerchuk’s *Crushing It* and Tim Ferriss’s *The Four Hour Work Week*. Both books are how-to guides on becoming a successful entrepreneur using social media, but also function as explicit instruction manuals in surviving without an economic safety net. Creating and promoting identity through social media becomes the linchpin for financial success. I introduce the concept of *immaterial emotional labor* to describe the practices that people go through to create and promote this self, which involves creating and establishing relationships with others, revealing vulnerable information in a performance of authenticity, and complete identification with the enterprise subject. Thus, neoliberal ideology is converted into books, seminars, and videos, instantiated technologically through social media, and operationalized through self-presentation strategies and interpersonal



practices. I frame self-branding as a neoliberal fantasy of how social media could best be used.

In the final chapter, I examine *lifestreaming* as an instantiation of the Web 2.0 ideal of transparency, in which software is used to create an image of a public life through tracking and broadcasting personal data. By sharing personal information with others, people receive benefits such as affective ties to a community, support, and social status. Openness thus requires the *social digitization* of previously ephemeral material. Lifestreaming affects the real-world social life of participants as the emergent layer of social information can lead to conflict and drama. While people idealize the “open,” in practice people carefully choose what to conceal or reveal, as they are always cognizant of the impact of performing to a *networked audience*. As a result, some participants feel anxious and overwhelmed. To understand these processes, I think of them as *publicizing the self to a networked audience*. Social status and visibility serve as powerful motivators, and the interconnectedness of lifestreamers result in both benefits and drawbacks. The ideals of openness ignore the dangers of transparency and serve the business models of Web 2.0 software, which profit from user-disclosed information.

I conclude the dissertation by summarizing the major research contributions of this work, discussing the online/offline split and how I tackled it during fieldwork, and suggesting some future directions for research.

## Conclusion

I briefly considered titling this dissertation after the web slang term “NSFW,” which warns web surfers that a link contains something inappropriate for the workplace, such as nudity, crude language, or violence. While *this* project is quite safe for work, NSFW reflects how business norms affect Web 2.0 workers’ self-presentation strategies. Online self-presentation must quite literally be “safe for work” to accrue status and benefit its creator. Whether this entails promoting one’s image as a company would promote a brand or celebrity, or adhering to a single, verifiable identity so that status can persist across sites, people adhere to online norms that increase status. In the technology scene, online status-seeking is immensely important because it has tangible impacts on face-to-face communication. High online status opens doors, and the lines between cultural, social, and financial capital are blurred. But what is high status in social media typically benefits technology companies and sustains neoliberal discourse. A verifiable identity makes it possible to leverage status across websites, but it also makes it simple to track people as they move around the web. A strong self-brand is a self-regulating mechanism that functions as a response to economic uncertainties. And while the social information created and shared through social media strengthens social ties, it does so in a limited way. “Authenticity” and “being yourself” become self-marketing strategies that encourage instrumental emotional labor. Social media furthers an individualistic, competitive notion of

identity that encourages individual status-seeking over collective action or openness.

I do not subscribe to a concept of technological determinism in which social media *causes* people to see and behave some way. Instead, I am interested in what acts are rewarded, and what is viewed as normal, among a particular group of users. Not everyone uses social media in the ways that I describe in this dissertation. Perhaps only a small percentage of people do. Groups of people interpret and use technologies according to their own traditions and values. But the San Francisco tech scene is doubly significant, as it both produces social media and influences how others view it. I chose to conduct fieldwork in the Web 2.0 community in San Francisco not only because of its members' high rates of social media use, but because the social norms of the tech scene are, in many ways, the social context of Web 2.0. Many of the loudest voices in public technology discourse belong to this group: they appear on television and radio to discuss new technology, meet at South by Southwest Interactive and FooCamp, write op-eds and bestselling non-fiction books, and read each other's blogs. Tech companies write press releases and stream press conferences promoting their creations as revolutionary and ground-breaking. The specificity of this social context to Web 2.0 is not often acknowledged, and the whirlwind of hype, both positive and negative, comes from the people most acquainted with these technologies, with the most to gain from their use. It is also the people who *create* Web 2.0 technologies who share these norms and values. While social media is

used in a dizzying variety of ways world-wide, many of the presumptions about use and users follow from Silicon Valley and San Francisco culture. In this dissertation, I try to shed some light on these taken-for-granted assumptions. Understanding the presumptions and discursive notions of self, other, friendships, and status promoted within the technology scene helps us to uncover some larger notions embedded in social media applications themselves; but this does *not* imply that users will receive or act upon these notions in the same way that the technology scene does.

Who are the leaders in this culture? They are the same people that technology discourse has celebrated for fifty years: young, white, rich, men. The communicative infrastructure of the Valley rewards quantifiable metrics, like venture capital raised, number of Twitter followers, company valuation, employee number, and stock options. While the technology scene couches this in arguments about “meritocracy” that are identical to those used by Web 2.0 celebrants, in reality, those deemed successful at social media generally fit a certain mold. Those who don’t, like Leah Culver, the young entrepreneur constantly belittled by gossip blog Valleywag, are criticized for falling outside the box. The techniques that are required to achieve status in the tech scene do not celebrate, for instance, outspoken women, discussion of race in technology, or openly gay entrepreneurs. An amassing of attention is excellent, but to get attention, it is best to fit a narrow set of social norms.

When I started this project in July 2007, the economy was vastly different than in 2010. Like the dot-com boom before it, Web 2.0 was hyped as a revolutionary schism with the past which would transform the world for the better. Those claims are heard less frequently nowadays. People who spoke lovingly of a new age of participation and equality facilitated by Web 2.0 are now contributing to nuanced critiques of social software that involve visual culture analysis, the commercial contexts of user interaction, and larger cultural impacts (Silver and Massanari 2006; Lovink 2008; Nakamura 2008; Zimmer 2008; Hindman 2009). This project was conceived as a response to a celebratory rhetoric which has significantly diminished.

However, that does not mean that the critique of Web 2.0 in this dissertation is irrelevant. The techniques that people use to gain status in the scene—lifestreaming, self-branding, and micro-celebrity—are in many ways prescient. They reflect a fragmented economy that celebrates individualism as it eliminates job security, a popular culture based on celebrity, publicity, and attention, and an incredible rise in the number of social technologies available to the average American. Social media represents a cultural shift in the broadcasting and sharing of personal information, one with long-term implications on social interactions, privacy, social status and social hierarchy.

## CHAPTER II

### A CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE TECHNOLOGY AND IDEOLOGY OF SOCIAL MEDIA

#### Introduction

In the middle of the 2000s, social media, or “Web 2.0,” entered the public consciousness seemingly from nowhere. Publisher Tim O’Reilly coined the term “Web 2.0” in 2004 to refer to companies who survived the dot-com boom by embracing “the web as platform,” “collective intelligence,” data openness, iterative software development, rich user experience, and “software as a service” (O’Reilly 2005). At the time, O’Reilly was promoting his company’s Web 2.0 conference, which cost \$2800 to attend, featured sessions like “The Architecture of Participation” and “So, Is This a Bubble Yet?” and boasted A-list tech speakers like *Boing Boing* blogger Cory Doctorow, Creative Commons founder Larry Lessig, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, entrepreneur Mark Cuban and tech blogger Om Malik. By collapsing such disparate phenomena as free/open source software, remix culture, and social network sites into one umbrella term, O’Reilly obscured important differences of opinion, but the epithet “Web 2.0” stuck. By 2006, the technology industry was bubbling over with enthusiasm for social network site success stories, YouTube celebrities, user-created content, and exciting young

entrepreneurs like Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook and Kevin Rose of Digg. Fox bought MySpace for \$770 million and Google bought YouTube for \$1.65 billion as *Time* magazine named “You” its Person of the Year (Grossman 2006). In intellectual circles, Lawrence Lessig (2004), Henry Jenkins (2006), and Yochai Benkler (2006) influenced the way people thought of technology, “free culture,” “participatory culture,” and the “networked information economy.” In business, “The Long Tail,” a theory formulated by Chris Anderson, editor-in-chief of *Wired* magazine, postulated that the internet and fragmented mainstream culture created infinite niche audiences for cultural products (2006), while *The Wisdom of Crowds* put forth the idea that collective intelligence could surpass individual smarts (Surowiecki 2005). Blogs like TechCrunch, BoingBoing and Mashable fueled readers with a steady diet of stories and gossip about the possibilities of these new, liberating technologies.

The Web 2.0 ideology promised freedom from “Big Media” and the subsequent democratization of celebrity and entertainment, new forms of activism, and the potential of open, transparent information of all kinds, collectively organized by individuals. It celebrated the adoption of social technologies as a precursor to a better, freer society, and framed the collection and sharing of information as the bedrock of this ideological revolution. Any protocol or institution that prevented people from accessing information and using cultural products as malleable raw materials for creativity, like the Recording Industry Association of America, the Sonny Bono Copyright Extension Act, or Digital

Rights Management, became an obstacle to overcome, through organized, collective action if necessary. These developments seemed doubly exciting because popular wisdom had all but written off the web after the 2001 dot-com crash, concluding that people didn't pay for online content, Amazon was the victor in the e-commerce wars and that the money, the funding, and the attention had left the internet, possibly for good. Web 2.0 shone a spotlight back on the young entrepreneurs, geeks, content creators and "thought leaders" of the Bay Area, brought technologically determinist utopianism back to the frontlines, and, in the process, created new investments, high company valuations, and fortunes.

Like many emerging forms of media, Web 2.0 is often portrayed as a new age, rupture, or paradigm shift (Gitelman 2006), although it is simply the latest iteration of computer-mediated communication technologies (CMC) invented in the 1960s, such as e-mail, Internet Relay Chat (IRC) and dial-up networks like America OnLine. Popular discourse framed these technologies many different ways over the years. The internet, for instance, has been described as a universal library, an "information super-highway," interactive television, a threat to children, the catalyst for an economic revolution, the cause of "post-human" subjectivity, and a publishing platform. That the most recent instantiation of CMC is considered democratic, participatory, and a challenge to institutional structures is due to an intertwined history and geography of the Northern California landscape from which it emerged. In this chapter, I examine the emergence of the San Francisco technology scene, and how social media technologies became



“Web 2.0” and promised institutional rupture. I argue that “Web 2.0” is a technologically determinist discourse that attributes transformative social change and economic success to social media. This chapter’s historical exploration contextualizes the development and popularization of social media in order to understand *why* it has been framed this way.

Northern California is an economic center with a long history of generating immense wealth from technologies, including transistors and micro-electronics, video games and dot-com companies. The Bay Area also has a strong countercultural presence, with prominent influences from punk rock, counter-globalization activism, Burning Man, techno-utopianism, and free/open source hacker culture. Fred Turner, among others, has documented the close ties between 1960s counter-culture like the New Communalist movement and early computer pioneers (Markoff 2005; Turner 2005; Turner 2006). This history has engendered a discourse popularly known as “The Californian Ideology,” the belief that increased adoption of computer technologies brings positive social consequences, that entrepreneurial technology culture is meritocratic, and that an unfettered free market is the best way to ensure prosperity for all, which is widespread in Silicon Valley (Barbrook and Cameron 1996). But Web 2.0 discourse is not simply the latest iteration of the Californian Ideology. Web 2.0 discourse selectively draws from the anti-institutional rhetoric espoused by countercultural formations, maps them onto technology, and positions social media as a solution to institutional failure. These countercultural movements are not discrete, but overlapping and

simultaneous. For example, anti-corporate activists and zinesters both argue that media consolidation has homogenized mass media, creating toothless journalism that does not check corporate or government power. In Web 2.0 discourse, blogs and Twitter facilitate “citizen journalism,” a bottom-up form of media which will compensate for these shortcomings. Thus, Web 2.0 situates itself in allegiance with the institutional critique of mainstream media provided by the counterculture, but positions social technology as the solution (see Figure 2). By doing so, the term whitewashes important differences within these formations, such as the debate over proprietary versus open-source software.

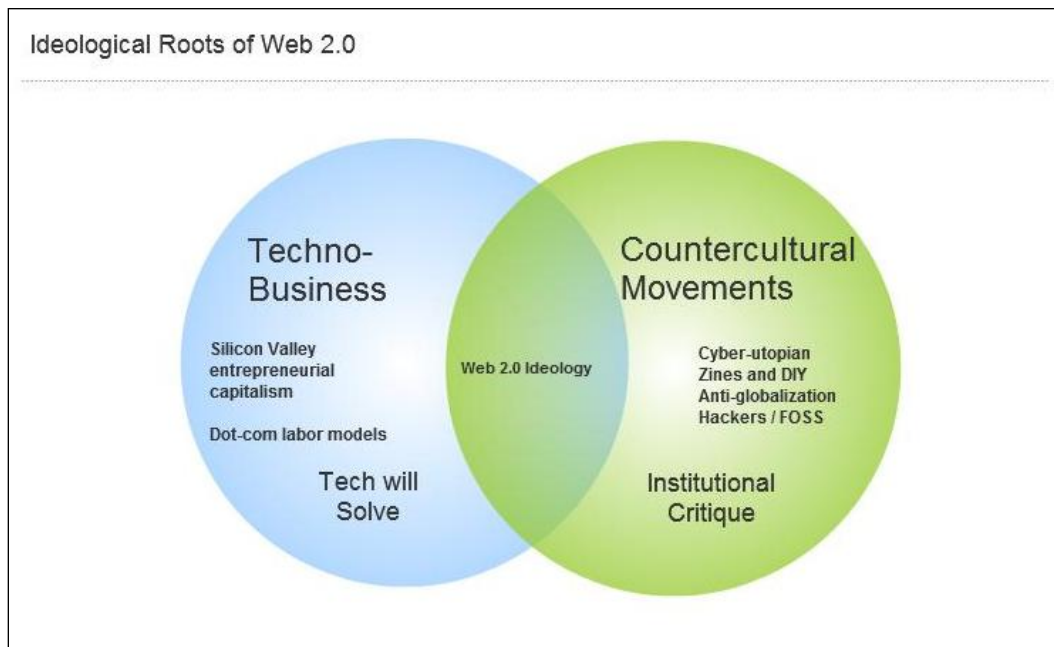


Figure 2: Ideological Roots of Web 2.0

Web 2.0 ideology therefore contains both shifts from and continuities with Silicon Valley history. Google, for example, which owns YouTube, Blogger, and

various other Web 2.0 products, is enormously wealthy and profitable while paying lip service to collaboration, creativity, and social responsibility, inspired equally by dot-com and Burning Man culture (Turner 2009). Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg claims the site can be used for radical protest and anti-government activism, but it also mines user data for profit and has come under strict scrutiny for its privacy policies (McCarthy 2008). While most of the activist countercultures I discuss in this chapter reject structural capitalism, Web 2.0 discourse assigns views capitalism, particularly venture-backed startups, as an agent of political change.

This chapter frames Web 2.0 as a discourse, or a way of thinking about technology in the world. To unravel the assumptions within it, I examine the technology, ideology, and community of Web 2.0. In the first third of this chapter, I trace the origins of contemporary social media to pre-web CMC like IRC, Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs),<sup>13</sup> Usenet, bulletin board systems (BBS) and dial-in networks like Prodigy, AOL and CompuServe. I identify two technical developments which facilitated social media adoption: the popularization of broadband internet access and Ajax, which allowed developers to build web-based applications as interactive as those designed for desktop computers. In the second part, I look at four counter-cultural traditions—hacker culture, zines, anti-corporate activism, and techno-utopianism—and identify their contributions to Web 2.0 ideology. I relate the history of San Francisco techno-capitalism, specifically the dot-com boom and the cyber-libertarian Californian Ideology, and

its contribution to Web 2.0's form of creative capitalism, emphasis on personal fulfillment through work, and valorization of startups. In the third section, I examine the emergence of the Web 2.0 scene, a community of technology workers in San Francisco. A collection of individuals, predominantly white male developers committed both to the core Web 2.0 principles of openness and transparency and entrepreneurial, venture-backed startups, congregated at a series of events in the mid-2000s. These included the Webzine conferences, the SuperHappyDevHouse "hackathon", Austin's South by Southwest Interactive conference, and BarCamp, an "unconference." Meandering through these origin stories shows that framing social media as revolutionary was far from inevitable; rather, this is a specific, ideological discourse with a history. "Web 2.0" applications are *not* deterministically transformative, but a continuation of pre-existing cultural forces.

### Part One: The Technology of Web 2.0

Social media and Web 2.0 are more-or-less equivalent buzzwords that refer to user-generated content published online through channels that combine collaboration and participation, such as video, audio, blogs, and so forth. Today, both terms are used expansively to indicate any website or application that facilitates interaction between people, data-sharing, open exchange of information, and user-contributed content, such as social network sites, mobile applications, or instant messaging services. Theorists often discursively construct

Web 2.0 in opposition to media that disallow this type of collaboration and connection, like traditional ecommerce sites, copy-protected content, and print newspapers and magazines. Popular Web 2.0 sites include microblogging applications like Twitter; news aggregators like Digg; photo sharing sites like Flickr and Photobucket; social network sites like MySpace, Facebook and LinkedIn; video-sharing sites like YouTube and Vimeo; blogging platforms like Tumblr, Blogger and WordPress; mobile software like Foursquare and Gowalla; user-contributed content sites like Wikipedia and DeviantArt; peer production marketplaces like Etsy or CafePress; and a host of forums, peer-to-peer sites, and other social software that facilitates interpersonal communication. Because both social media and Web 2.0 are jargon, they are not terms that have commonly understood requirements for inclusion and are often applied to technologies that existed in the dot-com era, like user-written reviews.

Yochai Benkler argues that social media facilitate peer production, which marks a shift from a model of industrial information economy in which content was centrally produced and distributed by commercial entities (television stations, movie studios, radio stations, newspapers) to one in which individuals and groups of citizens create, annotate, and distribute media, the “networked information economy” (2006). This shift brings about actual changes in interaction, but the underpinnings remain the same. As Gitelman argues, “media are more properly the results of social and economic forces, so that any technological logic they possess is only *apparently* intrinsic” (italics mine) (2006, 10). Claims of Web

2.0's revolutionary nature are influenced by a myriad of different subcultures and historical developments that portray institutions as *undemocratic* and doomed to fail, while positioning internet technologies as solutions to structural social problems. This history leaves certain capitalist structures unquestioned, while relegating others to the heap of the past. Capitalism as a system, the technology industry, and free market competition are accepted, while intellectual property, copyright, media industries and government are painted as hopeless relics. Despite these ideological roots, the collapsing of contradictory political philosophies into "Web 2.0" has dampened much of this critique. Most Web 2.0 companies embrace intellectual property—Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are all proprietary platforms.

Similarly, the communication technology popularized by social media did not originate in a flash of blue light. It was developed gradually in an ongoing process. Social media combines elements from earlier forms of computer-mediated communication, including tools developed in military, corporate, and hobbyist circles.

### Historical Context

Social media gradually developed over forty years, beginning with invention of the internet, originally a military technology named ARPANET. Although Arpanet was created by the US Department of Defense (DOD) in 1969 to share technical papers and scientific data, the instantaneous, non-geographically bound communication medium quickly lent itself to non-

academic, non-governmental use. Despite the DOD's strict stipulation that these networks be used only for research or government-related purposes, the ARPA administrators turned a blind eye to the development of discussion groups and e-mail<sup>14</sup> (Segaller 1998; Griffiths 2002). By 1973, 75 percent of the traffic on what was now known as Darpanet<sup>15</sup> consisted of e-mail, mostly between academics and researchers (Sheldon 2001). The two most popular discussion groups, or "listservs," were devoted to science fiction and, interestingly, e-mail itself. Griffiths writes that the latter, known as "human-nets,"

... was devoted to the social implications of the e-mail medium itself, and it helps define the moment when the e-mail users began to realize the full implications of the communication tool they were using (2002, 3).

Darpanet quickly extended beyond its intended use and became a source of both entertainment and meta-textual discussions about technology, both characteristics of the internet ever since.

At the same time, computers became more accessible. While the computer of the 1950s and 1960s was a room-size behemoth, the microcomputer hobbyist movement and "personal computer revolution" of the late 1970s and early 1980s brought desktop PCs ("single-user" computers) into the homes of thousands of average middle-class Americans (Abbate 2000, 186-187). In the early 1980s, arcade and console-based video games enjoyed a huge rise in popularity (Kent 2001). While home systems like the Atari, the Apple IIe, and the Commodore Pet were primarily intended for non-networked applications like programming, gaming and word processing, modems made it possible to log into a remote

system via a phone line. Independently run dial-up networks, like UNIX-based computer conferencing, bulletin board systems devoted to hacking and gaming, and social spaces like the Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link (the WELL) proliferated across the US (Abbate 2000; Naughton 2000, 186-9; Hafner 2001; Sternberg 2008). Eventually, proprietary commercial services like America Online, Prodigy, and CompuServe connected users via modem to walled computer networks, where people could shop, post on message boards, play games and chat with other users. Although these networks did not connect with the internet until the 1990s (each network was closed, so users could only communicate with people using the same system), they familiarized users with applications like e-mail, newsgroups, and chat (Abbate 2000, 203-4). By the time the first web browser launched, these early services had set groundwork for a fairly significant portion of the population to be comfortable with online communication, creating spaces where people with common interests could meet, share information and form social networks that often spilled over into real-world interactions.

Simultaneously, the Darpanet incorporated other elements of social computing besides e-mail, including Usenet, MUDs, and IRC. Two Duke University post-graduate students invented Usenet, a network of topical discussion forums, in 1981 as a substitute for Arpanet, which they could not access (Abbate 2000, 201-2; Griffiths 2002; Pfaffenberger 2003). Today, Usenet consists of hundreds of thousands of public discussion forums, organized hierarchically by topic. Rec.arts.tv.soaps, for instance, is reserved for discussions



of soap operas. Usenet forums, or “newsgroups,” are asynchronous and persistent; readers can reply to messages (“posts” or “articles”) posted days or weeks before, which are more like e-mails or essays than the quick bursts of conversation in chat rooms or virtual worlds (Hauben & Hauben 1997). Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle wrote the first MUD program in 1980 while PhD students at the University of Essex (Wikipedia contributors 2010a). A MUD, or Multi-User Dungeon, is a textual chat world that allows many players to connect at once for gaming or socializing. MUDs allow users to create characters, virtual spaces, and objects within a house, world, or universe-like environment that is used as a backdrop for real-time, synchronous chat. In 1988, Internet Relay Chat, a protocol for casual online socializing, was invented by a Finnish PhD student named Jarkko Oikarinen (Sternberg 2008). Users connect to an IRC server, like freenode.net or undernet.org, pick a nickname or “nick,” and join channels, or rooms. There are thousands of channels on most IRC servers, covering an enormous variety of topics; channels can be created by any user, and cease to exist when all users leave. Channels range from general chat like #hottub or #20somethings to more specific interests like #gaymuscle or #latinmusic;<sup>16</sup> some are transient, while others are well-established communities, with regular users, customs, and slang (Liu 1999). Within channels, communication is synchronous and rapid, with many people “talking” at once; users can also create private, one-to-one chats with other users.

These textual internet technologies were different from Web 2.0. They were unimodal, non-commercial, their code was made widely available for replication or alteration, and they typically ran on academic networks. But like today's social media, millions of users used these applications to talk, meet, and create "virtual" communities. Although IRC, Usenet and MUDs had an early adopter user base that differs from today's internet population; were built within non-profit, academic contexts; and involved purely textual environments, in many ways, current social media technologies build upon patterns established in these early forms of social software.

In 1993 NCSA released the first web browser, Mosaic, which made it possible for anyone to access the World Wide Web, popularizing the internet as we think of it today. The internet's rapid growth during the 1990s can be attributed to two factors: the development of usable browser technology, combined with increased opportunities to access the internet. First, before Mosaic, most internet applications were solely textual and required some degree of familiarity with fairly sophisticated technology. E-mail, for example, was primarily accessed through UNIX or VAX/VMS systems and required users to learn unintuitive commands. Mosaic, on the other hand, was simple to use, free to download and greatly decreased the average person's barrier to entry (Segaller 1998, 295-6). Second, the NSF took over the Darpanet in 1984 and eventually rescinded the DOD's ban on commercial internet use. This opened the door for thousands of commercial ISPs to provide dial-up connections, many of them

cheaper than the proprietary AOL and CompuServe networks (Segaller 1998, 297; Abbate 2000, 197-2000). As home use increased, schools and workplaces began to offer internet connectivity as a matter of course. As a result, the number of internet users increased exponentially during every year of the late 1990s (Coffman and Odlyzko 2001). In 1997, which marked the beginning of the dot-com boom, the number of websites grew from 640,000 in January to 1.7 million in December. By the end of 1998, there were more than 300 million websites (Sheldon 2001).

The early Web was markedly non-commercial. Although Amazon was founded in 1993 and eBay and Craigslist in 1994, most sites in the early 1990s were personal homepages, the precursors to both blogs and social network sites. Personal homepages and “vanity domains” were individually-created, independently run personal websites that showcased individuals’ thoughts, pictures, interests, portfolios, resumes, and so forth (Papacharissi 2002; Schau and Gilly 2003). Webcams began operating in 1991, and in 1996, the first camgirl, JenniCam, started broadcasting a constant internet feed, foreshadowing video-blogging and lifecasting (Senft 2008). Both LiveJournal and Blogger launched in 1999, popularizing online journals and weblogs.

These user-created content sites were clear precursors to Web 2.0 applications, but had little impact on the dot-com boom discourse of 1997-2001. Most of the celebrated dot-com companies concentrated on e-commerce, selling things over the internet, like Amazon.com, eBay, and Drugstore.com. Another

type of dot-com company hired copywriters and designers to create e-zines, web magazines and online newspapers like Slate and Suck. Although “New Economy” companies parroted the mantra “content is king,” this content was professionally-created rather than contributed by users. While the dot-com boom normalized the internet as a lucrative business platform, it did not, for the most part, monetize computer-mediated communication. There were, of course, exceptions.

Epinions.com relied on user reviews. The Internet Movie Database began as a project on the Usenet group rec.arts.movies, and was populated with user contributions. Geocities provided free hosting for personal homepages in exchange for banner ads, while ChickClick was an advertising network for slick, feminist-oriented content created by women. But most user-created content, like personal homepages and webcams, was largely non-commercial. This distinguishes dot-com companies, or version “1.0” of the popular internet, from Web 2.0. Terry Flew explains the shift from 1.0 to 2.0:

[A] move from personal websites to blogs and blog site aggregation, from publishing to participation, from web content as the outcome of large up-front investment to an ongoing and interactive process, and from content management systems to links based on tagging (folksonomy) (Flew 2005).

Although the early internet *primarily* consisted of “user-created content,” the term in its current usage did not exist in the late 1990s. The first social network site, SixDegrees, was founded in 1997, but it was not until Friendster launched in 2002 that social network sites became widely popular. Friendster was followed by MySpace (2003), LinkedIn (2003) and Facebook (2004). Web 2.0 exemplar

Delicious was founded in 2003, Flickr in 2004, YouTube in 2005, and Twitter in 2007. These branded applications, many owned by large media conglomerates,<sup>17</sup> represented the “new” wave of social media.

### Contemporary Technological Developments

Web 2.0 as an “era” is not demarcated based on a particular technological innovation, as some popular Web 2.0 sites were technically possible during the dot-com era (blogs, for example). But two technological developments made Web 2.0 possible: browser applications and broadband internet access.

When Tim O’Reilly talked about the “web as platform” in his Web 2.0 conferences, he was referring to the ability to run intricate applications within a web browser without using a Java applet or Flash animation. These applications are made possible by XMLHttpRequest, a JavaScript application programming interface included in web browsers beginning in 2002. Essentially, XMLHttpRequest lets developers build applications which retrieve information from a web server without reloading a web page. XMLHttpRequest is a key part of the Ajax group of technologies (Ajax is a portmanteau of “asynchronous JavaScript” and “XML”) which allow users to manipulate information within the browser, such as Google Maps, Meebo, or Facebook. Ajax makes it possible for developers to build web-based applications that rival desktop software for functionality. For example, before Ajax, web-based mail like Hotmail required a page refresh every time the user received, read, wrote, or sent a message, which

was slow and clunky in comparison to desktop clients like Outlook or Eudora. The integration of XMLHttpRequest into browsers made web applications a viable alternative to desktop software, popularizing “cloud computing” where user data is stored in centralized corporate servers rather than the desktop. Even sites that are not full-on web applications use Ajax to lighten server load or improve user experience (Wikipedia contributors 2010b).

A second development was the mainstreaming of broadband internet technologies in the United States. In 2002, 12 percent of Americans were using high speed internet access such as cable modems or DSL (Horrigan and Rainie 2002). By 2006, that number had jumped to 42 percent, and in 2009 63 percent of Americans had broadband internet at home (Horrigan 2006; Horrigan 2009). The common wisdom among technology pundits is that two technologies were the “killer apps” of broadband: peer-to-peer file sharing (p2p) and streaming video (Malik 2005; Karaganis 2009); both are extolled as exemplars of Web 2.0’s participatory, decentralized nature.

Today, by far the most traffic worldwide (in bytes) comes from peer-to-peer file sharing, which lets people easily copy and download digital files from each other (iPoque 2007). P2p was popularized by the mp3-sharing network Napster, which relied on a central database to share files, was declared illegal, and subsequently shut down in 2001. Many other popular p2p applications came to prominence in its wake, including Gnutella, eDonkey, SoulSeek, LimeWire, and Kazaa, many of which were similarly challenged in the courts. In 2001, Bram

Cohen invented the BitTorrent protocol. BitTorrent is decentralized and allows for the quick transfer of very large files—a 1.5 GB download of a high-definition DVD can take only an hour or so using Bittorrent and a high-speed internet connection—and quickly became the standard for file sharing (Andersson 2009). Because BitTorrent is a protocol and not a website, it is much harder to shut down, and although file-sharing copyrighted content remains illegal in the United States, BitTorrent is thriving.

Of course, all this free sharing of (primarily) copyrighted digital content did not go unnoticed. The legal battles between large media corporations, most notably the Recording Industry Association of America, and the developers of peer-to-peer software applications, individual users, and the operators of BitTorrent trackers, are well-documented (Vaidhyanathan 2003; Lessig 2004; Benkler 2006; Johns 2010). In his book *Piracy*, Adrian Johns documents the rise of the “intellectual property defense industry,” “a coherent, global, high-technology enterprise, standing alongside the better-known sectors of digital media and biotechnology” (2010, 498). This industry attempts to protect intellectual property of all kinds, from designer bags to pharmaceuticals and agriculture, using legislation, global policing, and surveillance (2010, 499). It has been extremely visible in its defense of media and software copyrights, and is absolutely *loathed* by digital advocates as a result. Vaidhyanathan writes:

If the music and film industries continue to tighten the reins on use and access, they will strangle the public domain and the information commons. This trend presents a much greater threat to American culture than just a chilling effect on scholarship.

Shrinking the information and cultural commons starves the public sphere of elements of discourse, the raw material for decision-making, creativity, and humor (2003, 248).

Larry Lessig writes, “the war to rid the world of Internet “pirates” will also rid our culture of values that have been integral to our [American] tradition from the start” (2004, 10).

These assertions and others like them are an integral part of Web 2.0 discourse. They position the internet as the bearer of traditional American values like creativity and democracy, and intellectual property as an outdated remnant of the “industrial information economy” wielded by “Big Media” to clumsily defend their business models. As a result, technologists of all stripes have become well-versed in the intricacies of copyright law. For instance, Biella Coleman argues that free/open source software projects function as “an informal law education, transforming technologists into informal legal scholars who are experts in the legal technicalities of F/OSS as well as proficient in the current workings of intellectual property law” (2009, 422). Similarly, there is a quasi-religious advocacy of p2p software as a literal instantiation of Web 2.0 principles, and therefore a tangible threat to repressive institutions. As Andersson writes, “file-sharing structures remain uniquely interactive and collaborative, considering that they are in many ways akin to the current ‘Web 2.0’ paradigm (a paradigm which stresses openness, interactivity and reliance on free, user-generated content)” (2009, 65).<sup>18</sup> By this measure, protecting file-sharing and other Web 2.0 technologies is necessary to protect the very basis of liberalism.



The other technological advancement that spurred broadband adoption was streaming video. Web browsers have supported animations and video since 1993, but streaming video was rare until broadband internet access and faster CPUs became standard. Online cams like the CoffeeCam (1991, online in 1993) and the FogCam (1994) showed still pictures, refreshed regularly: the CoffeeCam updated every three minutes (Elais 2004). Likewise, early “webcasting” networks like Pseudo.com, which featured stations with original programming called “88 Hiphop,” “Cherrybomb” and “SpaceWatch,” used RealPlayer to stream video. But these videos were so low-resolution that they broadcasted individual frames from cameras rather than continuous streaming video (Platt 2000). Flash animation was the medium of choice for early memes like “All Your Base Are Belong to Us” (2000) and web series *The Goddamn George Liquor Program* (1997) and *Homestar Runner* (2000-present). As broadband adoption increased, sites like NewGrounds (1995) and CollegeHumor (1999) collected viral clips such as “Star Wars Kid” (2002) and “Numa Numa” (2004) and became massively popular. During the 2004 elections, the elaborate Flash cartoon “JibJab” became a sensation; that same year, the first video blog, Rocketboom, launched (Baron 2010). However, online video was still primarily something people watched, rather than something people created.

This changed once YouTube was founded in October 2005 by three former PayPal employees, Steve Chen, Chad Hurley, and Jawed Karim (Time 2006) and acquired in October 2006 by Google, who paid \$1.65 billion for the site

(Chmielewski and Gaither 2006). YouTube let users easily upload and share videos, which could be embedded and watched from blogs, social network sites, and other web pages. According to YouTube, in 2006 the site served one hundred million videos and sixty-five thousand uploads per day and twenty million unique users every month (Google Inc. 2006).<sup>19</sup> The Nielsen Company, which tracks internet statistics, noted that YouTube's traffic increased 297 percent between January and June of 2006, with an average visit of 28 minutes (NetRatings, Inc. 2006). The site's popularity was generally attributed to its ease of use; before YouTube, uploading and serving streaming video required technical knowledge or expensive software, and viewing video online often did not work (Gomes 2006). Just as automated blogging tools like WordPress and Blogger made it possible to publish content online without HTML knowledge, YouTube made it simple to create and share streaming video. YouTube quickly became a central repository for viral clips, pirated media, old television shows, user-created content, video blogs, music videos, and animations. Mainstream media portrayed YouTube as part of a revolution that would liberate people from the bland entertainment products pushed by "the big five" consolidated media companies, create its own celebrities, and allow every person to become their own broadcaster. (Despite these claims to media independence, the first major YouTube "hit" was "Lazy Sunday," a digital short produced by *Saturday Night Live*.) *The New York Times* quoted Clay Shirky describing YouTube as "a new technology with new expectations, including interactivity and egalitarianism" (Leland 2006, 3).

*Newsweek* wrote “It’s the dawn of the democratization of the TV and film business—even unknown personalities are being propelled by the enthusiasm of their fans into pop-culture prominence, sometimes without even traditional intermediaries like talent agents or film festivals” (Stone 2006, 38). All of this was made technically possible due to both increased broadband adoption and the plummeting cost of data storage.

It was not inevitable that these technical developments would be framed within an ethos and aesthetic of liberatory, idealistic participatory technology. YouTube, for example, is owned by Google, one of the biggest media companies on the planet, and its power was tempered somewhat by deals brokered with various media companies, which pulled copyrighted content and forbade embedding of certain videos (Seidenberg 2009). (Like a hydra, this content usually pops up elsewhere; sites like Surfthechannel.com consolidate clips of television shows and movies posted unlabeled and anonymously on YouTube.) Likewise, in 2008, NBC launched Hulu.com, a United States-only, legal, advertising-supported alternative to YouTube that lets people watch high-definition copyrighted television and movie content; in 2009, it became the second-biggest video site on the web, but still only streamed 308 million videos per month compared to YouTube’s 5.2 *billion* (MacMillan 2009).<sup>20</sup> In order to understand this confluence of corporate capitalism and revolutionary ideology, we must analyze cultural forces as well as technology.

## Part Two: The Ideology of Web 2.0

Web 2.0 is more accurately described as a set of applications and general philosophy of information and technology than a technical development. This philosophy espouses transparency, openness, creativity, participation, and freedom. It holds that if you allow people to collaborate and create their own content—writing, news reporting, entertainment, music, videos—the grassroots results will be superior to those produced by mainstream media or any centralized organization: more diverse and less subject to interference from corporate interests. Social media is said to facilitate activism, direct interaction with corporations and governments, and creative forms of protest. The discourse of Web 2.0 celebrates individual use of the raw material of popular culture for self-expression, and frowns upon attempts by large corporations or media conglomerates to rein in this creativity. The political arm of Web 2.0, such as it is, is focused on net neutrality, copyright reform, peer-to-peer advocacy, and government reform—Larry Lessig, the founder of Creative Commons and the Free Culture movement, launched “Change Congress,” a campaign against government corruption and the influence of special interests in the Senate, with Howard Dean’s former campaign manager, Joe Trippi (Change Congress 2009). Cory Doctorow, the science-fiction writer and co-author of popular blog *Boing Boing*, is a hard-core copyright activist who widens his scope to include proprietary technologies of all kinds, whether Monsanto’s genetically-engineered seeds that last only a season or printer cartridges that automatically stop working

after a certain period of time (Robinson 2008). These beliefs, which draw heavily from hacker and free/open source software development, are seemingly antithetical to the libertarian, free-market ethos of entrepreneurial capitalism that also characterizes Web 2.0.

To understand Web 2.0 culture, it is necessary to look beyond the typical Silicon Valley celebration of capitalism and technology. Social media ideology is not just another rotation of “the Californian Ideology” (Barbrook and Cameron 1996), because it positions technology as a social, political, and economic solution to institutional failure that is simultaneously *profitable*. The problems that social media ostensibly solves are drawn from myriad nodes of influence. In this chapter I identify four of them: hacker culture, grassroots media activism, punk rock/zine “Do It Yourself” (DIY) aesthetic, and the “cyberdelic” rave culture of pre-dot-com San Francisco. These four nodes critiqued institutional elements of mainstream 1990s and 2000s culture. Free/open source software provided a political and economic critique of proprietary software and, by proxy, intellectual property. Grassroots media activists argued that mainstream journalism had failed to provide a check on government or corporate power. Punk rock and zine culture encouraged people to create alternatives to homogenized corporate entertainment. The techno-utopian rave culture provided communitarian alternatives to mainstream ways of life.

Web 2.0 discourse positioned social technology as a way to solve these failures. This argument maintained that social media would provide a superior

alternative to the failures of journalism, government and media by encouraging institutional transparency, openness, and participation and making it possible for people to create their own superior alternatives. Activists claimed that the intrinsic decentralization of the internet would break down information asymmetry and give individual citizens equal access to broadcast and distribution technologies, ending monopolistic media practices. Many of the social media technologies lauded by early proponents were themselves open and designed to be participatory (wikis, for example), encouraging rhizomatic models of cooperation and coordination rather than top-down hierarchies.

Many of the countercultural philosophies examined in this chapter emphasized the structural deficits of corporate capitalism, calling for “dropping out” and creating alternatives outside the mainstream. Rather than *rejecting* capitalism, however, Web 2.0 ideology fully embraced it. The excitement around Web 2.0 companies positioned the entrepreneur as the mythic hero of Web 2.0 and venture-backed startups as the epitome of high-status. While it is possible to see startups as an implicit critique of corporate software production, this is not generally how they were viewed by the Web 2.0 scene. Startups were certainly *cooler* than large companies, but Google and Yahoo! were not seen as representations of corporate failure but merely “less cool” than startups.<sup>21</sup> The hardcore anti-capitalist ethos of hacker culture and punk rock was overshadowed by a neoliberal ethic of Silicon Valley in which the free market became the purveyor of choice and creativity. For instance, while drawing from free/open

source ideology, Web 2.0 companies built and promoted proprietary formats. Social media allowed capitalism to be an agent of social change without challenging the mainstream's structural inequalities. Web 2.0 selectively draws from elements of San Francisco counter-cultures (hippies, ravers, Burning Man, the all-ages 924 Gilman Street punk club in Berkeley, the punk zine *Maximumrocknroll*) while embracing Silicon Valley's technologically-fueled economic success.

### Hackers

On the one hand information wants to be expensive, because it's so valuable. The right information in the right place just changes your life. On the other hand, information wants to be free, because the cost of getting it out is getting lower and lower all the time. So you have these two fighting against each other (Stewart Brand 1984 in Clarke 2001).

The hacker ethic of information sharing and “do it yourself” is at the core of social media ideology, deeply woven into the free and open-source movement, and translated to non-software milieus through the work of Larry Lessig and Yochai Benkler. The popular image of the hacker is either an anti-social young man hunched over a laptop, wreaking malicious and illegal havoc,<sup>22</sup> or a curious, talented technological aficionado (Nissenbaum 2004a; Coleman and Golub 2008). This dichotomy of “black hat” versus “white hat” hackers belies that in actuality, hacking is a philosophy and a diverse, varied global subculture of programming enthusiasts devoted to openness and transparency (Levy 1984; Coleman and Golub 2008). A “hack” is a clever and elegant solution to a complicated problem,

originally technical, but now applicable to other aspects of life, popularizing terms like lifehacking (solving everyday problems to increase productivity), brainhacking and so forth (Raymond 2003; Wikipedia contributors 2010d). Although hackers are often maligned and grouped with spammers, phishers, “cyber-terrorists” or malware distributors, the liberal ideals embodied in the hacker ethic remain much in evidence in technologically mediated cultures, and are intimately tied to the philosophy and culture of social media and its affiliated projects (Coleman and Golub 2008; Coleman 2009).

Hacking has a long and (arguably) noble history, as many computer pioneers come from the hacking community (Thomas 2002).<sup>23</sup> While the first groups of hackers inhabited the hallowed halls of MIT, by the early 1970s, the center of hacking culture had moved to the Stanford Artificial Intelligence Lab, the Stanford Research Institute, Xerox PARC and the burgeoning microcomputer DIY culture in Silicon Valley (Levy 1984, 140; Markoff 2005). The Northern California homebrew computer culture which was the birthplace of Apple Computing was comprised of hobbyists, hippies influenced by the anti-war movement, phone phreakers, engineers and programmers, and drew from “technologically politicized” community projects like the Berkeley People’s Computer Club. The Homebrew Computer Club was organized around principles of information sharing, exploration, decentralization, and meritocracy (Levy 1984, 218). This early microcomputer community significantly impacted the



complex sociotechnical geography of the Bay Area, and profoundly influenced the development of software as an industry.

The political philosophy of many hackers is often summarized as “information wants to be free,” emphasizing openness and transparency. In other words, everyone should be able to understand how things work, and everyone should be able to tinker with technologies, political systems, the workings of city governments, and so forth (Thomas 2002; Coleman 2009). Steven Levy summarizes the Hacker Ethic as:

A common philosophy that seemed tied to the elegantly flowing logic of the computer itself. It was a philosophy of sharing, openness, decentralization, and getting your hands on machines at any cost—to improve the machines and to improve the world. This Hacker Ethic is their gift to us: something with value even to those of us with no interest at all in computers (1984, 7).

Levy defines three phases of hackers: MIT mainframe hackers, the microcomputer DIY movement, and the video game programmers of the early 1980s. For the first two groups, the Hacker Ethic allowed everyone to profit. Freely circulating information and collaborating on iterative hardware and software improvements were valuable to all when there was no possibility of profiting from anything proprietary (Turner 2006).

For example, the first microcomputer available for home use, the Altair 8800, appeared on the cover of *Popular Mechanics* in 1975. Unlike buying a computer today, an Altair came as a bundle of circuit boards and transistors which had to be soldered together by hand. The company manufacturing the hardware, MITS, could barely keep up with the demand and worked directly with hardware

hackers to improve the product, giving out data sheets on the chips, encouraging hobbyists to write code for the machine and build devices like i/o boards and joysticks (Levy 1984). In 1976, two college students surmised that MITS would need some sort of operating system; they called the company and proposed writing a version of BASIC for the Altair. BASIC is a programming language, appropriate for a computer like the Altair without a lot of storage space. One of the students hacked a version of BASIC together in 8 weeks; the other flew to Albuquerque to pitch it to MITS, who bought it. (The hacker was Bill Gates and the pitcher Paul Allen, who both promptly quit school to found Microsoft.) Gates and Allen soon realized that lots of homebrew hobbyists were using their version of BASIC without paying for it. Gates wrote “an Open Letter to Hobbyists” which was printed in the Altair newsletter, the Homebrew Computer Club newsletter, and various other publications. It read, in part:

As the majority of hobbyists must be aware, most of you steal your software. Hardware must be paid for, but software is something to share. Who cares if the people who worked on it get paid?  
(Markoff 2005, 285)

The letter caused a commotion in the hobbyist community and an explicit conflict between the Hacker Ethic and the realities of proprietary software.

Several alternatives were raised: some members wrote their own versions of BASIC, one wrote what he considered a better version and sold it for five dollars, and another member, Jim Warren, founded a journal about “free and very inexpensive software” saying that “there is a viable alternative to the problems raised by Bill Gates... when software is free, or so inexpensive that it’s easier to

pay for it than duplicate it, then it won't be 'stolen.'" (Levy 1984, 232). But the lines between the collaborative Hacker Ethic and the proprietary, paid ownership model of software had been drawn. Levy's book chronicling the conflict inspired *Whole Earth Catalog* founder Stewart Brand to hold a hacker's conference in 1984, where one session focused exclusively on maintaining the hacker ethic in the face of proprietary software; the participants concluded that being a hacker was a set of personality traits, and that while open information access was an excellent ideal, it was ultimately "only an ideal" (Turner 2006, 137).

The ideals of the Hacker Ethic were transformed and codified in the free software movement, founded in 1983 by MIT student Richard Stallman (who had missed the golden age of MIT hacking and deeply regretted it). Stallman was (rightly) concerned with the prospect of large software companies, rather than hobbyists, dominating the computer industry. Most of Stallman's hacker friends at MIT had left to form software companies, and he was disgusted with monopolistic software practices, non-disclosure agreements, and locked-down source code, which he considered a betrayal of his principles (Levy 1984; Kelty 2008). Coleman and Golub write:

In 1984, [Stallman] founded the Free Software Foundation in order to further the values of reciprocity, pedagogy and scientific openness he had learned among the MIT hackers and to halt the intrusion of copyrights and patents in software. Stallman was a hacker, and so he *realized his liberal ideals in a technological idiom* and he linked his political goals to one of the most popular operating systems among the technical community, UNIX (*italics mine*) (2008, 261).

Stallman founded the GNU project (“Gnu is Not Unix”), a free, non-commercial operating system with shared source code available to anyone who wanted it (Kelty 2008, 191). GNU was a technological instantiation of Stallman’s commitment to “a liberal version of freedom that invoked the virtues of sharing and pedagogy” (Coleman and Golub 2008, 261). Along with the software, he authored the GNU manifesto outlining the “four freedoms” of software: “The right to use, distribute, modify and redistribute derivative versions” (Coleman and Hill 2004) This ideal became an integral part of free/open source philosophy, which notes that “it is the right of every user to use, modify, and distribute computer software for any purpose” (Coleman and Hill 2004). Freely available source code not only encouraged learning and tinkering, it actively worked against monopolistic, proprietary software practice. Thus, it was a technological solution to an institutional problem.

Stallman’s model of “free as in speech” (rather than “free as in beer”) software would ultimately be challenged by Eric Raymond and Bruce Peren’s model of “open-source” software; Raymond and Perens thought the latter sounded more professional and pro-business, causing various conflicts with Stallman and other members of the community (Jordan 2008, chap. 5). Today, free and open source software is a significant alternative to proprietary models of technological development. Jordan writes,

Free Software / Open Source software is freely available; freedom here means that the programmes often need not be paid for but more importantly and fundamentally that the code that constitutes the software can be taken and adjusted for free as long as any

changes made to the code are, in turn, made available to anyone else to use or adjust (2008, 43).

Beyond software, free and open source software (FOSS) is a culture and a community. Chris Kelty divides FOSS into five parts: “creating a movement, sharing source code, conceptualizing openness or open systems, writing copyright (and copyleft) licenses, and coordinating collaborations” (2008, 97). Jordan similarly identifies three aspects of FOSS as community, object, and property: the social organization by which software is made, the creation of software, and the theories of property that rise from FOSS (2008, 46). Today, Google, Microsoft, IBM and many other stolid software companies release some open source software, and independently-developed programs like Apache, Mozilla, Linux, Ubuntu and Songbird are used by hundreds of millions of users, a significant alternative to proprietary software.

Equally significantly, the philosophy of free/open-source has been extended to non-technical projects (Jordan 2008). Kelty writes that “Free software is about making things *public*” (italics mine) (2008, x). This liberal commitment to public-ness can be seen in a variety of efforts. User-contributed content leverages the community aspect of open source to solve complicated problems, culminating in projects like Wikipedia, the “free encyclopedia that “anyone can edit” (Wikipedia contributors 2010e). The OpenCourseWare initiative provides free, searchable online access to course materials from schools like MIT and Tufts (OpenCourseWare Consortium 2010). Similarly, the Open Access movement advocates that peer-reviewed academic articles be freely available to anyone, not

just people affiliated with institutions that hold expensive journal subscriptions (Budapest Open Access Initiative 2010).

Yochai Benkler chronicled such developments in his 2006 book *The Wealth of Networks*. Benkler claimed that new models of commons-based peer production pioneered by FOSS would lead to advancements in individual autonomy, democracy, freedom, and justice, unless they were threatened by pre-existing industrial actors—like Big Media—determined to continue exclusive rights-based models, like copyright. Benkler argued that the internet was allowing for a shift from an “industrial information economy” to a “networked information economy” that focused on non-market, individual, decentralized production using non-proprietary strategies (2006). Benkler’s work resonated with the Free Culture movement sparked by Larry Lessig, who explicitly refers to Stallman as the major influence for his beliefs in the introduction to *Free Culture* (2004). The free culture movement applies the ideals of the free software movement to all creative, cultural works, asserting that people should have the right to create “transformative works” (such as fan-fiction or mashups), comment on mainstream culture, and so forth. It has spurred a variety of other activist movements such as copyleft, Creative Commons, “cultural environmentalism,” and the general internet activism of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, which says “The Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) thinks that innovation is inextricably tied to freedom of speech, and innovators need to be protected from established businesses that use the law to stifle creativity and kill competition” (Electronic

Frontier Foundation 2010). This bundle of activism, theory, and philosophy is the primary driving force behind much of the idealism of Web 2.0 culture, as it explicitly positions internet culture as a solution to institutional failure. However, in reality Web 2.0 software often diverges from the baseline legal requirements for FOSS. While the ideology was adopted, much of the practice was not.

In the next section, I examine the 1990s DIY culture which furthered the critique of corporate-controlled media and positioned individually-created creative products as a superior alternative to homogenized content.

### Zines, Punk Rock and DIY Media

Zines are photocopied magazines written by individuals and distributed through the mail and independent bookstores. While fanzines originated in science fiction fandom, by the 1990s zines ran the gamut from obscure topics like hacking, *The Brady Bunch* or thrift stores (*2600*, *Teenage Gang Debs*, *Thrift Score*) to autobiographical accounts of personal experiences (*Cometbus*, *Doris*, *Dishwasher*). Zines were either sold for small amounts of money or exchanged through a barter system, and often emphasized the futility of wage slave labor and the lower middle class existence. Stephen Duncombe, in his definitive academic study of zines, writes:

In an era marked by the rapid centralization of corporate media, zines are independent and localized, coming out of cities, suburbs, and small towns across the USA, assembled on kitchen tables. They celebrate the everyperson in a world of celebrity, losers in a society that rewards the best and the brightest. Rejecting the corporate dream of an atomized population broken down into

discrete and instrumental target markets, zine writers form networks and forge communities around diverse identities and interests. Employed within the grim new economy of service, temporary, and “flexible” work, they redefine work, setting out their creative labor done on zines as a protest against the drudgery of working for another’s profit. And defining themselves against a society predicated on consumption, zinesters privilege the ethic of DIY, do-it-yourself: make your own culture and stop consuming that which is made for you (1997, 2).

Notably, many of the claims made about zines—small, independent, self-expressive, user-created, alternatives to Big Media—are identical to those made about YouTube videos and blogs. Also notable is the strong political ethos that Duncombe describes. While some zine writers were explicitly political, whether punk rock, feminist or libertarian, the overall experience and process of writing and distributing a zine required certain elements—“borrowing” photocopies and computer time from an employer, corresponding with like-minded zinesters and fans through the mail, and utilizing the barter system—which were explicit rejections of corporate capitalism.

This “do-it-yourself ethic” was partly rooted in American punk rock. In the 1980s, punk rock bands, most of which were either label-less or signed to small, independent record labels, created an alternative set of institutions to facilitate sharing and spreading music ignored by mainstream radio and MTV. These included “Book Your Own Fucking Life,” a photocopied book of information about different venues where an independent band could set up a tour (now at <http://www.byofl.com>); mail-order record and zine distributions; small music venues (often the houses of punk fans); zines like *Maximumrocknroll* and



*Punk Planet*; silk-screen and sticker companies, and a variety of instructional information on everything from building an amp to cooking a vegan breakfast. This idea of “doing it yourself” became one of the key elements of the American punk rock ethic. Daniel Sinker, former editor of *Punk Planet*, writes:

Punk has always been about asking “why” and then doing something about it. It’s about picking up a guitar and asking “Why can’t I play this?” It’s about picking up a typewriter and saying “Why don’t my opinions count?” It’s about looking at the world around you and asking “Why are things as fucked up as they are?” and then it’s about looking inwards at yourself and saying “Why aren’t I doing anything about this?” (2001, 10)

DIY was cultural production of music, writing, or art that explicitly acted as political resistance (Moore 2007). Listening to bands on independent labels<sup>24</sup> was an explicit rejection of corporate America. Writing a zine was a way to express viewpoints absent from mainstream culture. This dichotomy of independent vs. mainstream meant that “selling out,” whether by signing to a major label or putting a bar code on the cover of a zine, was strictly policed. While not all zinesters were involved in punk rock, the two shared an emphasis on independence from mainstream, capitalist media and “wage slavery.”

Although zines and zine culture still very much exist (see [zineworld.com](http://zineworld.com) for an overview), many zinesters and punk rock businesses have moved online to reach larger audiences. In the late 1990s, a series of conferences in San Francisco called Webzine explicitly brought together a class of zinesters, dot-com professionals, and early web publishers like Fray, Suck, ChickClick, Bust and Maxi, in a celebration of independent publishing which drew lines of

commonality between zines and personal homepages. The influence of DIY can be seen today in music blogs, the feminist crafting community (epitomized by Etsy.com), the Maker Faire, grassroots media activism, and ex-zinesters who maintain blogs and personal homepages. Most importantly, the ethic of “doing it yourself,” of learning from others without a profit motive, of self-expression, of focusing on obscure interests and sharing personal experiences, was woven into the creative fabric of Web 2.0—but simultaneously depoliticized. For instance, the equation of zines with blogs is vociferously debated in the zine world. Barnard College librarian Jenna Freedman writes:

While blogs can be a very empowering medium, there aren't many people out there capable of fully hosting their own blogs. Therefore, there is usually an Internet service provider that has the power to pull the plug on something it deems offensive, be it because of politics, sex, religion, copyright, or anything else. It's also much more difficult for the average blogger to be truly anonymous than it is for a zinester. Being able to violate copyright and readers' ethics or sensibilities have their good and bad points. Part of what makes zines what they are and what makes them so great is the total freedom not afforded to, but taken by the zinester (2005) .

Freedman identifies one of the major differences between zines, the DIY aesthetic, and its online equivalents: the lack of anti-capitalist ethos and rhetoric around “selling out.” There is no shame, for instance, in using Ning, a venture-capital backed social media startup, to start an online community about zines (<http://wemakezines.ning.com>). Although zines and DIY culture celebrated the individual and rejected Big Media, they did this as part of rejecting the overall structural inequality of labor. In the next section, I look at the counter-

globalization movement of the 2000s, which responded to perceived abuses of government and big corporations by explicitly positioning online, independent journalism as a solution to many of these problems.

### The Anti-corporate Movement, Blogs and Grassroots Media Activism

The anti-corporate movement protested the rise of multi-national corporations, their environmental impact, the homogenization of mass culture, media consolidation, and the pervasiveness of advertising, as chronicled in Naomi Klein's *No Logo* (1999), Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* (2001), the films *The Corporation* (2003) and *Super Size Me* (2004), and magazines *Adbusters* (1989-present), *Stay Free!* (1992-2007) and *The Baffler* (1988-present). Anti-corporate activists called for the support of small business, boycotts of major multinational corporations, ethical consumption, and events like "Buy Nothing Day" and "Turn Off Your TV Week." Simultaneously, counter-globalization movements used networked, distributed structures and technologies to create non-oppressive collaborative strategies and principles. Jeff Juris writes that counter-globalization organizations enact a "dual politics: intervening within dominant publics while generating decentralized network forms that prefigure the utopian worlds they are struggling to create" (2008, 9). Thus, the movements themselves are instantiations of political principles, many influenced by anarchism (Graeber 2004; Graeber 2009).

In 1999, the World Trade Organization met in Seattle, WA and was greeted by what was later called “The Battle in Seattle” or the “WTO riots.”<sup>25</sup> The first independent media center (or IMC, usually referred to as “Indymedia”) was set up in Seattle to document the WTO protests, “acting as a clearinghouse for publicizing the goals of the protesters, posting first-person reports, photographs, sound recordings, and digital video footage” (Jenkins and Thorburn 2003, 4). The Seattle IMC served as an organizing model for other groups and by 2006, there were 150 IMC groups in 50 countries, with about 5000 members (Pickard 2006a, 317). Indymedia’s slogan “be the media” displays its commitment to participatory media as a core component of radical democracy, which was built into the very fabric of the organization. Victor Pickard writes:

Indymedia’s radical democratic practice entails an active renegotiation of all power relationships by democratizing the media (exemplified by an interactive web-based interface), leveling power hierarchies (exemplified by consensus-based decision-making), and countering proprietary logic (exemplified by open-source software) (2006b, 20).

The WTO protesters adopted techniques from activist and anarchist history, specifically affinity groups, small groups of activists with personal ties who work together on collective action, networked together in a rhizome-like structure, used by anarchist groups since the Spanish Civil War (Smith 2001, 10). Indymedia centers similarly drew from the techniques and philosophies of other radical groups to create a non-hierarchical, anti-authoritarian model of organizing through decentralization and consensus-based decision making. Specifically, the IMC adopted free/ open-source software philosophy to manifest the principles of

radical democracy in their technological infrastructure, “such as de-privatizing technology, increasing and de-centralizing participation in news production, and leveling bureaucratic hierarchies” (Pickard 2006b, 27). The second principle of IMC’s ten “principles of unity” maintains that “open exchange of and open access to information [is] a prerequisite to the building of a more free and just society” and the ninth reads “All IMCs shall be committed to the use of free source code, whenever possible, in order to develop the digital infrastructure, and to increase the independence of the network by not relying on proprietary software” (Pickard 2006b, 25-26).

While the principles of unity were formulated by Indymedia as a global organization, Indymedia originated in late-1990s Seattle, a major center for dot-com activity and the home of multinational technology corporations including Microsoft, Nintendo, and Amazon.com, as well as a top-10 computer science school at the University of Washington. Seattle Indymedia and the IMC as a whole were technologically driven, using e-mail lists to organize members and a web interface to publish news stories, videos, and other user-generated content. The principles of free/open source software that IMCs espoused were seen as equally important to equality and democracy as their activist commitments. Pickard writes, “in the case of Indymedia, the technology and institutional structure are mutually constitutive. Undoing one would disable the other... the radical openness of Indymedia’s technology is predicated on a radical democratic institutional structure; this structure could not exist without internet

communications, especially on the global network level” (2006b, 36). Using participatory publishing software and FOSS became a way to live the principles of counter-globalization activism in day-to-day life.<sup>26</sup>

Significantly, the ability for anyone to publish a news story through the IMC newswires was seen as a way to challenge the corporate media coverage of radical politics in general and the WTO protests specifically, which was widely seen as inaccurate due to media consolidation. In 1996, the Telecommunications Act dissolved a number of laws that regulated how many media outlets a company could own. The resulting mergers concentrated media ownership in six huge companies, including Disney and Viacom, who control virtually all television, newspapers, publishing, mainstream film, radio, and music publishing. Scholars like Lance Bennett, Robert McChesney, and Eric Klinenberg have thoroughly documented the impacts of media consolidation on the corporate news media. These include a decrease in foreign and local news coverage, a reliance on mainstream sources, a decrease in minority viewpoints, a decrease in substantive educational content, an increase in cross-promotion and sponsor-driven content, and a pro-government, pro-capitalist bias (McChesney 2000; Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston 2007; Klinenberg 2007). These problems were especially relevant during the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> Bush Administration, as progressives criticized corporate media for cheerleading the war effort and failing to critically investigate policies or provide historical context for government decisions (Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston 2007).

Online publishing allowed people with views outside the mainstream to voice their opinions and practice amateur investigative journalism. The highly visible, politically radical projects of the IMCs and their ilk were gradually de-emphasized in favor of a more moderate, liberal impulse. During the beginning of the second Iraq War, “warblogging” spread “trustworthy alternative views concerning the objectives of the Bush Administration and Pentagon and the corporate media spin surrounding them” (Kahn and Kellner 2004, 92). In 2002, then-senator Trent Lott made a pro-segregationist remark at a birthday dinner for venerable former Dixiecrat Senator Strom Thurmond. While it was largely ignored by the mainstream media, who treated it as a minor tidbit, it was picked up by two major liberal blogs: *Talking Points Memo* and *Eschaton*. A few days later, the *New York Times* began covering the story, and two weeks later, Lott stepped down (Rosenberg 2009, 144-146). Blogs exemplified the FOSS maxim “given enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow” (Raymond 1999): citizen journalists working together could compensate for the deficiencies of mainstream media (Gillmor 2006).

As these examples show, by the early 2000s journalists, academics, technologists and pundits were heralding blogs as the new frontier of participatory journalism, and they were grandfathered in as a Web 2.0 technology. But the term “weblog,” coined by *Robot Wisdom* editor Jorn Barger, was essentially a new name for online journals or link lists, which had existed on personal homepages for years (Rosenberg 2009, 79). Early bloggers like Barger, Justin Hall, and David

Winer had previously been active on Usenet, personal homepaging, and e-mail newsletters, respectively. Similarly, online journaling sites like LiveJournal and Diaryland, both founded in 1999 with audiences primarily of young women who wrote about their personal experiences, were generally ignored in the media coverage of blogs. In fact, even though at least half of weblogs are written by women, the majority of media coverage of blogs focused on “filter blogs,” which contain links to external content and are primarily written by adult men (Herring et al. 2004).

Weblogs did not go uncriticized. Geert Lovink argued that far from being revolutionary, blogs are a form of “creative nihilism” which tear down the institutional structures of mass media without providing an alternative, merely creating unpaid replacements for journalists while furthering libertarian political beliefs (2008). Mainstream blogs are usually hosted in heavily commercial, privatized space which diminishes their democratic potential and hinders “objectivity” (Kahn and Kellner 2004; Kim and Hamilton 2006; Deuze 2008). In *Republic.com*, Cass Sunstein claimed that the blogosphere would result in “echo chambers” where people with similar political beliefs would talk only to each other, creating political isolationism (2002).<sup>27</sup> This proposition has been fiercely debated, with some scholars finding the ideological divide between right and left-wing bloggers widening over time, while others find the opposite effect (Hargittai, Gallo, and Kane 2008; Lawrence, Sides, and Farrell 2010). Still others find weblogs a poor substitute for professional political content, arguing that



amateur production produces substandard writing and cannot make up for investigative reporting or foreign news coverage (Keen 2007). Cammaerts identifies several other critiques of blogs' participatory potential, including government censorship, appropriation by elites, and the possibility of encouraging anti-democratic publics (2008).

Indymedia's struggles with the professionalization of online content demonstrate some of the problems involved in positioning user-contributed content as an alternative to professional journalism.<sup>28</sup> Pickard writes:

As an institution, Indymedia is torn between aspiring to become a credible news institution able to challenge corporate mainstream representations, and wanting to be inclusive so as to not repel large numbers of people who may not be able—due to lack of privilege and education—to produce content according to mainstream news quality standards (2006b, 35).

Grassroots media activism positioned blogging as an accessible way for everyone to participate in democratic journalism, but Indymedia found it difficult to separate itself from the norms of Big Media. It was tricky to find untrained contributors who could create coverage of the same quality as mainstream media. And the legitimacy of online journalism was often measured by whether Big Media picked up a story, as in the Lott case. The truly radical leftist anti-corporate principles of the IMCs were submerged in the media emphasis on more liberal online journalism. Although blogs and independent media were positioned as an anti-institutional alternative, the realities of dealing with capitalist structures were more complex.

In the next section, I look at San Francisco's "cyberdelic" rave culture of the 1990s which patterned a communal, participatory utopian philosophy after the transparency and collaboration facilitated by the early internet, as exemplified by Burning Man. Many key participants in techno-utopian culture played significant roles in both the dot-com and Web 2.0 periods.

### Cyberdelic Utopianism

The dot-com era was preceded by a utopian culture focused on the revolutionary potential of raising consciousness through computer networks, strongly influenced by Marshall McLuhan, rave culture, psychedelic drugs, and the idea of a tribal, collective dimension. In his book *Cyberia*, Douglas Rushkoff describes the denizens of this *cyberdelic* culture:

...the people I met at my first rave in early 1990s San Francisco claimed they could experience this same boundless, hypertext universe without the use of a computer at all. For them, cyberspace can be accessed through drugs, dance, spiritual techniques, chaos math, and pagan rituals. They move into a state of consciousness where, as if logged onto a computer, the limitations of time, distance, and the body are perceived as meaningless. People believe that they move through these regions as they might move through computer programs or video games—unlimited by the rules of a linear, physical reality. Moreover, they say that our reality itself, aided by technology, is about to make a wholesale leap into this new, hypertextual dimension (1994, 3).

Clustered in San Francisco, the cyberdelic subculture was a mish-mash of electronic music, "neopaganism," ecstasy and LSD, "smart drugs," online communities, computer hacking, and freewheeling theories about universal consciousness linked together by fractals and memetic theory. It advocated a do-

it-yourself approach to altering consciousness and reality, using immersion in “cyberspace” to achieve psychedelic bliss. Many of the shamans of this culture were former hippies: Timothy Leary, Stewart Brand, Terrence McKenna, and John Barlow (founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation and former Grateful Dead lyricist). They appeared at raves, gave lectures, and were quoted in magazines like *Mondo 2000* and *Extropy*; Leary famously stated, “the PC is the LSD of the 1990s” (Rucker, Sirius, and Mu 1992; Dery 1997; Rothstein 2006; Wikipedia contributors 2010c). Radical theorists surmised that the internet would allow participants to tap into a cyber-consciousness, creating a post-human body that was stronger, better, and more evolved than the meat-space self. While these theories ran the gamut from William Gibson-esque insanity to the more practical “virtual homesteading” accounts of Howard Rheingold, what these theorists had in common was the idea of the internet as a utopian space where people could overcome the difficulties of their everyday lives.

Also crucial to cyberdelic culture was the idea of rejecting the mainstream. Rudy Rucker, one of the *Mondo 2000* founders, describes the audience for one of his talks as:

...reality hackers, nuts, flakes, entrepreneurs, trippers, con-men, students, artists, mad engineers—Californians with the naïve belief that a) There is a Better Way and b) I Can Do It Myself. To put it in a clear gelatin capsule for you, I’d say that (a) and (b) are the two beliefs that underlie every single entry in the *Mondo 2000* User’s Guide. The way that Big Business or The Pig does things is obviously not the best way; it’s intrusive, kludgy, unkind, and not at all what you really want... Now, thanks to high-tech and the breakdown of society, you’re free to turn your back on the way “they” do it, whatever it might be, and do it yourself (1992, 10).

The Burning Man festival exemplifies this attitude. Burning Man was a product of San Francisco 1980s countercultural groups like the Cacophony Society, the Suicide Club, and Survival Research Laboratories (Dery 1997; Brill 2003; Beale 2008). In 1986, Larry Harvey and Jerry James burned a wooden figure on Baker Beach to celebrate the summer solstice, an example of what Burners now call “radical self-expression” (Black Rock City LLC 2003a). Burning Man became an annual event attracting hundreds of people, until the burning of a four-story wooden figure in a public place became impossible for authorities to overlook and the event was moved to the Black Rock desert of Nevada in 1990. Today, Burning Man is a city, built from scratch every year for a week, which celebrates artistry and individual self-expression, set out in the “Ten Principles” of Burning Man which include radical inclusion, participation, communal effort, gifting, decommodification, and leaving no trace (Black Rock City LLC 2003b).

From the beginning, technology workers were an integral part of Burning Man (Turner 2009). As Scott Beale, founder of the art and technology blog Laughing Squid, stated, “So it used to be that everyone went and that you could actually put that into your contract, ‘I’m gonna be gone this week in August’ easily, right? And I remember like a really stupid thing like LinuxWorld happened one year during Burning Man-- asinine! So, all these like Linux sysadmins and geeks are out there at Burning Man...all these things happening” (2008). Google’s first “Google Doodle” (Figure 3), an illustrative representation

of the Google logo, included the Man, and “was intended as a comical message to Google users that the founders were ‘out of office’” (Google Inc. 2010).



Figure 3: Google Burning Man Doodle, 1999

In many ways, Burning Man represents a physical representation of early internet principles of openness, collaboration, and self-expression. Co-founder Larry Harvey told personal homepager Jessica Barron that “this environment we’ve created is a physical analog of the Internet. It’s radically democratic. It allows people to conjure up entire worlds—like websites—voila! Out of nothing!” (Quoted in Turner 2009, 83). Brewster Kahle, the founder of the Internet Archive and long-time Burner, told C|Net that “The communities are very interchangeable...There’s a great deal of overlap; the open aspects of the Internet and Burning Man come from the same place. Burning Man and the Internet...disproved the 1980s myth that people will only do something if they’re paid for it” (Terdiman 2006).

Fred Turner argues that Burning Man provides a *cultural infrastructure* for new media labor, modeling commons-based peer production, gift economies, a rhetoric of community participation, and the potential of “vocational ecstasy:” self-fulfillment through creative work and radical self-expression (2009, 86).

Turner explicitly links the social structures of Burning Man to Google's company culture, which emphasizes collaboration, a relatively flat corporate hierarchy, and the pursuit of individual passion projects through "20 percent time." He maintains that for Bay Area technologists, Burning Man represents a week where the idealistic principles of new media production are brought to life, cementing the rich social networks that flexible labor models make necessary, and "work[ing] through the contradictions" of locating these ideals in a corporate setting (2009, 81). Burning Man demonstrates a commitment to the same values that Web 2.0 idealizes, and allows technologists to affirm their validity, importance, and presence in their lives. Just as Burning Man is a blueprint for creating a community that runs on gifts, bartering, and volunteerism, the ideals of Web 2.0 suggest that technology *as a business* can embody the same values.

Burning Man has become part of the lifecycle of Bay Area technologists; as such, it demonstrates the conflicts intrinsic to for-profit corporations holding up non-commodification as an ideal. Google is a large company, but mirrors many principles of creative labor epitomized both by venture-backed startups and the dot-com boom. While Google can create and maintain infrastructures like YouTube that facilitate commons-based peer production, ultimately it is responsible to its shareholders and cannot operate on an economy of gift exchange. The belief that creative expression through technical labor is the path to self-actualization often results in long hours at work and the dissolution of boundaries between personal and corporate life. While in some ways Burning

Man is a radical space, it is also primarily inhabited by the wealthy, white people who run the technology industry. The values of Burning Man are transformed by the technical enterprise into business practices that justify unstable labor models and valorize neoliberalism.

### Silicon Valley Culture

In this section, I have shown how different social movements positioned social technology as a solution to institutional failures. Web 2.0 discourse selectively draws from these existing movements to celebrate technology's revolutionary capacity. But rather than accepting the full radicalism of the ideals espoused by free/open source software developers, counter-globalization activists, and the like, Web 2.0 ideology is dampened in its transformative potential by Silicon Valley orthodoxy and for-profit corporate context. In order to fully understand Web 2.0 culture, I look at both dot-com companies, which pioneered many of the flexible, entrepreneurial work cultures which characterize Web 2.0, and the "Californian Ideology" of Silicon Valley history.

#### The Dot-com Boom

During the height of the dot-com boom in 1999-2000, millions of dollars in venture capital were pumped into thousands of internet companies, hundreds of which went public or were acquired, sending the stock market soaring. Young people flocked to the centers of the boom, San Francisco (Yahoo! and Netscape), Seattle (Microsoft and Amazon), Austin (Dell and Trilog), and New York City,

where Silicon Alley, in the Flatiron district, bristled with new media firms like Razorfish and Sapient. Technologists emphasized the “three c’s:” content, community, and commerce, extolling the massive changes that the “New Economy” would bring about. The New Economy, a buzzword popularized in 1997 by a series of articles in *Businessweek*, referred to the changes in the economic climate of the US supposedly caused by the technology industry: low unemployment rates, fast growth, low inflation, and increased productivity (Cassidy 2003, 155). L. John Doerr, a venture capitalist in Silicon Valley, called the internet “the largest legal creation of wealth in history” (Lacy 2008, 11). *Wired* magazine put “The Long Boom” on the cover and claimed,

We are watching the beginnings of a global economic boom on a scale never experienced before. We have entered a period of sustained growth that could eventually double the world's economy every dozen years and bring increasing prosperity for- quite literally- billions of people on the planet. We are riding the early waves of a 25-year run of a greatly expanding economy that will do much to solve seemingly intractable problems like poverty and to ease tensions throughout the world. And we'll do it without blowing the lid off the environment (Schwartz and Leyden 1997).

Despite these predictions, the stock market reached its height in March of 2000 and then dropped 34.2 percent in five weeks (Cassidy 2003, 292), causing massive job loss in the technology sector and something like a collective hangover. Today, the dot-com boom is mostly remembered for wretched excess, inflated company valuations, and the stereotype of the “ultracool, twenty-something cyberhead with a tattoo and a skateboard, plotting the overthrow of



Microsoft from a fifth-floor walk-up on East 10th Street,” as the *New York Times* characterized the industry in 1997 (Johnson 1997).

There are several important differences between the dot-com boom and Web 2.0. Dot-com companies were clustered in e-commerce (selling goods and services over the internet), web services (making websites for non-internet companies), and new media, rather than “user-created content” or “software as a service.” But dot-com companies nevertheless served as a template for the way creative, technically-savvy labor functioned in urban centers from the 1990s onwards. Social media in San Francisco boasted many veterans of the first boom, and the emphasis on self-actualization through work was drawn directly from boomtime philosophy. The philosophy of self-branding was first suggested during the boom, in an article from *Fast Company* called “The Brand Called You” (Peters 1997), as was the lofty idealism and rhetoric of changing the world that permeated the time period. Although the realities of the dot-com work experience differed from city to city, company to company, and industry to industry, there are two major shifts in the nature of work pioneered during the dot-com era that remain key parts of the social media experience today. The first was the idea of a high-risk, high-reward entrepreneurial work style in which workers lacked benefits or stability, but could potentially become rich. The second is thinking of a job as something to love that stimulates creative energies and does not constrain work to a cubicle. Both of these changes have persisted into Web 2.0 and beyond.

First, in their ethnographic studies of Silicon Alley startups Neff et al. (2005) identify “entrepreneurial labor” as a major product of the new economy. This model allows for flexible jobs and careers, but simultaneously normalizes high-risk working environments where freelance and contract positions are common. Individuals have the glittering possibility of massive wealth through profit-sharing, but simultaneously bear the risk of market failure (layoffs, lack of health insurance, underemployment), which is much easier for the economically privileged. Ultimately, workers are encouraged to adopt an enterprising attitude towards business, where they are responsible for their own skills, career development, successes, and failures (Neff, Wissinger, and Zukin 2005). Neff points out that part of the symbolic capital for workers in industries adopting this model is the glamour of working in a “cool” job in a “hot” field (2005, 309-310), which becomes a form of non-monetary compensation typical to commons-based peer production (Turner 2009, 77). Andrew Ross compares what he calls the “no-collar” labor model (bohemian workers in ultimately unstable work environments) with the work ethic of Silicon Valley; both share an emphasis on personal growth, optimism, idealism, mixed with libertarian politics (2004, 37). Ross claims that as this model moved from the sterile suburbia of the South Bay to chic urban environments like Seattle and New York, it drifted leftwing and mixed with an artistic, non-conformist Generation X ethic to create “industry with an indie pedigree” (p.39).

The second major change was in the working conditions under which creative new media professionals labored. Richard Florida's influential *The Creative Class* chronicled the increase in creative labor, "people in design, education, arts, music and entertainment, whose economic function is to create new ideas, new technology and/or creative content" (Florida 2002, 8). While Florida's link between policies designed to encourage this creative class and economic prosperity has been fiercely debated, certain aspects of the technology industry exemplify this class of knowledge workers and creative professionals. "New Economy" rhetoric rejected the hierarchical, buttoned-down company structures of large, traditional business, derided as *Dilbert*-esque cubicle culture. Instead, dot-com companies were structured purportedly to indulge and reward skilled artisans, emphasizing flexibility, play, self-actualization, creativity, autonomy and freedom. Workers could wear what they wanted, roll in at noon, play foosball and video games on break, pursue creative interests outside of work, freely voice their opinions and concerns, and collaborate with others in an intellectually stimulating environment. Ross writes, "in such a workplace, the zeal of employees was more like a quest for personal and existential stimulation, closer in spirit to extreme sport or adventure travel than to the sobriety of the self-dependent man who saw himself as a pious and productive member of society" (2004, 12). Inculcating this passion in workers, particularly young workers willing to work 60 or even 80 hour weeks without overtime was, of course, advantageous to the companies themselves.

In San Francisco proper, the dot-com crash had a devastating effect. The Bay Area lost 450,000 jobs in the bust, or the equivalent of the entire working population of today's San Francisco (Lacy 2008, 13). Nationwide, the economic crash tempered techno-utopianism and prematurely dampened the enthusiasm surrounding the internet; John Cassidy, a financial writer for the *New Yorker*, wrote in his book *dot.com* that the internet “was not a ‘disruptive technology’ that would destroy any company locked into the old way of doing things, such as selling books in stores, printing news on paper, or using people to sell stocks. The bookstores, newspaper companies, and brokerage houses are still in business, and most of them are doing fine” (2003, 316). Despite this, many survivors of the dot-com era, made wealthy by Amazon.com, eBay, PayPal, and Netscape, founded or invested in Web 2.0 companies. Furthermore, entrepreneurs who bucked conventional wisdom and started internet companies in the post-bust era—Friendster in 2002, MySpace and LinkedIn in 2003, and Flickr and Digg in 2004—became some of the stars of the Web 2.0 boom (Lacy 2008).<sup>29</sup> During this time, the Web 2.0 discourse chronicled in this chapter was a crucial ideological underpinning to generate enthusiasm and trust for market solutions in a time when anti-market rhetoric was prevalent. But much of the culture pioneered by dot-com companies, itself massively influenced by the work culture of Silicon Valley, persisted into the social media era: flexibility, entrepreneurial labor models, creativity, self-actualization through work, and the bootstrapped startup are all common to both.

## The Californian Ideology and Cyber-Libertarianism

Web 2.0's symbolic center, the technology culture of San Francisco, is inextricably intertwined with Silicon Valley, only a few miles south. The term "Silicon Valley" was coined by Don Hoefler in *Microelectronics News* in 1971 to describe the prevalence of micro-electronics companies headquartered in the southern San Francisco area, including Intel, Hewlett-Packard, and IBM (Rogers and Larsen 1984, 26). Until the 1970s, the area was primarily agricultural, with a few scattered radio machinists and engineers. A massive boom in the production of semiconductors, power-grid tubes, and other electronic components drew international interest to the concentration of technical resources and infrastructure found in the cities of Palo Alto, Mountain View, and San Jose (Lécuyer 2006, 2). There are several reasons for this enormous expansion in microelectronics: an extensive history of defense contracts, the intellectual power of Palo Alto's Stanford University, and innovative manufacturing and business processes pioneered by the radio and machinist industries, including stock options and profit-sharing (Saxenian 1996; Lécuyer 2006, 2).

In the forty years since this first boom, the Valley has been marked by boom-and-bust cycles of technological hype, centering on personal computing, video games, multimedia, and internet startups. These cycles have left deep traces. Po Bronson, writing about the dot-com boom, explained:

What those often-cited "Silicon Valley advantage" theories don't convey is how evolved this place has become just from being on the high heat for years. The competition has bred electronics stores

the size of eight football fields, electronics stores open all night, electronics stores where you can do your laundry while shopping. There are VCs who invest only in video chips, VCs who funnel only foreign money, VCs who write books, VCs who are professors of sociology. There are headhunters who handle only Cobol programmers from Singapore, headhunters who specialize in luring toy company executives, and, I've recently learned, a headhunting firm that helps other headhunting firms hunt for headhunters (2000, 215).

More prosaically, Silicon Valley has venture capitalists, consultants, lawyers, manufacturers, marketers, professional associations, technical expertise and, above all, “social capital embodied in Silicon Valley’s knowledge workers” (English-Lueck 2002, 19) which combine to create a fertile space for technological entrepreneurs. Stowe Boyd, a blogger and consultant, spoke similarly of San Francisco:

At any given moment in time, there's a big infrastructure here of people, venture capitalists, smart technical people, all the peripheral stuff, the media marketing, all that. So, people who are interested in this, and are tired of living in Iowa, they'll move here. So it's a mecca, in that sense. People literally make the pilgrimage, in order to do their new idea or whatever it is... People self-select, and as a result, you have all these honestly self-motivated, upward striving, overachievers. They congregate here, and that's what you're going to get... You get all these people that are the ones motivated to go do the best they can.

The Web 2.0 boom took place in Northern California partly because the infrastructure, social capital, and human resources were already nearby.

The cycles of boom and bust technology trends also left strong ideological traces in the Valley. The political sensibility of Silicon Valley tends to be of a decidedly libertarian bent, espousing self-improvement, meritocracy, and “work-life balance” (Rogers and Larsen 1984; Bronson 2000; Borsook 2001; English-

Lueck 2002). Of course, what passes for libertarianism is highly variable; Paula Borsook describes:

Classic libertarianism combines the traditional conservative right's aversion to government, with regard to laws, entitlements, and services, with the traditional left's insistence on individual liberty. But the ubiquitous free-form libertarianism of high tech is as much a lens through which to view the worlds as it is a political philosophy... The Silicon Valley worldview contains within it all different colors of the free-market/antiregulation/social Darwinist/philanthropic/guerrilla/neo-pseudo-biological/atomistic threads (2001, 8).

Silicon Valley libertarianism is its own animal, very much woven into the four layers of internet culture that Manuel Castells calls "the techno-meritocratic culture, the hacker culture, the virtual communitarian culture, and the entrepreneurial culture" (2001, 37). These are difficult to extricate, but include a strong belief that intelligence and drive is an indicator of success, an almost mythological belief in entrepreneurialism, the "do it yourself" ethic common to zinesters and hackers, and an idealized view of the internet as a utopian space. Silicon Valley encourages a faith in technological solutions, specifically computerization, the idea that widespread adoption of computer technologies will lead to positive social change, in this case, increased participation, democracy, and community (Iacono and Kling 1995). This is the almost-contradictory combination of "technological determinism and libertarian individualism" that Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron labeled "The Californian Ideology" (1996, 3).

While this discourse has spread world-wide, the importance of geography—or at least, a fantasy about space—is emphasized by locating this culture among Northern California technology workers, drawing from both the counter-cultural history of the Bay Area and the decades of technology-driven boom-and-bust cycles of Silicon Valley. Barbrook and Cameron (and Iacono and Kling)’s critiques were responding to the mid-1990s *Wired* magazine enthusiasm about “the information superhighway;” however, this discourse is virtually identical to that surrounding social media. Web 2.0 combines idealism, a “do-it-yourself” emphasis, and the “information wants to be free” hacker ethic with a fervent belief in the emancipating potential of entrepreneurial, venture-capital backed small business. In “The Californian Ideology,” Barbrook and Cameron write, “In the digital utopia, everybody will be both hip and rich” (1996, 1). The fantasy of the young entrepreneur and meritocracy, in which “each member of the ‘virtual class’ is promised the opportunity to become a successful hi-tech entrepreneur” (p.5) is highly prominent in Web 2.0 circles.

The libertarian belief system espoused by Kevin Kelly (editor of *Wired* and former editor of *The Whole Earth Catalog*), Nicholas Negroponte (founder of MIT’s Media Lab and the One Laptop Per Child Association), Esther Dyson (journalist, venture capitalist and author of *Release 2.0*), Louis Rossetto (former *Wired* editor) and other technological elites has been criticized for discounting government influence on the development of internet technologies and Silicon Valley, as it counsels against raising taxes to pay for public education or welfare



(Barbrook and Cameron 1996; Borsook 2001). Critics of both computerization and the Californian Ideology argue that their proponents overlook structural inequalities in the system which make entrepreneurial capitalism possible. Barbrook and Cameron claim that the democratic emancipation fantasized about by “hi-tech artisans” excludes the mostly-brown underclass who cannot afford computers and internet access. It is well-known that Silicon Valley culture is dependent on undocumented immigrant laborers to build circuits and microchips, clean offices, and mow the lawns of technology workers relocated from Bangalore, Shanghai, Dublin, and Des Moines (Hayes 1989), and they rarely appear in rapturous descriptions of the area. In *The Silicon Valley of Dreams*, Pellow and Park note that while one story of Silicon Valley is all about wealth, the American Dream, luxury cars, good times, egalitarianism, brilliant ideas, high wages and expensive houses, the other is “a place of considerable human suffering, preventable illness and premature death, the exploitation of thousands of workers, widespread ecological devastation, and increasing social inequality” (2002, 1-2).

Overwhelmingly, the Californian Ideology is a *neoliberal* ethic. David Harvey defines neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2007, 2). The encouragement of *siliconia* worldwide (Silicon Valley equivalents

like Silicon Gulf in the Philippines and Silicon Wadi in Israel) as a way to spur local economic development is an example of exporting the Californian Ideology as a universal solution to localized problems (Dawson 2001; Wikipedia contributors 2009). Silicon Valley has become a model of neoliberal economic development.

Naturally, when Barbook and Cameron's critique of the Californian Ideology was first published in *Mute Magazine*, it garnered a number of indignant reactions. Louis Rossetto sputtered that it descended "into the kind of completely stupid comments on race in America that only smug Europeans can even attempt" while espousing "utterly laughable Marxist/Fabian kneejerk that there is such a thing as the info-haves and have-nots" (Rossetto 1996). A more even-handed critique was given by game designer and Georgia Tech professor Celia Pearce, who pointed out that many members of the "virtual class" were deeply influenced by autodidactic hacker culture, in which learning, information-sharing, and non-hierarchical bartering of services and products is normative: "in this model, cooperation and a sense of community is said to benefit all" (Pearce 1996). Others criticized Barbook and Cameron's linkage between the New Left of the 1960s and *Wired's* techno-utopianism; as meticulously researched by Fred Turner in *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, the founders of *Wired*, including Kevin Kelly, Stewart Brand, Nicholas Negroponte, and Esther Dyson, were grounded more in the New Communalist movement of 1970's back-to-the-land hippies and the *Whole Earth Catalog* than the New Left (Turner 2006).

As I have argued throughout chapter, it is not enough to label the ideology of social media as yet another example of the Californian Ideology. The artisanal, activist, utopian, anti-establishment elements that idealize radical participation and democracy are those which hold up Web 2.0 as a literal instantiation of these ideals. They are also responsible for the critiques of institutions, like government, mainstream media, and non-technology companies, which Web 2.0 purports to solve. In the next part, I trace the social origins of the contemporary Web 2.0 scene in San Francisco.

### Part Three: The Scene of Web 2.0

Web 2.0 became a scene due to geography more than anything else, as the San Francisco Bay Area has both very large numbers of people interested and inspired by technology and, as this chapter suggests, a long sociotechnical history. While the dot-com bust seemingly decimated the San Francisco technology scene, it restructured it rather than destroying it. During the boom, two dot-com workers, Eddie Codel and Ryan Junell, founded the Webzine conference (1998-2001), “a forum, exhibition, and party for those who create non-commercial creative projects for the Internet. Each year, dozens of webzine makers share their experiences and perspectives in a space designed to support a meaningful dialogue between creators, their audiences and the general public” (Junell 2001). Over the years, their speakers included Web 2.0 luminaries like Caterina Fake

(Flickr), Tantek Çelik (Technorati, microformats), Evan Williams (Blogger, Twitter), Chris Pirillo (GnomeDex), Matt Mullenwag (WordPress) and Owen Thomas (Valleywag). Junell wrote:

The WEBZINE event happened in San Francisco because of the environment's dynamic blend of technology geeks, experimental artists, radical writers and advanced partiers. Dozens of other unique cultural movements, such as the Gold Rush, the Beat poets, the Haight/Ashbury hippies, the UC Berkeley protests, Silicon Valley, underground raving, Burning Man and the over-zealous dot.com industry, have flourished in the Bay Area. The WEBZINE event drew directly from this hub of attitude, perspective, experience, and vibe to identify and unify a community of geeks interested in independent publishing on the web (2001).

Junell positioned independent web publishers as heir to San Francisco's countercultural throne, likening websites to activism and art. Note that Webzine specifically imagined *San Francisco*, rather than the larger Silicon Valley area, as the epicenter of creative technological culture. The Webzine events brought together a group of people who would significantly influence San Francisco's social media scene for the next ten years.

Despite emphasizing independent media, the dot-com bust put a damper on Webzine for several years; as Eddie Codell sadly explained, "technology didn't seem that fun anymore" (2005). The giddy optimism of the dot-com boom was replaced with resignation as thousands of people left the San Francisco Bay Area for cheaper destinations with more affordable housing and, presumably, better jobs.

Tim O'Reilly held the first Web 2.0 conference in the fall of 2004 in the city of San Francisco. The speaker list—almost all male—included entrepreneurs,

investors, bloggers, and theorists such as Jeff Bezos (Amazon), Larry Lessig, Om Malik, Jason Kottke (blogger of kottke.org), Marc Andreessen (Netscape), Stewart Butterfield (Flickr), Mitch Kapor (former inventor of Lotus 1-2-3 turned open source advocate), Cory Doctorow, Jerry Yang (Yahoo!), Craig Newmark (Craigslist), Jeffrey Veen (Adaptive Path), Brewster Kahle, and Danger Mouse, fresh off the immensely popular “Grey Album” mashup of the Beatles and Jay-Z that epitomized remix culture (MediaLive International and O’Reilly Media 2004). While O’Reilly events were marketed towards high-level professionals and cost thousands of dollars to attend, the excitement sparked by wikis, blogs, mashups, and the cutting-edge of 2005 participatory culture was palpable in the blog posts and comments that followed each talk. Steven Levy, writing for *Newsweek*, summarized:

Are you ready for the new Web? It's getting ready for you. It turns out that bidding on eBay, gathering with Meetup and Googling on, um, Google are only the opening scenes in a play whose running time will top "Mahabharata." While we've been happily browsing, buying and blogging, the tech set has been forging clever new tools and implementing powerful standards that boost the value of information stored on and generated by the Net. Things may look the same as the old Web, but under the hood there's been some serious tinkering, and after years of hype among propeller-heads, some of the effects are finally arriving (Levy 2004).

On the other hand, the idea of a new bubble had other people on edge. C|net wrote, “This was billed as a coming-out party for the new Web, and the Internet executives and venture capitalists in attendance would much rather forget the excesses of the old” (Olsen 2004). PC Mag noted that the “familiar faces” of the web’s “glitterati” were in attendance, but seemed “slightly less breathless about

the Web than they were during the dot-com boom, but they still characterized the Web as full of innovation and promise” (Rupley 2004).

Meanwhile, in Austin, the South by Southwest Interactive festival had steadily grown since its inception in 1995. Founded as SXSW Multimedia to celebrate Austin’s burgeoning new media industry, by the mid 2000s it was a yearly destination for the digerati. The 2005 festival featured keynotes from Malcolm Gladwell, Wonkette blogger Ana Marie Cox, and Bruce Sterling. Today, for Web 2.0 scenesters, “South By” represents what Burning Man did for an earlier generation of geeks. It helps to constitute a social world, providing a yearly touchstone for people to touch base and revive their passion for technology. Twitter broke into the mainstream during SXSWi 2007 and Foursquare was launched there in 2009; but in 2005, SXSWi spurred San Francisco’s technology revival.

Scott Beale, the founder of Laughing Squid, relates, “I really look at 2005 as the first year for so many things... Eddie [Codell] and I went to South By together and we're like, “Holy crap! This is like a really big version of Webzine!” We got totally inspired. At the event, Eddie revived Webzine for one more time and we did it in 2005.” Webzine 2005 was a huge success, bringing together older-and-wiser dot-com veterans with newcomers to the scene to celebrate the participatory potential of online publishing. 2005 was also the first year of two largely ad-hoc gatherings, SuperHappyDevHouse and Barcamp, which helped to form a grassroots community of social media enthusiasts primarily working at

venture-backed startups. Significantly, while O'Reilly's conferences, including eTech, Where 2.0, and the Web 2.0 Expo, popularized some of the technologies and ideas that would become most identified with Web 2.0, the grassroots events held in San Francisco were attempts to embody the principles of social media in physical space by facilitating collaboration, openness, and participation.

Scott Beale, who began blogging on New Year's Day 2005, relates one of the first meetings between himself, WordPress founder Matt Mullenwag, open source activist Chris Messina, and blogger Om Malik. Beale was using WordPress software and noticed from Mullenwag's Flickr stream that he had just relocated to the Bay Area. Beale was eager to meet the man behind WordPress and learned that he was hosting a meetup: "This is so hard to conceive of now but I'm like, 'Wow! I could actually meet the guy who made the script that I use for my blog.'" At the meetup, Beale suggested to Mullenwag that he throw a public party for WordPress. The party was successful, and brought together many other technologists.

This anecdote demonstrates the importance of face-to-face meet ups within the San Francisco social media scene. Informal chats, parties, and conferences allowed people working on disparate but similar projects to network, share inspiration, and help each other out. SuperHappyDevHouse, for example, was a semi-regular event started in 2005, where developers brought their laptops to all-night hackathons where they worked on personal projects together. The invitation to the second SuperHappyDevHouse reads:

You could think of SuperHappyDevHouse as an all-night hackfest. Come work on your personal projects; this is an excuse to do it. Maybe you'll learn about new technologies or methodologies [sic]. Maybe you'll find people interested in working on that project with you. Maybe you and others will form an idea for something that you could easily prototype together that night. If not, the environment is fun and productive, just what you need to get your work done solo (Progrium 2005).

SuperHappyDevHouse drew from the Hacker Ethic to bring together programmers to share information and collaborate in a mutually-beneficial effort. While the attendees of SHDH were not necessarily working on social media projects, they were drawing from the collaborative ethic of social media, itself directly influenced by FOSS.

Technorati employees Tantek Çelik and Ryan King were driving back from an all-night hacking session at the second SuperHappyDevHouse when the idea for BarCamp was born. Tantek was complaining about not getting invited a second time to FooCamp, an exclusive technology campout run by O'Reilly Media. FooCamp attendees determine the agenda and topics in what Tim O'Reilly calls "the wiki of conferences." O'Reilly holds the yearly camp to keep up with current developments in technology, get input on products and conferences, and network; the invitee list is usually a who's who of the current tech elite (O'Reilly 2007). Tantek wrote in his blog:

Knowing that the focus and content of FooCamp were mostly attendee driven, armed with a plethora of photos from previous FooCamps, and inspired by the scrappy can-do attitude of events like SuperHappyDevHouse and Webzine2005 which were both openly or at least semi-openly organized by volunteers, I asked the rhetorical question: "Why don't we do our own FooCamp?"



followed shortly thereafter with something like "We could call it BarCamp and make it open" (Çelik 2006).

“Bar” was a joke, “foo” and “bar” being metasyntactic variables that programmers use for placeholders. A few weeks later, Çelik, King, Chris Messina, Andy Smith, Matt Mullenwag and Eris Free met at Ritual Roasters to plan the first BarCamp, which was held six days later. Scott Beale recalls:

BarCamp is seminal. This is like the most important thing of all...all of this. ...Scoble came by, and he was really into it. It was actually the very first public demo of Flock and Pandora. It was a really big deal. You know, those things coming out of it, and the funny thing is that we always think about is like so Arrington was there. None of us knew him... And so by the time you get to 2006, they tried to do like BarCamp again. It's gigantic. The TechCrunch stuff is ultimately moving to August Capital. Like, nothing...it's like this ultimate scaling thing, nothing can even be how it originally was. That's 2006.

BarCamp is an “open-source” protocol for “unconference” organizing that is described as “an ad-hoc gathering born from the desire for people to share and learn in an open environment. It is an intense event with discussions, demos and interaction from participants who are the main actors of the event” (Barcamp 2010a). In other words, BarCamps are participant-driven, allowing attendees to facilitate sessions and decide on discussion topics. The “camp” metaphor suggests rugged informality and collectiveness, a back-to-basics approach that contrasts with the modernity of technology. BarCamp is constructed as an *authentic* space where the ideals of collectivity can flourish without the infiltration of profit motives.

The BarCamp format has proven immensely popular and has been used for hundreds of conferences world-wide; in 2009, there were more than 450 BarCamps in 67 countries (Barcamp 2010b), including EduCamp (education), PhotoCamp (photography), HealthCamp (health care), PresentationCamp, LaidOffCamp (unemployed people), BarCampMoney (financial services), eDemocracyCamp, GreenCamp, PrivacyCamp and EqualityCamp (marriage equality). Like Independent Media Centers and Burning Man, Barcamp is an instantiation of Web 2.0 principles that emphasize participation, openness, transparency, and information-sharing.

The importance of such interactions to technologically-mediated cultures has been well-documented, from MIT's Model Railroad club and Stewart Brand's original hacker conference to today's free and open/source software developer conferences (Levy 1984; Markoff 2005; Kelty 2008; Coleman 2010a). These events allowed for face-to-face meetings between people who shared a common interest in software, but also created a scene of people who became friends, worked and lived with each other, dated, built tools that their friends used, went to each other's gatherings, collaborated on projects, and supported each other's efforts, emotionally, financially, and physically. Despite the constant and ongoing discussion and socializing that goes on in the San Francisco social media scene over internet tools like Facebook, Flickr, Twitter and blogs, it is the in-person socializing and collaborating that solidify the scene.

## Implications

The Web 2.0 scene changed considerably from 2005-2006 to 2008-2010. The heady optimism and idealism that characterized conferences, events, writing, and theories in 2006 had been replaced by a kind of gold rush mentality in 2008. Self-styled “social media gurus” and “thought leaders” flooded San Francisco networking events and technology parties, as the first wave of scenesters hunkered down at their laptops or found new places to socialize. Simultaneously, the openness and transparency that epitomized the first round of successful Web 2.0 applications like blogs, Wikipedia, and Google Maps had been replaced by proprietary, walled-garden formats. In *The Future of the Internet*, Jonathan Zittrain used Facebook, the Kindle, Google Apps, and the iPhone as an example of sterile internet appliances, closed, restricted, and completely secure; but absent of the pro-tinkering, pro-hacking spirit of *generative*, or open, technologies (Zittrain 2008). The ideals of free/open source software flourished in open government and initiatives like Wikileaks, but were antithetical to proprietary technologies like Facebook. While people like Tim O’Reilly were deified in some circles, they were reviled by others. “Web 2.0,” always a catch-all term, now represented a serious ideological conflict.

Several free and open-source software developers whose work was an important part of the first wave of participatory web applications were concerned with the concentration of power in “cloud computing” services like Gmail, Facebook, Google Docs and YouTube. In cloud computing, user data is stored on

large corporate-owned servers rather than a personal computer's hard drive. An independent group of hackers and activists called autonomo.us wrote that:

...the last decade has witnessed a rise in the role of computing as a service, a massive increase in the use of web applications, the migration of personal computing tasks to data-centers, and the creation of new classes of service-based applications. Through this process, some of the thinking, licenses, tools, and strategies of the free and open source software movements have become poorly suited to the challenges posed by these network services (autonomo.us 2008).

Autonomo.us released a manifesto called “The Franklin Street Statement” which called for users to “consider carefully whether to use software on someone else's computer at all. Where it is possible, they should use Free Software equivalents that run on their own computer. Services may have substantial benefits, but they represent a loss of control for users and introduce several problems of freedom” (Hill 2008).

The shift from the openness of Wikipedia to the highly restricted iPhone application development platform represents an ongoing contradiction between transparency and openness in a celebratory capitalist paradigm that depends on proprietary knowledge as a profit model. Much of the subversive ideology of the 1990s countercultures that influenced Web 2.0 culture—punk rock, zines, the counter-globalization movement, techno-shamanism—were discarded once translated through the economic philosophy of neoliberalism. The creative dot-com idealists working at Razorfish and Amazon believed that self-fulfillment could be found in capitalist work, as long as it was the right sort of capitalist workplace: one where you could wear whatever you wanted, ride a skateboard to

work, curse in front of your supervisor, and play your Nintendo 64. Similarly, the explicit critique of corporate media provided by the counter-globalization movement was replaced by one in which the solution was simply creating your own media. If you didn't like the impact of corporate ownership on the news media, the solution was starting your own blog on a site owned by a different large corporation. This is further problematized by the transition from blogs to media like Facebook, which encourages people to share personal data that is packaged and sold to data-mining companies and marketing agencies.

This chapter chronicled a variety of subcultural projects that shared commitments to principles later attributed to Web 2.0, primarily “do it yourself” as an alternative to corporate production, self-expression as a value, the open sharing of information as a public good, and gift economies of collaboration as superior means of production. Internet applications and organizing models facilitated by electronic communication seemingly brought these values to life, allowing radically decentralized principles to be brought to millions of average people. Tracing these histories is necessary in order to understand the many and often contradictory principles that are grouped together under “Web 2.0.” Social media culture embodies idealism, drawn directly from anti-institutional activist groups, creativity, a primary value of New Economy labor, and the wealth and influence celebrated in Silicon Valley. Today, even as large corporations like Microsoft and Google work with open source software and open APIs, the prevalence of tracking technologies, online surveillance, and collection of

personal data normalized in Web 2.0 applications undermines their radical principles. In the next chapter, I investigate how social media has become a major site for the display of social status and the maintenance of social hierarchies, further undermining its democratic potential.

## CHAPTER III

### STATUS STRUCTURES, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND THE TECHNOLOGY SCENE

#### Introduction

I am waiting in a long line to get into a party sponsored by Seismic, a video-sharing startup, as part of the annual TechCrunch conference. It is being held at 330 Ritch, a club in the South of Mission district. There are two big bouncers, a passel of attractive 20-something women wearing lots of makeup, cocktail dresses, and heels working the door, and a velvet rope. A town car pulls up to the curb and a British man who works for TechCrunch, a photographer, and a well-preserved woman in her fifties get out. The British man shows his badge to the bouncer and says “I’m TechCrunch staff,” clearly expecting to be whisked inside. The bouncer indicates he should wait at the end of the line, which is now winding around round the block. The guy keeps protesting to the bouncer “But I’m Techcrunch staff!” The photographer and the woman wait behind him and he gets increasingly agitated. Finally, I’m at the front of the line and the bouncer whisks me inside. (Fieldnotes, September 10, 2008.)

Social status is a very important part of human interaction. Increasing or maintaining status motivates many actions we take, from consumption to employment to education. Looking at how a community is organized along status lines reveals what it values, whether that is wealth, appearance, or musical ability. But what is valued is not universal. It is specific to a particular time and space, so people constantly move between overlapping social spheres with differing values

and distinctive social hierarchies. Although social technologies like social network sites, blogs, and photo-sharing applications are a significant source of status negotiation and display for many people today, they are rarely examined in terms of status. Obviously, the extent to which this matters depends on the technological saturation of a community: the congregation of my parents' church would not put much stock in their number of Twitter followers. But in groups that socialize online and in person, technologically-mediated interactions are part of the fabric of everyday life. At the moment when a woman uses her iPhone at the dinner table to update her Twitter status with what her friends are saying, "online" and "offline" are meaningless terms that do not describe the liminal space she inhabits. When that woman is whisked past lines at parties and photos of her are posted to gossip blogs, this treatment is due to her status, determined by the sum of her interactions both face-to-face and through social media. Status in social media has consequences.

In the last chapter, I traced the roots of Web 2.0 discourse to two primary sources. Countercultures like punk rock and hacking's critique of government and business institutions position do-it-yourself culture, openness and transparency as solutions. The Silicon Valley tradition of entrepreneurial capitalism emphasizes computerization, or using technology to solve social problems, and venture-backed startups as meritocratic alternatives to large corporations. This is a potent combination. Web 2.0 discourse frames social media as the solution to structural problems of corporate capitalism, government,



and globalization. But rather than advocating institutional change, the ethos of modern techno-culture encourages personal liberation through the integration of technology, business ideology, and advertising and marketing techniques into daily life.

In this chapter, I unpack the relationship between San Francisco's technology scene, contemporary social software, and *status*. Analyzing status helps us to evaluate the widespread claims that social media facilitates meritocracy and egalitarianism, since status incorporates inequality of all types, including class, race, gender, and sexuality, as well as privilege and consumption. Understanding status reveals the values and assumptions shared by a group, which make up a culture. The technology scene values openness, transparency, and creativity, but these values are instantiated as participating in the culture of techno-business, sharing personal information online, and commanding and maintaining a large audience. The traits emphasized by countercultural movements are synthesized with the entrepreneurship, technical knowledge, wealth, and intelligence long-valued by Silicon Valley, creating an atmosphere more akin to celebrity culture and marketing than the idealism of an open society. Since this shared set of values and beliefs about social life is the context that fuels the creation of social software, unpacking it helps us to understand the assumptions that technology creators make about "users" and "social behavior."

In the first section of this chapter, I define status as one's place in a social hierarchy, and explain how it functions. I distinguish status from social class,

which has historically been viewed as primarily economic, while status depends on a more complex set of variables. Even considering theories which conceptualize social class as a set of overlapping taste cultures rather than a single economic hierarchy, status is more local and less fixed than class. I also look at status and consumption, particularly how goods function as identity markers, and how this theory changes in situations that lack face-to-face display. While sociologists, economists, and anthropologists agree on the significance of status in daily life, it is rarely applied to computer-mediated interactions. I identify several ways that status operates online, and distinguish it from more familiar concepts of “reputation” and “trust.”

In the second section, I examine the status hierarchy of Web 2.0 workers in the San Francisco Bay Area, introducing the community in which I conducted dissertation fieldwork. This hierarchy demonstrates how the values of intelligence, entrepreneurship, technical knowledge, visibility, wealth, and participation are interpreted through the lens of contemporary technological business culture. Entrepreneurship functions as a powerful myth which valorizes independence and risk-taking, justifying the tech scene’s hierarchy through claims of meritocracy. But this myth is gendered, systematically valuing male-gendered traits and male contributions over those ascribed to women. I discuss the gender aspect of the status hierarchy in some depth, identifying its consistency in media imagery about technology, how this manifests in talk within the scene, and its impact on technology production and design.

The third section of the chapter looks at status symbols in the tech scene. The tech scene prioritizes ostensibly functional goods, travel, and experiences. I identify the role of conferences in constituting the global cosmopolitanism of the scene. Although travel, sports and gadgets function as status symbols, they are framed as productive experiences, which I connect to a gendered discourse around consumption which codes certain types of consumption as masculine and therefore acceptable. Within this discourse, money is valued primarily for its contribution to experience and creativity rather than an end in itself. I provide a case study of the iPhone as status symbol to demonstrate the intrinsic conflicts between openness/transparency and commercialism present in contemporary Web 2.0 discourse.

In the final section, I discuss how social media is used to display and manipulate social status hierarchies, taking a Values in Design approach to understand how software affordances and interfaces interact with community values. Taking the position that technology is not neutral, I argue that software can embody the values of a group of users or creators: the “design constituency,” individuals and groups that participate in a technology’s design (Pfaffenberger 1992, 283). Specifically, the features of social software like Twitter reflect the technology scene’s cultural beliefs about how the world is ordered and organized.<sup>30</sup> Twitter incorporates quantifiable measures of status based on attention and visibility, and provides an articulation of social connections, which facilitate public performance of connections and access. Social media, as a

medium through which people communicate or establish status, emphasizes skills like self-publicity and risk-taking, revealing deep-seated presumptions about gender, privacy, and work.

In the introduction, I argued that social media is a *technology of subjectivity* which teaches users how to present and regulate their digital identities (Ong 2006). Michel Foucault theorized *technologies of the self*, which are bodies of knowledge, or “matri[ces] of practical reason,” through which people learn to transform themselves into a desired state (Foucault et al. 1988). Similarly, technologies of subjectivity teach people how to be a proper subject through adopting a desired positionality. Social media technologies illuminate and reward status-seeking practices that reflect the values of the technology scene.

### What is Status?

#### Definitions

“Status” is a commonly-used term. Popular expressions like “status symbol” make it difficult to define precisely. Complicating matters further, Facebook uses “status update” to describe the box that appears at the top of each individual user profile, where people answer the question “What’s on your mind?” “Status” describes both micro-blogging entries, comments, links, or jokes, and the messages that indicate whether one is present or away on Instant Messenger. (More than once, I had to explain that I was not writing about this type of status.) Instead, what I mean by “status” is closer to the formal definition

of “rank-ordered relationships among people associated with prestige and deference behavior” (Huberman, Loch, and Öncüler 2004, 103; Ridgeway and Walker 1995). In other words, in any social group, people are loosely formed into a *hierarchy*, and those higher up in the hierarchy get more respect from their peers, and often more money, better jobs, and the resulting freedom as well.<sup>31</sup> Alain de Botton, in his book *Status Anxiety*, defines status less formally as “one’s value and importance in the eyes of the world” (2005, vii)—colloquially, status is “love from the world” (2005, 5). Status is what your peers think of you, whether they hold you in esteem or contempt, and the privileges that accord from this position.

Status is not fixed or static. Most people have more than one status position, because most people move between several social realms, such as work, groups of friends, a hobby club, and so on. To outsiders, people in groups like fraternities share the same status, but within each group there will be different levels and hierarchies, from the fraternity president to the pledges (Turner 1988, 3-5). Status is *local*, meaning community-specific. For example, within a church congregation, the deacon is high-status. When he is not in church, that same person might be a janitor, which is considered a low-status occupation among middle-class Americans, or a sexual minority with low-status in his neighborhood. This means that status is *situational*: it can change depending on the community of interest that a person is interacting with. While some factors, like wealth or education, have status that translates across multiple contexts,

smaller social groups and cultures will have particular status markers and practices such as musical knowledge or owning a certain pair of shoes.

Status is displayed in almost every possible variant of human interaction, including language (Labov 1964; Scott 1996), etiquette and deportment (Wouters 1995), pastime and entertainment preferences (Bourdieu 1984; Peterson and Kern 1996), and clothing and possessions (Featherstone 1991; Giddens 1991; Bagwell and Bernheim 1996). Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption describes the vicarious demonstration of wealth through ritual display and use of consumer goods; these "signaling properties" of a good refer to its ability to provide information to outside observers about the possessor's social status (Ireland 1994). Judith Donath uses the term "signal" in a similar way. She explains that a signal is "a perceivable action or structure that is intended to or has evolved to indicate an otherwise imperceivable quality about the signaler or the signaler's environment. The purpose of a signal is communication and its goal is to alter the receiver's beliefs or behavior" (Donath, chap. 2). I use *status signal* to describe any action, structure, or quality that indicates social status, whether this is conscious or unconscious on the part of the signaler. Similarly, a *status marker* is something that demonstrates status, whether that be a possession, action, or attribute. A *status practice* is something that is done to display, maintain, or increase status. Turner writes that status practices "...emphasize and exhibit cultural distinctions and differences which are a crucial feature of all social stratification" (1988, 66). Indeed, knowledge *of* practices creates boundaries

between insiders and outsiders that are important to status maintenance. For example, a high-status high school clique will adhere to complex codes of acceptable dress, social relationships, or slang, making it difficult for outsiders to become part of the group (Milner 2004). Some of these status markers are *ascribed*, attributes like race, gender, and age, which a person cannot control, while others are *achieved*, attributes like education or job title which are dependent on individual achievement (Linton 1936).<sup>32</sup>

These are all subject to change over time, as status hierarchies, signals, markers and practices are particular to a spatiotemporal location. Peterson writes that “the whole intellectual basis on which status markers are established shifts over time, harbingers of changing power relationships in society” (Peterson 1997, 75). Erving Goffman’s classic paper “Symbols of Class Status” (1951) demonstrates how concepts of status have changed since mid-century. Goffman conceptualizes status as “fixed through time by means of external sanctions enforced by law, public opinion, and threat of socio-economic loss, and by internalized sanctions of the kind that are built into a conception of self and give rise to guilty, remorse, and shame” (1951, 294). Although I agree with Goffman that status is structurally reinforced, in Goffman’s social context, status was viewed as unchangeable. People of other socioeconomic positions who attempted to pass as upper-class by using “costly symbols” were considered to be “misrepresenting” their class status, prompting the term “nouveaux riche” (1951, 303). This fixity has changed; today people in all walks of life pursue “costly

symbols” like Humvees and Louis Vuitton bags, without concern that they are “misrepresenting” themselves. Even counterfeit luxury goods, the ultimate “misrepresentation” of high-status goods, are widely seen as morally acceptable (Thomas 2007).

### Status and Class

It is important not to confuse status with social class. The sociological examination of status is primarily influenced by two perspectives, that of Marx and Weber. Marx held that social divisions, which he called the “superstructure,” depend on economic inequality, or “substructure.” In contrast, Weber saw social stratification as multidimensional, encompassing power and culture as well as economic differences (Turner 1988, 1-2). In the sociological sense, status is an intrinsic part of social stratification; in other words, status is what determines a person’s place within a social hierarchy. The inherent tension between these two approaches rises from the Marxist position that economics, rather than status, are the root of social stratification. I take a position akin to Weber’s, namely that class and status are not synonymous. Chan and Goldthorpe’s useful paper “Class and Status: The Conceptual Distinction and its Empirical Relevance” (2007) maintains that Weber’s distinction between status and class, while quite important, has largely been ignored by American sociologists (European sociologists are more likely to theorize on the basis of class). Although class is primarily economic in nature, Chan and Goldthorpe maintain that social class is not necessarily hierarchical and that power differentials between social classes are



more complicated than can be expressed in simple ranking. Chan and Goldthorpe define status as:

...a structure of relations of perceived, and in some degree accepted, social superiority, equality and inferiority among individuals that reflects not their personal qualities but rather the degree of 'social honour' attaching to certain of their positional or perhaps purely ascribed attributes (e.g. 'birth' or ethnicity). The social hierarchy thus created is expressed in differential association, especially in more intimate kinds of sociability—Weber speaks of 'commensality' and 'connubium'—and in lifestyles of differing distinction that are seen as appropriate to different status levels (2007, 6).

The distinction between the two is elucidated by David Brooks, a pop sociologist who coined the term "income-status disequilibrium" to describe a person whose income does not match his or her status. Brooks suggests that in the United States, a professor earning \$80,000 a year is higher status than a CEO with a GED earning a million dollars a year (2000). While this is a useful example to understand the difference between income and status, it implies incorrectly that American society shares a universal set of status norms. While the professor may possess greater social or cultural capital in some contexts, in others the CEO's income will elevate her position in a social hierarchy. This again shows the importance of social and cultural context in analyzing status.

Bourdieu theorized this complex relationship between class and status using the concepts of social and cultural capital, resources which have symbolic power, or the ability to affect meaningful change (1984). Cultural capital, such as a prestigious university education or knowledge about fine art, builds on itself. Getting into Harvard, for example, requires other forms of capital, like SAT

preparation to raise standardized test scores, access to extracurricular activities, networking with Harvard alumni, and so forth. People typically learn about these resources and how to access them from parents, peers, or school; this knowledge must be taught, and is not available to everyone. The same is true of taste. What we consider “high culture,” appreciation for classical music or modern dance, is learned from family or peers over time (Bourdieu 1984). Bourdieu conceptualized “high culture,” such as opera, fine art, and ballet, as cultural formations associated with upper class elites. Bourdieu understood taste as a marker of the dominant class that schools and families inculcated into younger members, functioning to maintain class boundaries, rather than an innate property of those gifted with superior aesthetic judgment. While Bourdieu’s theories were enormously influential, other theorists reject the model of a single space of distinction in favor of one in which multiple, overlapping taste cultures exist (Gans 1999; Ollivier and Fridman 2001).

This does not mean that there are no longer elites or that cultural and social capital does not exist. In the United States today, higher-status people consume more of all types of culture, whether talk shows or art films (Peterson and Kern 1996; Peterson 1997). This omnivorousness can be linked to the fact that higher-status people are more connected than lower-status people; their networks are larger, they travel more, and spend time with people across social classes and lifestyles (DiMaggio 1987; Erickson 1996). While Bourdieu’s model assumes that competence in a narrow field of cultural artifacts confers status, this

new model suggests “cultural mobility,” the strategic manipulation of cultural symbols, as a status marker (Emmison 2003). The ability to tailor cultural expressions and discussions appropriately, based on audience, becomes valuable cultural capital. Someone who can eat at a Michelin-starred restaurant with the company president and talk with their administrative assistant about *American Idol* is well-equipped for success.

### Status and Consumption

One category of status practice involves consumption, originally theorized by Thorstein Veblen in *Conspicuous Consumption* (1899). Veblen’s concept of *conspicuous consumption* describes elaborate and expensive rituals performed by the upper class to demonstrate an abundance of free time, indicating wealth. Ritzer argues that Veblen’s theory makes more sense in the context and era of the Gilded Age, pointing out that “in modern societies, characterized by a high degree of anonymity and mobility, it is very difficult to display a conspicuous waste of time. It is far easier to be conspicuous on the basis of the goods one has purchased” (2001, 210). Cultural anthropologists have further conceptualized consumption as a *social* process that encompasses use and discourse as well as the buying and selling of objects (De Certeau 1984; Chin 2001). These processes frame commodity goods as status markers, and suggest that identifying with goods is a key part of contemporary identity work (Veblen 1899; Weber 1946; Hall 1996; Klein 1999). This type of consumption is often linked to display, e.g.

viewing the good in person (Baudrillard 1998). For instance, theorists of luxury goods emphasize the importance of the built environment of consumption in creating luxury subjects, such as the four star hotel guest or brand-name store customer (Twitchell 2003; Sherman 2007). On the other end of the spectrum, cultural studies scholars have conceptualized the creative re-working and display of symbolic commodity goods as resistance to hegemonic consumer capitalism (Hebdige 1979; Fiske 1990). Understanding consumption in late modernity requires thinking about how it operates in physical space. Technologically mediated communication complicates these ideas of consumption as conspicuous display, since people communicating through computers are usually (but not always) invisible to each other, requiring us to think about “conspicuousness” differently. For instance, people may post digital pictures of their outfits to fashion blogs or discuss their favorite designers with others online. Conspicuous consumption can exist without co-presence.

Contemporary sociologists and economists have studied the use of visible marker possessions to connote social status, which is very common (Featherstone 1991; Giddens 1991; Bagwell and Bernheim 1996). Featherstone discusses how the recent increase in luxury goods and massive growth in lifestyle marketing has particularly targeted women, creating a series of new consumer images to be used as identity templates (1991, 108-9). Steven Silver writes, “It is clear that consumption remains instrumental in objectives of status attainment, even if it is less generally in the grandiose style of early industrialization” (2002, 1). The

goods used for conspicuous consumption are referred to as *status symbols*, which carry both *categorical significance*, in that they identify the social status of the person displaying it, and *expressive significance*, in that they express the point of view, style, and values of person displaying it (Goffman 1951, 295). This latter point echoes Birmingham School theorists like Hebdige and Hall in their discussions of the use of consumer goods as identity markers. Mark Poster writes, “In modern society, consumer objects represented social status; in postmodernity, they express one’s identity” (2004, 416). In the cultural view of status, both are possible: a Marc Jacobs bag can connote wealth, taste, and bohemian urbanism simultaneously.

#### How Status Functions Online

In the technology scene, there is a complex relationship between social media and social status. Many status symbols are related to technology, from owning a short domain name, to having many Facebook friends, to receiving quick responses to Twitter inquiries. Because social life in this particular context is highly mediated by technology, what people do online directly affects their in-person status and vice versa, to the point where it is difficult to separate the two. In general, status *motivates* people to participate in online interactions (boyd 2007; Lampel and Bhalla 2007; Christofides, Muise, and Desmarais 2009). For example, Christofides et al. found that popularity was a major reason why Canadian undergraduates used Facebook (2009). Similarly, the highest status individuals on the textual forums of Usenet were those with long-term

engagements with a particular newsgroup who contributed valuable knowledge (Baym 2000). Obviously, status is not the only motivator for online action; there are many others, including entertainment, communication, productivity, collaboration, and so forth. But in certain communities, like the tech scene of San Francisco, we can think of status motivating online interaction in two ways. First, within a bounded online community like a massively-multiplayer online game or IRC channel, people may participate in order to increase their standing within that community. Second, people may try to boost their online visibility and popularity in order to increase their standing with a larger community that exists both on and offline; for example, a marketer attempting to establish a highly-trafficked blog to impress people in her field.

It is important to distinguish between “status” and related terms that are more often used to describe online interaction, particularly “trust” and “reputation.” Reputation, for instance, is used either to refer to systemized ranking systems like Slashdot Karma, World of Warcraft Reputation, or eBay Feedback, or a more ineffable quality that is roughly “what people say about you online.” In the first category, reputation systems are software mechanisms which collect, distribute, and aggregate feedback about people, such as eBay Feedback or Amazon Top Reviewers (Resnick et al. 2000). In World of Warcraft, for instance, “reputation” describes a system of “honor” that resembles military rankings; a player’s reputation increases with successful quests, often laborious scut work referred to as “grinding” (Rettberg 2008, 31). The second conceptualization of

reputation is used by services like ReputationDefender, which charges \$14.95 a month to monitor “every reference to you on the web” and defines reputation as “the opinion held by a given part of the community of an individual,” operationalized as “information found about you on the internet” (ReputationDefender 2010). Similarly, a new startup called “Unvarnished” provides unattributed, but verified, reviews of business professional’s work performance; the company uses the term “reputation” to refer to “candid assessments of coworkers, potential hires, business partners, and more” (Unvarnished 2010).

The first use of reputation differs from status in several important ways. First, most reputation systems reduce “reputation” to a single, quantifiable measure. In the “real world,” reputation, like status or trust, is subjective and differs from social context to context. Second, reputation systems assume a mutual, rational approach to trust. Williamson points out that personal interaction is emotional, and thus the mutual performance of trust or reputation is not always monitored, and failures are often forgiven rather than sanctioned (1993). A person may trust someone despite a bad reputation, or may trust them despite past transgressions, based on an amorphous quality difficult to determine in a formula.<sup>33</sup> Status, on the other hand, is more nuanced and complex. Still, while reputation mechanisms do not display status per se, they are good examples of features designed to convey specific types of social information, and can themselves affect status.

The second use of “reputation” resembles status, in that it is social information about a person determined by others. But these terms are distinct.

Management scholars Marvin Washington and Edward Zajac write:

We suggest that there are subtle but important differences between the two concepts: status is fundamentally a sociological concept that captures differences in social rank that generate privilege or discrimination (not performance-based awards), while reputation is fundamentally an economic concept that captures differences in perceived or actual quality or merit that generate earned, performance-based rewards (2005).

Although the terms are used interchangeably in the vernacular, I concur with Washington and Zajac’s conclusions. Reputation “reflects either the underlying reality or the intersubjectively agreed-upon reality of quality differences” between entities, while status reflects “fundamental, social characteristics that can be unrelated to—and exist independently of—the product/service quality differences (real or perceived)” (Washington and Zajac 2005, 284). By this definition, reputation indicates a singular metric while status is contextual. I suggest that “reputation” is frequently used in technological contexts precisely because of this quantifiability; as I will demonstrate, metrics are highly-valued in the tech scene because they apply the principles of engineering to complex social concepts. Still, status is more useful for analyzing a particular social context without claiming generalizability; it also incorporates both achieved and ascribed qualities rather than only someone’s actions.

Trust is also different from status. Trust as a philosophical and sociological concept is typically used to suggest a *public good* that is the basis for



“social cooperation, solidarity and consensus” (Misztal 1996, 3), but it is a “vague and murky concept” used in many different ways (1996, 6). Who we *trust* has little to do with their status; Donald Trump may be high-status to some, but I trust him a lot less than I do my best friend, who does not share his wealth or renown. Generally, trust *online* refers to *trustworthiness*. Trust can refer either to people’s trust in computer systems and networks which demonstrate “integrity, availability, survivability” and similar values (Nissenbaum 2004b, 156), or more specifically, trust in online transactions (Corritore, Kracher, and Wiedenbeck 2003). For example, trust cues in e-commerce sites include certificates like TRUSTe, VeriSign and credit card logos, security, privacy, and return policies, and phone, fax, shipping, and non-internet ordering options (Osborne and Kunz 2004).

### Status in the Technology Scene

For many, the Bay Area itself defines an identity; it is a land of liberal thoughts, multicultural restaurants, and invent-it-as-you-go-along traditions. For some, particularly those who came to work in high-tech industries, the culture is a “Silicon Valley Culture.” This identity, in which work defines worth, is based on producing technology, and embracing a fast pace and open attitude. In theory, it embodies the ultimate expression of personal achievement beyond the restrictions of one’s birth. Tom, a highly placed general manager, describes how each of his colleagues comes from among the working classes of many different countries, but, in a parable of meritocracy, each is now in SV playing for high stakes. People assert that opportunity is not affected by national origin, class, or gender. However, differences are detectable. The culture of opportunity looks different to a janitor, an admin, an engineer, and a high-tech executive (English-Lueck, 2002, p. 25).

In Jan English-Lueck's *Cultures@SiliconValley* project, she describes the centrality of modern work practices to Silicon Valley techno-culture and identifies the discrepancy between its discourse of egalitarianism and the reality of a striated social hierarchy. Similarly, while the San Francisco technology scene prides itself on openness of opportunity, my fieldwork showed that social position affects how one is treated by others, access to people, conferences, and technologies, job and relationship prospects, the ability to command an audience, and many other privileges. In American society at large, higher social status has been linked to longevity (Marmot 2005), wealth (Belliveau, O'Reilly, and Wade 1996), deference, respect and influence (Ridgeway and Walker 1995; Anderson et al. 2001). Social status is a significant motivator for human action, and as a result people devote considerable time to status-seeking activities (Huberman, Loch, and Öncüler 2004). This is equally true of the tech scene, which is not only competitive and fast-paced but places immense value on technical innovation and success in the business world.

In this section, I look at the status structure, hierarchy, and symbols of the Web 2.0 technology scene in San Francisco. Note that the "technology scene" is a construct that encompasses and overlaps other social groups. Within the tech scene, I encountered Burning Man aficionados, bloggers, hardware hackers, venture capitalists, journalists, social media gurus, hipsters, nerds, and Twitter obsessives, to name a few, each with different experiences and opinions. Most significantly, although the Web 2.0 scene in San Francisco is a subset of the

Silicon Valley technology industry, there are differences between the city and its southern suburbs. San Francisco technology workers tend to be younger, less settled, child-free, focused on the social web, and more sociable than their Silicon Valley counterparts, who were often married with children and employed by large technology companies like Google and LinkedIn. I spent more time in San Francisco, but I attended events in Silicon Valley where the atmosphere seemed to focus on venture capital, funding, and the formalities of entrepreneurship. I interviewed Dale Larson, a longtime San Francisco tech worker who shared similar perceptions of these differences:

If we broaden outside of the San Francisco to include the Bay Area, it's a very different culture than say, entrepreneurs on the peninsula. I lived in Palo Alto for six weeks over the summer, house-sitting for a friend, and finally got that for the first time. Every time I'd gone down to the Valley before, I noticed that they have a different uniform than we do, which is to say they have one and we don't. And so I'd always felt a little bit of discomfort like, "Oh! What, I don't quite fit it." And I finally realized a big part of the difference is that here, everybody is a web person in some form or another. And there, everybody is an entrepreneur, and that doesn't - that could mean they're still in the web, but the difference isn't that, some of them are hardware guys, or some of them are inventors or something else, but the difference is like, what they want to do with this. For the web people, whether or not they are motivated by money and other things, they really enjoy business, selling things.

Despite these distinctions, many people talked about the San Francisco and Silicon Valley technology communities as a single social context, and I met plenty of people who traveled frequently between the two areas. I believe that there is a significant difference between the San Francisco Web 2.0 scene, which positions itself as *the* most important site of innovation, and the larger Silicon

Valley culture. Plenty of rank-and-file SV engineers could care less about their Twitter numbers and may not use social media at all. When I use the term “technology scene,” I mean a particular group of people in San Francisco devoted to social media as described in the first chapter.

This chapter’s broad overview is based on themes that repeatedly came up in San Francisco fieldwork between 2006-2009, popular discourse about the San Francisco technology scene in blogs, magazine articles, and so forth, and comparative fieldwork in the New York social media scene from 2009-2010. As in all chapters, direct quotes from informants are taken from formal interviews. The status of each person I talked to or observed, whether insider or outsider, high or low status, male or female, affected how they viewed the scene.

In general, the technology scene ascribes status to wealth, risk-taking, entrepreneurship, visibility, access, recognition, technical know-how, and intelligence. Looking at some of the conflicts and nuances in status symbols and practices reveals the tension in the ethics of Web 2.0. I found that these values embodied not only the idealism of Web 2.0’s countercultural roots, but also its location in a neoliberal ethic of work/life integration and relentless self-marketing. In many ways, the easiest route to achieve high status in the tech scene is through full participation in both the business of technology and social media. There are several extensive ethnographies of Silicon Valley that explicate the values and practices of technology workers in detail (Saxenian 1996; English-Lueck 2002; Finn 2002). For purposes of space, I discuss what is most pertinent

to this dissertation, which deals with how people in the SF tech scene pursue and seek status.

### Hierarchy

The technology scene has a well-understood and clear social hierarchy, notwithstanding proclamations of its inclusiveness or openness. Despite claims that the scene was meritocratic, many of my informants, when pressed, were able to describe this hierarchy in great detail. For example, blogger and marketing entrepreneur Tara Hunt explained her perceptions of the community in an interview:

There are those who are talking about it. They're on the lower rungs of the hierarchy.

There are those that are working on it. In that strata of working on it you recognize a definite chance of success. Or you look at it and go, "Yeah... [*derisively*] that's a feature." or "That person is just doing it for money." You just look at it and say, yeah, that start-up is not going anywhere. The top of that strata would be like the middle class. The working on it is the middle class.

The top of that strata are people that you go, that's going to be successful, the Get Satisfaction. Like a current company you can see going further. I saw Twitter before Twitter exploded. That sort of thing.

The top, the upper crust, are the people that have done it. They did it. They had a company people loved. They sold it. They are now doing whatever the hell they please. The different ways they interact.

So the talking about it-- you see these people at every event. This was me, whatever. Every event, reading everything, commenting on everything, being overly eager, almost being desperately hungry.

The next strata, they're working on it. They drop out a little bit because they are working on things. You don't see them as often, but they do come out, and they're pretty focused on their companies. They're talking to people. Those on the upper crust of that don't have to focus so much. They actually can have a little bit more fun. Because yeah, they've got it.

The people in the upper crust you never see them come out unless you're like, at Davos or something. That's the only place you see pictures of these people... They don't need to come to every party in-- yeah, like I said, the parties they go to. Like Bono and Davos and Ted. You'll see them at Ted. That sort of thing.

What's most obvious in her description is that status level is conferred through one's position in a neoliberal schema of work. Status in this community is conveyed primarily through *the business of technology*. Work is conflated with value, morality, personality, and character. When Tara talks about *having done it*, she distinguishes two qualities: having "a company that people loved" and selling it. The latter is exemplified by MySpace's sale to Fox Interactive (\$580 million), PayPal's acquisition by eBay (\$1.5 billion), or YouTube's purchase by Google (\$1.6 billion). The former speaks to the centrality of technology to daily life; creating something that people use, and emotionally connect with, is high-status in and of itself. Naturally, the combination of both is the highest status of all; the prevalent conception of success, and the dream many people in the tech scene are chasing, is to found a successful technology company and get rich from its acquisition or IPO (Initial Public Offering). As Tara's taxonomy demonstrates, people's position on the social hierarchy of the scene is determined by how close they are to this goal.

This hierarchy also demonstrates the integration of business ideals with social values, something that has characterized Silicon Valley for decades.

English-Lueck, in her ethnography of 1990s technology workers, writes:

Use of technology is linked to work, the lodestone of SV life. In our fieldwork, if we asked about technologies, we ended up hearing about work. If we asked about family, we heard about work. Work is a center of discourse. Work matters and workplaces matter. Work is used to explain why a child needs a computer—to prepare her for the world of work (2002, 22-23).

In the SF tech scene, there is slightly more balance: people love to snowboard, ride bikes, and go to concerts. But during fieldwork, when I asked people what they did, they answered with a list of work projects. When I first met someone, they often gave me an elevator pitch for their latest project. Social occasions were frequently sponsored by companies or held at startup headquarters. People wore t-shirts and hats with company logos, and lived and socialized with their co-workers. Work was a source of satisfaction, fulfillment, and personal worth, both literally and figuratively. Pounce founder Leah Culver, when asked about work/life balance in a speech to Girls in Tech,<sup>34</sup> said “Pick one or the other, make your choices, whatever makes you happy.” She flatly stated, “If you really want to have work/life balance— you can't.” This was a common attitude and the underlying implication was that one should pick work. (“Work-life balance” is often a gendered euphemism for family and children. The prioritization of work implied that these things were unimportant; I did not hear any young men discussing their concerns in this area.)

This hierarchy also demonstrates the idealism of the technology scene. When Tara refers to *working on it* or *doing it*, she means engaging in what the community thinks is important. This does not mean just creating technology, but following your passion, in the sense of popular Web 2.0 motivational speaker Gary Vaynerchuk whose book bears the tagline “Cash In on Your Passion.” Status is linked not just to job title, but to creative *output*. Technology facilitates people doing what they love, creating revolutionary products, “changing the world” and utilizing their entire creative process. It is not just getting rich, but creating something that *people love*. This encapsulates both the ideology of work exemplified by dot-com companies, namely that participating in the capitalist work force is the path to personal and spiritual growth and self-actualization, as well as the do-it-yourself ethic professed by media activists and punk rockers that people should create and disseminate personal projects as alternatives to institutional products.

### The Role of the Entrepreneur

This idealism is reflected in the mythology of success, which holds that those who succeed (and thus ascend to the top of the Web 2.0 heap) do so due to their excellent ideas and ability, demonstrating that the tech scene is a meritocracy which rewards intelligence and hard work. Paulina Barsook writes:

Philosophical technolibertarianism gives one pause because it colors, deeply and widely and mostly unconsciously, a zillion personal and institutional decisions. The notion that because one is rich one must be smart, however fallacious, is deeply embedded:



People can equate piles of money—or the promise of it—with good sense, wisdom, and *savoir faire* (2001, 22).

This mythology is omnipresent in the technology scene and it has several functions. First, it denies the value of personal connections, wealth, background, gender, race, or education in a company's success. If, for example, women are not getting venture capital funding at the same rate as men, it is due to their lack of ability rather than institutional sexism. Second, technology companies are capable of generating immense wealth for their creators and funders (and to a certain extent the employees) and the highest-status people tend to be extraordinarily wealthy. However, talking about money is *gauche*. Entrepreneurs almost never claim that they founded a company to get rich; instead, they cloak their ambitions in idealistic language. This justifies the extremely high status of people who sold companies for millions of dollars by claiming that people admire their intelligence rather than wealth. Technology journalist Kara Swisher explains:

Money is the most important factor. They would deny it up and down, but you know, stock options, who is in on a hot company, who gets the stock options, what kind of stock options they get, how they are paid. I think the people at Google suddenly became the smartest people in the universe, because, you know, they are, but they aren't. And the minute that stock went down, they definitely lost status.

The ability of technology entrepreneurs to earn millions of dollars, as opposed to teachers, doctors, or social workers, is also justified through lofty rhetoric of changing the world. Not everyone buys into this myth. Former *Valleywag* editor and professional cynic Owen Thomas scoffs:

Well, but I mean it's just... like when you really dig down into OK, "What are your personal goals, where do you see yourself?" Like, they don't want to change the world really. They want to better their wallet, which is not that different from everyone else out there. And, you know, not that bad of a thing really, except they're trying to they're trying to blow up like just living an ordinary life into something grandiose and, you know, into a cult.

Overwhelmingly, the highest status people in the technology scene are successful, wealthy entrepreneurs. They personify the values of individualism, technological innovation, creativity, and intelligence that reinforce the sense of the tech scene as a meritocracy. They are also very wealthy; money is not only a primary signal of status, it facilitates other high-status activities like expensive cars, vacations, and houses. The status of young entrepreneurs like Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook is cemented by their media coverage, conference appearances, and endless references on blogs and Twitter. This creates a sense of celebrity that compounds people's interest in them. Often, rich entrepreneurs create products that people use, like, and connect to on a personal level. Fans of the location-based social network Foursquare, for example, held simultaneous "Foursquare Day" celebrations around the country on 4/16/2010, organized independently from the company. Evan Williams, the founder of Twitter, is high-status partially because Twitter is so integrated into people's lives; like Mark Zuckerberg or Bill Gates, he has achieved mythic status because his creation is a part of daily life. At a tech party, Williams is the equivalent of a movie star.

This sense of entrepreneurial value extends beyond founding a company. Having personal projects demonstrates initiative and creativity. Participating in

the larger community of technology enthusiasts, whether founding an event or developing an open-source tool, is highly respected, demonstrating “community citizenship, generalized reciprocity, moral obligation, and pro-social behavior” (Tedjamulia et al. 2005), traits that are valued in many technology communities that prize information-sharing and collaboration. Similarly, contributing to free or open-source software projects demonstrates that the creator is technologically savvy, creative, and not motivated by money. For example, technologist Tantek Çelik quit his full-time job at Technorati to work full-time as an evangelist for microformats, a set of open data standards. He told me:

So in June of 2005, there was basically enough critical mass around this, like, okay, this needs to move off the Technorati developers wiki and on to something neutral, and so we created microformats dot org. It's like open community. To maintain this stuff. It's totally taken off, and it's totally vibrant...and this are some of the reasons why I quit Technorati. You know, I'm like, this shit's taking off like a rocket. Like now is the time. I need to spend my time in my life right now on this. It's like so much more important and to like help it whatever...achieve potential, whatever potential it can. Because like...that kind of thing doesn't happen to you like all the time. It's like a once-in-a lifetime kind of thing, especially if it's like fundamentally impacting the web.

Most members of the tech scene were working on multiple personal projects simultaneously.

Even more commonly, life itself is treated as a project. English-Lueck writes that in Silicon Valley, “relationships are also transformed into products, and people ‘work’ on their relationships, making them projects with goals. Working on one’s ‘parenting,’ or on one’s romantic relationships, demonstrates an approach towards family and education that mirrors the practice of an engineer

in the workplace” (2002, 33). This sensibility is epitomized by the term “lifehack,” which Wikipedia defines as, “anything that solves an everyday problem in a clever or non-obvious way... [the term] is primarily used by geeks who suffer from information overload or those with a playful curiosity in the ways they can accelerate their workflow” (Wikipedia contributors 2010d). Lifehacking is an instrumental use of work-related practices mapped on to intimate life.

More than anything else, one’s job determines status. Hillary Hartley, a member of the co-working collective CitizenSpace and an e-government consultant, explains:

I think probably in San Francisco, the company that you work for may be first. Second, the type of thing that you do--well, maybe first, the company that you work for, or if you don't work for a cool company, if you're in a start-up. You get credit here for that. And then after that, it's probably the type of web stuff that you're doing, and I say that as somebody who does e-government.

Since entrepreneurialism is so highly valued, working for a large company, even a well-regarded and wealthy company like Google, is less impressive than performing the same role at a hot startup. Tantek Çelik explained, “I quit Microsoft. Right, I went to go and work for Technorati. I think that raised my status as well, a little bit, like, now, like working for a hot startup, and all that kind of thing.” There are several reasons for this; first, working at a startup demonstrates risk-taking, since in the beginning of a startup, workers usually take lower salaries and work long, stressful hours. Second, startups are generally more exciting than large, stable companies in terms of interesting projects, volatility,

changes, and so forth. Third, joining a successful startup in the early stages shows the value of foresight, as it comes with equity—a percentage of the company—and the promise of great wealth if the company is bought or goes public. If this scenario plays out, the company diminishes in status because there is no longer the possibility of making an enormous amount of money. As Tara Hunt explained, a startup's status is partially based on how likely they are to succeed. People frequently jump from lower to higher-status startups. When I began fieldwork, Digg was the coolest company to work for, but as Twitter became more popular, employees left Digg to join the Twitter team.

#### Gender and the Myth of Entrepreneurship

Because entrepreneurship is such a crucial part of the technology scene's status hierarchy, it is worth delving into the complicated relationship between men, women and entrepreneurialism to examine how status is affected by gender. While I focus on gender in this chapter because my informants talked about it frequently, a similar section could be written about class, race, or sexuality. In summary, entrepreneurialism is a loaded concept that incorporates male-normative notions of behavior and success. This systematically excludes women from the highest levels of the technology scene. Furthermore, these assumptions about women and entrepreneurship are reflected in individual-level discourse. While many members of the tech scene—both men and women—espoused equality and meritocracy, they simultaneously re-enacted and reinforced sexist

stereotypes about women in technology through their own talk and practice. Specifically, women's contributions to the scene were devalued or attributed to men, women were systematically sexualized and judged on appearance, and structural sexism was denied. This is a vicious circle that discourages women's participation in entrepreneurial technology, creating fewer female role models and mentors for younger women and thus perpetrating the low rates of women in technology.

First, it is widely agreed that the trope of the “entrepreneur” is specifically *white* and *male*. John Ogbor writes:

The discourse on entrepreneurship, following a pattern within a general ‘Eurocentric’ character of Western thought, has sustained traditional dichotomies, oppositions and dualities—between male and female—where the male-oriented definition of reality is upheld as the legitimate world-view celebrating masculine concepts of control, competition, rationality, dominance, etc. (2000, 620)

Studies of entrepreneurship discourse have repeatedly found that “entrepreneurs” are male-gendered, while “female entrepreneurs” are ignored, under-covered, and portrayed less favorably than men (Baker, Aldrich, and Liou 1997; Ahl 2002; Bruni, Gherardi, and Poggio 2004; Achtenhagen and Welter 2006). For instance, Helene Ahl analyzed business discourse about entrepreneurs and found that 70 percent of descriptive words were male-gendered, including self-reliant, assertive, forceful, risk-taking, self-sufficient, leader, competitive, and ambitious (2006). This discourse has an ideological effect, namely, to discourage women from pursuing entrepreneurship by positioning it as a male enterprise, and by

portraying “women entrepreneurs” as unusual deviations from the norm (Ogbor 2000).

In Silicon Valley specifically, there is a consistency to the myth of the entrepreneur that has persisted through thirty years of boom-and-bust cycles, an image that is almost always young, white and male. For example, in the mid-80s, Michael Shawn Malone described Silicon Valley denizens in *The Big Score: The Billion Dollar Story of Silicon Valley*:

Thirty year old tycoons in T-shirts, making their first hundred million before they buy their first pin-striped suit; secretaries worth millions thanks to a few dollars spent on stock options; garage inventors suddenly finding themselves on lists of the world’s richest men (1985).

In this segment, the “world’s richest” garage inventors are men, while the “secretaries,” presumably female, accidentally get rich through the almost-accidental purchasing of stock. This image of the industry as male, and as women as irrelevant, girlfriends, or gold-diggers is persistent through the microelectronics era:

Why there are few women in positions of responsibility in SV is complex and puzzling... females have yet to enter the boardrooms or the executive suites of SV.... [VCs, scientists, finance people, startups] these power brokers rely exclusively on their personal networks, passing information about job openings, possibilities for expansion, and promising companies to their friends—other men. Women are virtually absent from the power centers of SV corporations (Rogers and Larsen 1984, 142).

To the dot-com era:

...money doesn’t impress. It’s too ubiquitous to dazzle. And there are too many ways here to make a lucky bundle and never really have deserved it. Driving a Ferrari doesn’t impress anyone but the

heavy-on-the-eye-shadow secretaries perched on the bar stools at the Friday evening Black Angus happy hour (Bronson 2000, 219).

To the Web 2.0 era:

By the time they had started the incubator, all three [company founders] had gotten hipster makeovers... add designer jeans, Pumas, and a supply of tight-fitting T-shirts with witty sayings, and the geeks were now practically ladies' men. Add the bank accounts, and they definitely were. And don't forget the ultimate Web 2.0 accessory: puppies (Lacy 2008, 39).

In each of these segments, taken from three different books about Silicon Valley life, the movers-and-shakers are men, while women are secretaries or sex objects easily impressed by wealth or cute animals.

The same tropes run through descriptions of the Web 2.0 scene in San Francisco and New York. In 2008, *Details* magazine ran an article called "The Playboys of Tech." It profiled the wild-and-crazy lives of young (white) Web 2.0 entrepreneurs Mark Zuckerberg, Jakob Lodwick (CollegeHumor), Kevin Rose (Digg), David Karp (Tumblr), Charles Foreman (OMGPOP), and Pete Cashmore (Mashable). The story describes these men's extreme youth, wealth, and women who fall all over them; while a few accomplished women like technology journalist Caroline McCarthy appear in the story, they are portrayed primarily as girlfriends. The writer even includes the term "founder fetishism: when a woman goes only for men who have started high-tech companies" (Chaplin 2008). During fieldwork, people joked about "Web 2.0 floozies" and "CE-ho's" to describe women who supposedly enter the tech scene just to sleep with founders. Clearly, these portrayals are deeply sexist and heterosexist, reducing women to playthings



and trophies. But they also function to restrict women (and non-white men or gay men) to a secondary role, positioning the entrepreneur as subject as something only men can embody successfully.

While entrepreneurs are consistently portrayed in popular discourse as young, brash white men, this does not actually map to the reality of American entrepreneurship. Forty percent of privately-held businesses in the United States are owned by women (Center for Women's Business Research 2010). Despite the attribution of entrepreneurial traits to men, studies have shown no significant differences between women and men who start companies in terms of education, technical background, or motivation (Wadhwa et al. 2009; Cohoon, Wadhwa, and Mitchell 2010). In fact, by some metrics, women-owned companies out-perform the average: they are more conservative about spending money, and are more likely to survive the transition from startup to established company (Miller 2010; Padnos 2010).

However, media imagery has an enormous impact on how and what people think about entrepreneurship. While venture-backed technology companies do not represent the majority of United States companies, they are the highest status in Silicon Valley and overwhelmingly run and funded by men. Only 8 percent of venture-backed startups are founded by women, and only 14 percent of venture capitalists are women (Miller 2010). In a TechCrunch article by Harvard professor Vivek Wadhwa, Sharon Vosneck identified “systematic and hidden biases” in technology funding:

VCS hold clear stereotypes of successful CEOs (they call it pattern recognition, but in other industries they call it profiling or stereotyping.) John Doerr [venture capitalist] publicly stated that his most successful investments – and the no-brainer pattern for future investments – were in founders who were white, male, under 30, nerds, with no social life who dropped out of Harvard or Stanford (Wadhwa 2010).

Thus, the limited perception of entrepreneurs furthered by media and business discourse affects who receives funding. One informant, a venture capitalist, said some very questionable things about women in an interview. (He looked horrified when he realized what he had said on the record, and I promised to anonymize him.)

And in the end, the basic conclusion we came to is like, women are just emotional and it reminds me– don't take this the wrong way– of a seven-year-old kid, or an eight-year-old kid who's struggling with emotions, doesn't know what's happening, they can't verbalize it, it happens to all of us, even men. And men can shut down, get angry, but we can logically do something. And women can't express it to the guy logically.

Clearly, if a VC thinks women are less logical and emotionally mature than men, this will impact his likelihood of funding women-run companies. This quote also displays the primacy of engineering and programming logic when applied to social life, both fields in which women are underrepresented.

These perceptions were also furthered by individual discourse. While both male and female informants talked about women in technology in terms of equality and meritocracy, they re-enacted and reinforced stereotypes and tropes around women in technology and entrepreneurship through talk and actions. The following quote from an anonymized informant demonstrates several recurring

themes. The informant is discussing Tara Hunt and Chris Messina, two members of the social media scene who dated, worked on several projects together, and then broke up (I interviewed Tara). Tara is a marketer and author, while Chris is a technologist and developer. Both Chris and Tara were still high-profile in the scene, and their breakup took place partially over social media.

If you wanted a pivotal story about the difference between doing stuff that's real and matters, and doing stuff that's superficial and just, sort of, social flurry, the whole relationship of Chris Messina and Tara Hunt. Very public, done in excruciating, painful detail, in front of everyone. But Chris has gone up and done great things, done; Barcamp, for Christ's sakes. And now he's working on OpenID stuff. He's the guy that invented hashtags, for Christ's sakes, Twitter. He's done a lot of things...But he got involved in this social media swirl, to some extent because of Tara being one of those young, beautiful people, although she's a little older now. She definitely had that aura. And they had this very public love affair and romance. They were everywhere together. They started Citizen Agency. They started pushing co-working. They were involved in a lot of fundamentally important ideas that really all came from Chris. And then they parted ways, very ugly and publicly... The divergence of those two people is dramatic. Chris is going to live to do great things over the next 40 years. I don't expect...Tara, if she can keep her head above water, but she can't get any business, is going to become a PR flak. She's going to have a PR agency and she's going to help people use social media. If she's sensible, she'll mature and figure out how to do it as a business. She'll exploit the brand that she has for that benefit, etc., etc. But it's not going to cure cancer.

This quote illustrates several patterns I observed when people discussed women in the scene. First, Tara's appearance is mentioned while Chris's is not, demonstrating how women are objectified and evaluated based on looks (and dismissed as a result). This is not simply something men do to women; some women in the scene engage in self-objectification, including posting flattering or

risqué shots of themselves online, or find empowerment through public discussion of their sexuality. Second, Tara's accomplishments (including co-founding an agency, organizing several conferences and writing a book) are attributed to her involvement with Chris. Third, her contributions to the scene are seen as insignificant compared to Chris's. Sadly, these motifs recurred throughout fieldwork. Individual women in the tech scene were discussed in terms of appearance and sexuality, their accomplishments were attributed to their involvement with men, and their contributions to the scene were de-valued—by both men and women.

Mentoring and networking were common in the scene. Events were held for the express purpose of networking, and formal and informal mentorship was widespread. Adam Jackson, a newcomer to San Francisco and aspiring entrepreneur, was mentored by several older (male) technologists and spent time working with teenage (male) entrepreneurs. Studies show that mentorship is an important part of career mobility and longevity in business in general, but that women face more barriers than men in finding a mentor due to lack of women in upper-level management and lack of presumed commonality between cross-gender mentor-protégé relationships (Noe 1988; Scandura 1992). This is compounded in the technology industry since there are so few women in upper management (Miller 2010). I found that relationships which might have been characterized as “networking” or “mentoring” between men were sexualized once

one member of the dyad was female. In an informal analysis of discourse around “hinted” affairs in media stories, *Awl* blogger Jane Hu wrote:

The relative stories I found all contained one trend: ambitious and often "troublesome" women who profited professionally by their involvement with established men of authority. Of course, had these stories involved the relationship between two men, one would always (well, almost always) have simply called it “networking.” With women, networking was recast as a pejorative and manipulative working of the system. And because there were ladies involved, the articles...emphasized their sexual appeal and activities with the men in question (Hu 2010).

This is virtually identical to two dynamics I observed in gossip and talk around male-female friendship: mentoring and networking were sexualized, and any accomplishments of the women involved were attributed to men.

While there certainly were women and men within the scene who both dated and worked together, these relationships were described in terms like “gold-digging” or “sleeping her way to the top” regardless of whether they were romantic or not. For example, Leah Culver’s founding of Pownce was attributed to her friendship with Kevin Rose or Twitter designer Daniel Burka. Owen Thomas wrote a lengthy blog post about Culver, which read, in part:

If she doesn't want to be famous, Culver might want to take a look at her relentless technosexuality, which more than hints at the acquisition of influence rather than intimacy as its goal. Is it sexist to point this out? Perhaps, but not nearly as sexist as touting technical skills while sleeping your way to the top (Thomas 2008).

I argued with Thomas about this interpretation in our interview, but he responded:

I find the Leah Culver story fascinating because you actually have a woman who is very deliberately sleeping her way to the top. Like a classic, classic stereotype, almost a parody of how you might imagine that would be done. So, if you think that is something that

is bad and should not be encouraged and falls outside the social norms that we would like to foster, what do you do? Do you say I'm not going to write about that because people might say, "Oh look, you know, there is this woman acting like a stereotype and we don't want to encourage the existence of that stereotype"? Or do you say, "Well, no actually you want to say, 'Look, this is bad, don't do this, don't support this, don't tolerate this, don't remain silent about this.'"

From Thomas's point of view, Culver *was* "sleeping her way to the top," and it was his journalistic duty to point this out so that other women wouldn't follow the same path. This story was widely accepted; one informant, a self-professed feminist woman, said snidely, "Unfortunately for Leah, it's not that she's sleeping."<sup>35</sup>

Thomas's questionable logic becomes even more problematic when this portrayal of Culver is shown to be part of a pattern in which women in the scene were *repeatedly* portrayed in this way. In addition to Tara Hunt and Chris Messina, one informant told me that Ariel Waldman's career had been launched by technologist Tantek Çelik "discovering" her (Waldman is a social media consultant and blogger). Blogger Penelope Trunk wrote a post calling business strategist Glenda Bautista a "gold-digger" for her relationship with WordPress founder Matt Mullenwag, although Mullenwag achieved success after he and Bautista began dating (Trunk backpedaled once Bautista's considerable professional accomplishments were pointed out). In all these instances, women's accomplishments were attributed to their involvement with men; I did not witness a single instance of this with men who were mentored by other men.

This also demonstrates the sexualization and objectification of women in technology media and discourse. Tech journalist Megan McCarthy told me:

When you have a story about a female entrepreneur, their looks get mentioned, men's looks never do. They'll be described as like, they will be described as like a petite blonde. Would you ever say tall, dark-haired Kevin Rose or something? I mean come on, although actually Kevin did get called doughy, which was great.

This is consistent with studies showing that media portrayals of powerful women, whether lawyers, sports stars, or politicians, are often sexist and objectifying (Chase 1986; Faludi 1991; Koivula 1999). For instance, a *BusinessWeek* story on Google executive Melissa Mayer described her as a “tall, striking blonde with blue eyes” while PopCrunch called Leah Culver “the hottest software engineer alive.” These comments are often positive (one informant said “you’ve got like the Ariel Waldmans of the world who are completely out there about everything that happens in their lives, and sexually and technically, who are really smart, really beautiful, and you scratch your head and go, “And you can actually manage that?” And they do!”). But they still base a woman’s worth on her looks rather than accomplishments, devaluing women’s contributions to the scene and positioning them as objects rather than actors. This constitutes a barrier to women’s participation which is not in place for men, who are rarely, if ever, evaluated on their looks.

This devaluation of women’s accomplishments was systematic, reflecting the idea that women in the tech scene are overlooked or excluded because they are less worthy than men (Sullivan 2010). One (male) informant told me:

Ariel Waldman when she got hired as the Community Manager at Pownce she didn't really have a track record other than being a sex blogger, and now she is writing a book for [Press] about social media and she is doing community management work for NASA. So Pownce was a failure, not because she failed but, if you look at her resume, it would appear that so far Ariel doesn't really have a track record still. So she is running off of, I guess fumes and she is doing a great job but if I was an analyst to write about her I would say, I don't know how she got this job at NASA. She is a sex blogger who worked for a failed startup who is on Twitter. She has like 20,000 followers.

The informant implies that Waldman's success is unwarranted because she does not have the "track record" for it. While he admits she is doing a "great job," he undermines this statement by suggesting she isn't qualified for it. Similarly, another informant said about Tara Hunt:

It's very high school or college. It's like the sorority sisters, the great girls at school, that cadre of people who definitely were not the nerds, who were not the geeks...you know, the beautiful people. And so there's that, but it's paper-thin. No offense, I like Tara and she's a nice person, but if you sit down and actually talk to her, it's like two inches and a mile wide. There's no depth.

After disclaiming that he means "no offense," this informant places Tara in the category of the "beautiful people," stating that she is pretty, but has no intellectual depth. (I interviewed both Hunt and Waldman and found them to be thoughtful, intelligent, and knowledgeable about their respective fields.) These quotes are troubling as they suggest the obstacles that women in the scene must go through to achieve success; namely, the perception that they are less qualified than their male peers, which supports systematic gender discrimination. As the former dean of MIT concluded after a lengthy study of gender discrimination and the status of women faculty members, "Once and for all we must recognize that the heart and



soul of discrimination, the last refuge of the bigot, is to say that those who are discriminated against deserve it because they are less good” (Massachusetts Institute of Technology 1999).

Significantly, these patterns are perpetrated by women as well as men. Some women capitalize on their looks, making their appearance a significant component of their online persona. In a social milieu where women are commonly objectified, self-objectification makes strategic sense, but it still furthers the underlying problem that women are evaluated on appearance while men are not. (This also spurs resentment from others who perceive that good-looking women have an unfair advantage in the scene.) I experienced just as many women making judgmental comments about another woman’s looks, dating prospects, or sexuality as I did men. Moreover, some women I spoke with dismissed sexism as a problem. Ariel Waldman said:

[Leah Culver] doesn’t buy into the whole super feminist thing which I enjoy because I’m of the same mindset where, you know, it’s like, we’re working on cool stuff, we don’t have this, I guess attitude of like, “We’re a woman in tech.” [Laughter]... and when I meet people who are like that, I don’t know. My first-- it's sad but the first thing I think is like, are you actually good?

Waldman’s statement emphasizes the importance of meritocracy. Tokenism is widely denounced, and often women are accused of being tokens when they appear on a panel or achieve a professional accomplishment.

There are two major implications of this type of discourse. First, gender discrimination deeply undermines claims that the tech industry is a meritocracy. Although even successful women in the scene will say they do not want to be a

“woman in tech” but just a woman “in tech,” how their accomplishments are perceived is affected by their gender. And while the scene is supposedly egalitarian and democratic, it privileges the voices and experiences of men. For instance, at the 2009 Web 2.0 Summit, 80 percent of the speakers were men, while the 2009 “Future of Web Apps” conference boasted a single woman speaker and no people of color. The startup incubator Y Combinator recently came under attack for accepting only 14 women out of 450 participants (Harris 2010). The high status placed on entrepreneurs, a subjectivity that very few women can or do successfully embody, systematically excludes women from the upper echelons of social media culture.

The second has to do with the culture of production. While most of the people in Web 2.0 are not engineers per se—there are more entrepreneurs, marketers, business development people, etc. than developers—technology skills are highly prized. The statistics on the number of women in computer science are dismally low; as I mentioned in the introduction, according to the US Bureau of Labor, women comprise 19 percent of hardware engineers, 21 percent of software engineers, and 22 percent of computer programmers. Computer and mathematical professions are, overall, 75 percent male (National Center for Women and Information Technology 2007; Dines 2009). These numbers have actually *decreased* since the 1980s (Ashcraft and Blithe 2010; Misa 2010). In free/open source software development, researchers estimate that only about 1.5 percent of contributors are women (Nafus, Leach, and Krieger 2006; Holliger 2007). The

issue of women in computer science and engineering is tremendously complicated. Researchers have identified a plethora of reasons for these numbers, including a masculine programming culture, low rates of female math and science students, lack of role models, and media images of programmers (Spertus 1991; Margolis and Fisher 2003; Misa 2010). The attitudes I identified are part of this problem, but it is difficult to identify which part. Certainly, systematic gender bias in the tech scene, whether conscious or unconscious, contributes to maintaining a male-dominated culture of production (Gürer and Camp 2002; Margolis and Fisher 2003; Ashcraft and Blithe 2010). This means that technology is primarily made for, and by, men. Recent studies suggest that diverse development teams are more productive, innovative, and creative than their less-diverse counterparts (Ashcraft and Blithe 2010), but more worrisome is the idea that women's perspectives are not being incorporated into technological products. More research is needed in this area.

These problems are acknowledged by others. There are well-known female entrepreneurs in the scene, including Caterina Fake of Flickr and Hunch and Gina Bianchini of Ning. There are a plethora of organizations dedicated to supporting women in technology, such as Women 2.0, Change the Ratio, Astria, Girls in Tech, the Forum for Women's Entrepreneurs and Executives, and the National Center for Women and Information Technology. But complex problems have complex explanations. Unfortunately, the constant repetition of the idea that the technology industry is a meritocracy undermines these efforts, as it implies—

incorrectly—that those who do *not* rise to the top are less able than those who do. As I have shown, this is reinforced through micro-level discourse which subtly identifies successful women in the scene and paints them as less competent than men, or dependent on men for their achievements. For the most part, women in tech are primarily in marketing, public relations, project management, event planning, graphic design, or community management, lower-status jobs than developers, engineers, VCs, or entrepreneurs. The status structure of the tech scene thus reveals a systematic gender bias which excludes women from full participation.

### Status Symbols

The San Francisco technology scene adhered to an ethos of visible consumption focused on ostensibly functional goods, experiences, and travel. While spending on clothes or brand names was generally discouraged, carrying an expensive messenger bag filled with the latest gadgets was not considered ostentatious or wasteful because electronics were framed as necessary tools. Similarly, experiences and travel were deemed worthwhile because they contributed to self-improvement, education, and career development. Since the normative subject of consumption is usually gendered female and seen as irrational, shallow, or self-indulgent (Breazeale 1994; Clarke 1999; Andrews and Talbot 2000), this view frames a certain type of consumption as masculine and therefore acceptable, while caring about clothes and designer labels is feminized,

signals lesser intelligence, and is viewed as a waste of time. Conspicuous consumption is distinguished from shopping and frivolity by linking it to intelligent pursuits that have a larger purpose—typically work as it manifests in personal and professional life. The technology scene and technology in general are heavily male-gendered, so it is not surprising that status symbols are cloaked in a language of necessity and practicality.

Much acceptable conspicuous consumption revolved around experiences. Rock climbing, biking, and yoga are popular sports in San Francisco. While these activities can be practiced cheaply, joining a climbing gym or buying a fixed-gear bike is costly. Such hobbies were considered self-improvement and therefore “productive” and worth investing in. Similarly, many tech workers went to expensive, exclusive events like TED, Sundance, Coachella, South by Southwest, New York Internet Week, and technology conferences all over the world. Constant travel (and the subsequent accumulation of frequent flier miles) was normalized and demonstrated a flexible work schedule, plenty of money, and worldliness, all status symbols. This type of travel contributed to a subjectivity of global cosmopolitanism within the scene. Thurlow and Jaworski argue that frequent flier programs, with their attendant benefits, “promote a carefully managed cosmopolitan lifestyle predicated on the mythology of super-elite, global citizenship” (2006, 105). Similarly, meeting up with peers in airport lounges and hotel rooms across the country created a sense of a far-flung diaspora connected

through wealth, travel, and technology. One member of the New York tech scene tweeted:

Declining 80%-90% of speaking invites, trying to minimize travel + blur. But they're also the only way to connect w/ Global Intercity Peeps.

This tweet reflects the privilege of getting asked to speak at conferences, and the attendant conflicts this produces for frequent travelers. Travel boosts relationships with friends and colleagues far away, but it can be stressful and time-consuming. Still, it is considered necessary for maintaining connections to “Global Intercity Peeps.”

### Conferences

The conference is a significant site for solidifying group membership. Gabriella Coleman talks about the role of the “con” in hacker culture: “They [conferences] reconfigure the relation between time, space and persons; allow for a series of personal transformations; and, perhaps most importantly, reinforce group solidarity” (2010a, 52). Similarly, conferences have been instrumental in creating a community around Web 2.0, as they provide an opportunity for people to meet, brainstorm and generate ideas, learn and socialize in a way that maintains the primacy of business and work. Kara Swisher, who runs the All Things Digital conference, describes the role of conferences:

Tech people are very social and like to get together in an analog fashion in a way that is kind of antiquated to their obsession with Twitter and all that stuff. But they actually do. I call them like a high school class. They love to get together, meet, and chat. You can get them to go to almost any event, which is really kind of funny. Compared to a lot of other industries, really, it's kind of

astonishing in a lot of ways. I think they're very social outside. They like to get together and talk about each other and talk to each other. That's a nice thing. There is a lot of socialization that has nothing to do with technology. They just like to get together. They're very social outside. It's a very social group. That's why the conferences succeed so much, and why there's so much of that kind of stuff going on, because they're very successful. You can make a lot of money doing them. Actually, people like them. They like to get together. They like to chat with each other in person, in real-life style, which is kind of funny if you think about it.

Conferences in the tech scene create new friendships and cement older ones, produce stories to retell later, and create a sense of intimacy and inclusion among participants. Many of these interactions are done publicly, as conference attendees post pictures from events, tweet about sessions, and write blog posts about their experiences.

The most significant conference in the tech scene is South by Southwest Interactive (SXSWi), held yearly in Austin, Texas, and widely referred to as “spring break for geeks.” Hillary Hartley said:

[Interviewer]: What was your experience like at South By for your first time?

Hillary: It was awesome... Literally, it kind of changed my life.

[laughs] It's really cheesy but it really kind of did.

[Interviewer]: Why is that?

Hillary: Just meeting—again, I think everybody who has gone at least once says the same thing, which is it's not necessarily the conference; it's just the people that you meet. The hallway experiences, the party experiences. Not so much that you're partying, but that you just meet so many different people. Yes, I've made lots of good friends from South By that I'm in touch with. We're all, sort of like, conference geeks. We see each other two or three times a year, but we have a great time and great conversations when we do.

SXSWi, or “South By” as it is commonly referred to, is a five-day event full of panels and lectures, but also thick with parties, concerts, dinners, and drink-ups. Several break-out technologies have launched there, including Twitter and Foursquare. A number of informants told me they had moved to San Francisco after meeting members of the tech scene at SXSWi. As a result, the conference has reached almost mythical proportions among members of the tech scene. Get Satisfaction founder Thor Muller told me:

And the thing about South by Southwest is that first and foremost, it's a music festival. It's where the rock stars, or the budding rock stars, go. So, as an interactive festival, in my opinion, it always had an element of that rock and roll mystique to it. It was a different kind of birthplace for a new kind of ethos around what we were building.

South by Southwest is made up of several parts, and the interactive section is a recent addition to the long-running music festival where famous and obscure bands from all over the world converge on Austin for a full week of music. Die-hard music fans in the scene spend several thousand dollars on hotel and registration fees to stay for both. Notably, the registration fee for the interactive portion is waived if the attendant is organizing or speaking on a panel. Most scene members try to do this both to save money and obtain the status that being a speaker provides.

SXSWi has solidified the scene's reputation for cliquishness. The conference is so significant to group membership that missing the yearly party is an obstacle for newcomers who want to become insiders. But as user experience designer and cartoonist Kevin Cheng said:



The first year I went, I was like, ‘This is a really annoying conference. It’s very cliquish’—you know, ‘and it’s actually really hard to meet people and there’s all these like quote on quote “celebrities,”’ and then the next year...and I was like there’s this inner circle, and all this stuff, and then the next year, I was friends with most of those people already. And then I would meet new people and they would say that, that they had that sense and I’ve realized like well, actually, there is and there isn’t. Nobody here is really, very few at South By are against meeting new people certainly. But the more you come, the more people you’re trying to reconnect with that only...you only see that one time. So these people aren’t going to make an effort to meet new people. Will they be receptive to new people coming up to them? Absolutely. Would they go out of their way to meet new people? No. So the newcomers have to make an effort to that break that barrier.

Cheng’s account makes evident that it is normal in the scene to attend the conference multiple times (I have been four times). After one trip, you become a SXSW “veteran” and the subsequent experience is different—provided you have made the necessary social connections. South By demonstrates the importance of travel and face-to-face socializing in maintaining the networked, global feel of the Bay Area tech scene.

### The Role of Money

Experiences such as travel, conferences, and sports functioned as status symbols but were framed as creative projects and self-improvement. English-Lueck writes of Silicon Valley:

Our informants saw money as a way of keeping track of relative status—nothing startling there. More interesting was the way in which money was recast instrumentally. It was viewed repeatedly as a way of sustaining what was truly important, supporting a comfortable lifestyle that enabled people to engage in creative work, not an end in itself. Of course, those with enough money to

be comfortable can afford to engage in other obsessions—a high median income disguises the reality of living at the lower range (2002, 30).

Similarly, though wealth was very important to maintaining the lifestyle of San Francisco informants, the idealism of the technology scene framed money *in itself* as unimportant. This indicates that typical status symbols like clothes and cars meant less to my informants than the experiences and creative projects previously described. Men in the tech scene, whether twenty or fifty, wore jeans, sneakers, and t-shirts or button-downs. San Francisco is a low-key city with a casual aesthetic, but the constant de-emphasis on looks and appearance demonstrated an ostensible prioritization of intelligence and creativity over superficialities. But there is a difference between the archetypal bearded software developer and the casually hip San Franciscan; people did care about their appearance, but doing so too obviously was frowned upon.

Despite the discourses that wrap wealth in a cocoon of self-actualization, the potential to get extremely rich motivates many to enter the technology scene. Although most people in the scene never earn millions of dollars, there is a presumed income level among San Francisco technology workers that could be characterized as “bohemian yuppie,” or artsy upper-middle class. A certain level of money is, of course, expected. Flying off to Austin for SXSWi, buying a tiny digital video camera or a brand-new MacBook Pro, joining a rock-climbing gym, renting a house in Tahoe for the winter—these things are perceived as normal, and people do not explicitly acknowledge that these experiences require a high

level of economic privilege. Individuals who complain about overdrafts or bank accounts on Facebook or Twitter are seen as gauche; far more are willing to talk about their vacations to exotic places (the winter I lived in San Francisco, four different friends visited Thailand)<sup>36</sup> or obtaining tickets to the inaugural ball. I only met a few people during fieldwork who admitted they could not afford the latest gadget or a group sailing trip. When Pownce founder Leah Culver began selling advertising on her laptop case (detailed in the next chapter), she did it because she could not afford a new computer otherwise. This explicitness about money was rare among people I met in the tech scene, which I think speaks to a larger attitude of entitlement and privilege: tech professionals are used to having money, and as they view the scene as egalitarian, they assume others have money too. Jan English-Lueck's observation of Silicon Valley workers that money was valuable insofar as it facilitated what was "truly important" was echoed by my informants (2002, 30). When I told a friend that I couldn't go to the full ten days of SXSW music and interactive, she scoffed that *she* always prioritized it. As a graduate student, I simply did not have the money to go, but she framed my reluctance as a lack of desire to share an experience—time functioning as the truly limited commodity. While people may privately recognize financial differences, in general economic privilege is hardly ever remarked upon.

On the other hand, extremely rich people in the scene are expected to avoid flaunting their wealth. Kara Swisher explains:

They're a better class of rich people. They do mingle. Bill Gates does mingle with the hoi polloi, kind of thing. He doesn't really

have to. He can go to a little island by himself as far as I'm concerned, but I think there is a lot more equality in mingling. They are a lot less... They don't have Hamptons houses and they don't exclude themselves and you can run into them in Palo Alto. There's not a lot of that. There's not a lot of limousines and that kind of stuff. But there is status related to their wealth.

The first dot-com boom abounded with tales of newly minted millionaires living in studio apartments and wearing torn t-shirts (Bronson 2000). Flaunting wealth is considered tacky, as it defies the scene's emphasis on intelligence and technological savvy; focus on looks or superfluous material possessions is viewed somewhat suspiciously as non-techie or at least non-nerdy. There is a certain anti-fashion ethos in some geek cultures, as focusing too much effort on appearance or status goods is seen as "mainstream," feminine, or otherwise unimportant compared with what really matters (Tocci 2007).

### Gadgets: The iPhone

Because technologists work with computers, their relationship to gadgets is intense and personal. Technology affiliation becomes an identity marker. People are enthusiastic about gadgets and software, even attending events where users meet in person to talk about tech products and make friends. These meet-ups exemplify "brand communities," communities of interest that form around specific brands (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann 2005). Muniz and O'Guinn argue that members of brand communities share a connection to each other, and members believe that they share "some important quality, not always easily verbalized, that sets them apart from others and makes

them similar to one another” (2001, 418). For example, most people I met in the tech scene used high-end Apple laptops, while PCs marked people as behind the times, older, and generally uncool (I use a PC). Apple’s strong brand ethos of creativity, style, and individualism thus extended to people who used their products. Although the iPhone and MacBook have millions of users, these gadgets signaled commonality and similarity between members of the scene. During fieldwork, the iPhone was so significant in the San Francisco technology scene that it is worth discussing in some detail.

On June 29, 2007, with a great deal of fanfare, Apple released the iPhone, a web-enabled cellphone with a large, touch-sensitive color screen designed for basic telephony, web browsing, e-mail, video and mp3 playback. Initially priced at \$599 for an 8 gigabyte (GB) model, the iPhone was an instant success with technology enthusiasts and gadget fans and owning one became an immediate status symbol. Informants blogged and Twittered about their iPhones, posted pictures on Flickr as they waited in line at the Apple store, discussed the device in online forums and swapped tips on how to use it. Others grumbled about the high price, the required contract with AT&T, and the inability to run third-party applications. Months later, the iPhone continued to cause controversy. In September, Apple lowered the price on the 8GB to \$399, spurring much agitation by owners and a lawsuit by one disgruntled buyer angry with the rapid price drop (Apple responded with a rebate for anyone who had bought the phone less than two weeks before the price drop announcement). After a global team of hackers

announced that they had successfully unlocked the iPhone, company head Steve Jobs held a press conference warning that a future over-the-air software update would turn the phone into a useless “brick” which would no longer be covered by warranty. These controversies tapped into pre-existing discourses of information economics, copyright, ownership, and corporate arrogance, but especially social status.

The iPhone is a potent status symbol, both physically and virtually. It is a branded commodity good that is meant to be noticed and looked at. In face-to-face and mediated communication, it signals its existence to others through its unique design and persistent communication cues (Apple automatically appends the message “*sent from my iPhone*” to every e-mail sent using the device, although this can be removed by the user). The controversy over the price drop demonstrates irritation over perceived unfairness, but also suggests anxiety around a decrease in exclusivity and devaluation of the device. The iPhone is particularly meaningful to wealthy, wired American technology workers who, while a small minority of people, have a high influence on technology creation and use. As a status symbol, its consumption goes far beyond the point of purchase: it exists in many different types of online communication forums, in face-to-face conversations, in media commentary, and in physical display. These are all examples of the complex process of contemporary consumption and how both online and offline communication are woven through the use and display of commodity goods.

The iPhone also represents a shift from the internet's non-profit, academic origins to today's commercial internet. Jonathan Zittrain writes:

[The iPhone] is sterile. Rather than a platform that invites innovation, the iPhone comes pre-programmed. You are not allowed to add programs to the all-in-one device that Steve Jobs sells you. Its functionality is locked in, though Apple can change it through remote updates. Indeed, to those who managed to tinker with the code to enable the iPhone to support more or different applications, Apple threatened (and then delivered on the threat) to transform the iPhone into an iBrick. The machine was not to be *generative* beyond the innovations that Apple (and its exclusive carrier, AT&T) wanted. Whereas the world would innovate for the Apple II, only Apple would innovate for the iPhone (2008, 2).

To Zittrain, the iPhone represents a locked-down, Digital Millennium Copyright Act-controlled device that is antithetical to the spirit of tinkering and *generativity* that categorized early computing culture and the internet. This demonstrates a clear contradiction between Apple's defiance of the ideology of open and free while remaining highly valued by a community which supposedly upholds these ideals. Why is a brand which restricts development for its iPhone and iPad platform and holds a near-monopoly of music sales through iTunes so beloved by the technology scene?

Due to the academic and scientific roots of networking technology and the strict prohibition of commercial activity in the internet's formative years, online culture during its early years was rooted in the hacker, academic, and hippie ethics of the homebrew computer scientists and open-source developers who populated it. Early internet adopters were highly educated and relatively young with above average incomes (Neustadt and Robinson 2002), but, more

importantly, many of them were deeply invested in the anti-commercial nature of the emerging internet and the “information wants to be free” hacker ethos. Any attempted use of the network for commercial gain was highly discouraged, particularly uses that violated “netiquette,” the social mores of the internet. For example, on April 12, 1994, a law firm called Canter and Siegel, known as the infamous “Green Card Lawyers,” sent the first commercial spam e-mail to 6,000 USENET groups advertising their immigration law services. This inspired virulent hatred, which seems inconceivable in today’s spam-ridden climate. Internet users organized a boycott, jammed the firm’s fax, e-mail, and phone lines and set an autodialer to call the lawyers’ home 40 times a day (Campbell 1994). Canter and Siegel were kicked off three ISP’s before finally finding a home and publishing the early e-marketing book *How to Make a Fortune on the Information Superhighway* (Rowland 2004). Despite these dubious successes, the offense was seen as so inappropriate that Canter was finally disbarred in 1997, partially due to the e-mail campaign; William W. Hunt III of the Tennessee Board of Professional Responsibility said, “We disbarred him and gave him a one-year sentence just to emphasize that his e-mail campaign was a particularly egregious offense” (Craddock 1997; Wikipedia Contributors 2010b). How did the internet get from a point of aggressive anti-commercial activism to one where people are happy to have an advertisement appended to every e-mail they send?

This anecdote illustrates a shift that took place in the late 1990s as internet users became more comfortable with commercialism and the presence of brands



online. In his book *Niche Envy*, Joseph Turow chronicles the gradual integration of e-mail marketing and advertisements into online culture. Services like Hotmail and Juno provided free e-mail or web hosting in exchange for viewing advertisements. Online product placement became commonplace and direct marketers used technologies like browser cookies to track individual web users (Turow 2006, chap. 4). These incremental changes contributed to the integration of the internet with profit-driven, market-based interests. Today, users take for granted that Facebook requires an exchange of personal data for social features. And even though the iPhone is a locked-down technology that appends a brand message to every e-mail *although the user has paid for the phone and the service*, this is acceptable because Apple products are such potent status symbols.

Three years after the iPhone launched, Apple released a tablet computer called the iPad. Some informants agonized on Twitter because they had pre-ordered an iPad but received it a day later than those who spent hours in line to own it on the first day of release. And once again, people debated whether the iPad encouraged “tinkering” or not. Twitter engineer Alex Payne blogged:

That the iPad is a closed system is harder to forgive [than the iPhone]. One of the foremost complaints about the iPhone has been Apple’s iron fist when it comes to applications and the development direction of the platform. The iPad demonstrates that if Apple is listening to these complaints, they simply don’t care. This is why I say that the iPad is a cynical thing: Apple can’t – or won’t – conceive of a future for personal computing that is both elegant and open, usable and free (2010).

The iPad and the iPhone are status symbols although they are antithetical to the open, non-commercial spirit of the internet embraced by the countercultural

groups described in the second chapter. Instead, these gadgets are valued for their pleasing aesthetics, usability, and affiliation with Apple, an extraordinarily well-regarded brand. Apple has historically functioned as an underdog to the behemoth of Microsoft—the company still only holds about seven percent of the home computer market (Tilman 2010)—and many of the people in this scene grew up thinking of Apple as an anti-authoritarian brand. Apple has embraced this image, with iconic advertising campaigns such as the television commercial “1984,” which positioned the Apple computer as a force of social revolution against totalitarianism, and the “Think Different” campaign which compared Apple to Ghandi and Jack Kerouac (Scott 1991; Fitzsimons, Chartrand, and Fitzsimons 2008a). This history suggests why the commercialism and heavy branding of the iPhone are embraced within the tech scene but touched off massive controversy in the wider geek sphere, demonstrating some of the intrinsic contradictions between the counter-cultural and pro-business discourses simultaneously embodied in Web 2.0.<sup>37</sup>

### Access

Status is also demonstrated through social connections to others. This is particularly salient in the tech scene because social media facilitates public demonstration and performance of relationships. Many social technologies create “articulated social graphs,” mechanisms that illuminate contacts and codify connections. For example, Facebook profiles include a box of one’s “friends,”

while Twitter user profiles list users the person is “following.” This creates public knowledge of who knows whom. Relationships with high-status people are strategically made visible through public recognition, such as posting a digital picture with a company founder or having a public conversation via @replies on Twitter (Marwick and boyd 2011). Boundaries between insiders and outsiders maintain status hierarchies and are partially based on knowledge of the social sphere and its practices (Milner 2004). Reaching high-status in the scene requires acceptance from and connections to those high in the social hierarchy.

Access is most visible as a value to those who do not have it, particularly newcomers with an outsider’s perspective. Kevin Cheng’s earlier assessment of South by Southwest as “cliquish” demonstrates the low status ascribed to people attempting to enter the scene by those inside it. While the tech community emphasizes networking as a necessary skill for business success, people attending large tech parties who aggressively pitched their company without pre-existing social connections were considered somewhat pathetic. Technology journalist and C|Net blogger Caroline McCarthy described the New York Tech Meetup, a very large-scale event:

That's the sort of thing where afterwards where you're going to be getting like business cards passed to you left and right, you don't know who's legit, you don't know this that and the other thing. I don't want to call it the bottom of the pecking order, but that's like the most open-entry, and still is. And to the point where I don't even really go to it anymore, because if there are companies presenting, I've heard about them already.

Implicit in this quote is that some people are “legit” and others are not, a consideration that is primarily determined through social relationships. For example, at a Digg meetup in November 2008, I was talking to Valleywag blogger Nick Douglas when a woman came up to us, took our picture, and immediately handed us cards promoting her “Smart Mom’s Network.” Her business card had three different product links on it, an e-mail address, and a cellphone number. Neither one of us knew her or was employed in a field related to her business, so this networking seemed both aggressive and meaningless. Blanketing an event with business cards indiscriminately revealed a lack of access to the networks necessary for business success, and demonstrated limited understanding of who was or wasn’t considered important (Nick and I were not, at all, important).

Success in the technology scene is thus at least partially dependent on the ability to access a pre-existing social network. Melissa Gira Grant, activist and former Valleywag blogger, describes the difference between people integral to this network and those outside of it: “They have no perspective or scale. They have this thing that they heard somewhere in some marketing article in like, Fast Company, that everybody you talk to is important and then they don't really know how to weigh the human reality in front of them against these like, tips that they got for how to succeed, which I see all the time.” During fieldwork, social media and Web 2.0 were business trends which attracted outsiders to the tech scene hoping to share in its wealth (one friend derided these as “carpetbaggers”). As a

result, social connections and knowledge of the scene functioned as gatekeeping mechanisms to maintain boundaries between scene insider and outsiders. While people already in the tech scene viewed it as open to all and easy to access, outsiders often described the scene as a “high school” or “clique.” Claims of meritocracy assume pre-existing access to these networks as a precondition for success.

### The Role of Social Media

Given the status hierarchy of the technology scene, how did social media play into displaying and maintaining these complex inequalities between high and low status people? How does status function in online spaces? How is it displayed? What mechanisms exist? What values are demonstrated in the applications that were used in the technology scene to display status? I use a Values in Design approach to tease out the answers to these questions by briefly analyzing a significant contemporary technology, Twitter. I find that the applications used by this community in some ways replicate the values of the “technology scene” and show the intrinsic conflict between the idealistic view of social media as a solution to institutional critique and the neoliberal values of techno-business. I argue that technologies like Twitter, Facebook, and blogs encourage status-seeking behaviors that blur the lines between work and play and promote the infiltration of marketing and advertising techniques into relationships and social behavior, thus functioning as technologies of subjectivity. The

emphasis on metrics which track attention and visibility reveal the significance of these values to the Web 2.0 scene.

### Values in Design

Values in design (VID) is an approach to software analysis rooted in Science and Technology Studies (STS), philosophy of technology, and practical design-centered approaches to software creation. It is based on the premise that technological artifacts—systems and devices—can have embedded values, cultural assumptions, or biases (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1985; Latour 1992; Winner 1993; Flanagan, Howe, and Nissenbaum 2008). For example, Rachel Weber’s study of military cockpit design found that assumptions about average height were made to accommodate the 5<sup>th</sup> to 95<sup>th</sup> percentile of men, but excluded all but the 65<sup>th</sup> to 95<sup>th</sup> percentile of women (1997). Although “value” is a complicated and loaded term, I use the anthropological definition of values as socially constructed, or more specifically, “what a person or group of people consider important in life” (Friedman, Kahn, and Borning 2006, 349). These values can be demonstrated through use (emergent), built into the artifact (technological), or formed by an institutional context (pre-existing) (Friedman and Nissenbaum 1996, 330). The VID framework is appropriate given that status hierarchies reflect what is valued by a community; a social context that deeply values education, for example, will assign high status to someone with a college degree. VID helps us approach two questions: 1) How does the technical structure

of an online community influence its values and how they are displayed? 2) What is the relationship between structural elements (interfaces, features, design) and user practice?

### Status Display and Status Signaling

There are two types of status signals in social software. Drawing from Donald Norman's concept of affordances to describe "a perceived property of an object to suggest how it should be used" (Pfaffenberger 1992, 284; Norman 2002), I use the term *status affordance* to describe signals facilitated by software features that are explicitly created for status display, like reputation systems (eBay feedback and Slashdot karma), attribution (Digg's "first submitted" and "made popular" story appellations or Yelp's "Elite" user designation), or functional properties of the software that establish a particular social stratification (such as "Gods" and "Wizards" on Multi-User Dungeons, early textual role-playing worlds). Second, users display status through *emergent status signals* which arise from community practices, such as citation in a Frequently Asked Questions document or deference shown by others in computer-mediated interactions.

This distinction is made in order to avoid both strictly technologically deterministic explanations of online behavior, which assume that technology prescribes a certain user action and artifacts can be interpreted untethered from politics, and strictly social constructivist models of technology, which argue that human actors and human action shape technology (Pinch and Bijker 1984;

MacKenzie and Wajcman 1985; Winner 1993; Brey 1997). Rather, it is necessary to understand the relationship between the technological affordances of a system and the cultural behavior reinforced by the community that uses the system. The importance of social context is shown by earlier research that demonstrates immense contextual differences between different groups of users of the same technology. For example, there are many studies of Internet Relay Chat (IRC), early software for textual chatrooms, or channels. While Soukup (1999) and Herring (1999) found widespread sexual harassment throughout IRC channels, other researchers worked with data that did not exhibit this type of sexism (Danet, Ruedenberg-Wright, and Rosenbaum-Tamari 1997; O'Neill and Martin 2003, 43). This means that sexism cannot be linked to the technology itself but rather the group using it. Conversely, it is equally clear that the specifics of technology help to shape human action (Winner 1986; Latour 1992; Weber 1997). For example, the strict hierarchy of MUDs, where more technologically adept players are granted programming privileges once they achieve “Wizard” status, demonstrates that these communities place a premium on programming skills. On Usenet, a network of topical discussion forums, status instead depends primarily on verbal competency. Using the *affordance* concept recognizes that while software functionality may *suggest* certain uses, it does not by itself determine social action. Analyzing these affordances and the communities that use them is necessary to understand the operation and re-inscription of social status.

### Twitter



I'm not speaking to you anymore—you stopped following me on Twitter (Stowe Boyd to author, 2009).

Twitter was the most popular technology while I was in San Francisco (its use is discussed in depth in the sixth chapter). Twitter is a micro-blogging technology that lets people post quick 140-character updates, or “tweets,” to a network of followers. Twitter asks participants “What are you doing?” resulting in a constantly-updated stream of short messages ranging from the mundane to breaking news, shared links, and thoughts on life. In Twitter’s directed model of friendship, users choose others to “follow” in their stream, and each user has his or her own group of “followers.” There is neither a technical requirement nor a social expectation of reciprocity, which typically means people have more followers than people they follow. Tweets can be posted and read from the web, text messages, or third-party clients for desktop computers, smartphones, and other devices. This integration allows for instant postings of photos, on-the-ground reports, and quick replies to other users.

The site launched in 2006 and broke into the mainstream in 2008-2009, when user accounts and media attention exponentially increased. According to Nielsen, Twitter had approximately 18.2 million users in May 2009, a growth rate of 1448 percent from May 2008 (Nielsen, 2009), increasing to 27.2 million by January 2010 (Quantcast Corporation 2010). Today, the most-followed Twitter users are famous people, well-known organizations like CNN and Whole Foods, and public figures, from President Barack Obama to actor Ashton Kutcher and

pop star Britney Spears. While Twitter can be used as a broadcast medium, the dialogic nature of Twitter and its ability to facilitate conversation and connectivity has contributed substantially to its popularity (Marwick and boyd 2010).

For the first two years of its existence, Twitter was used almost exclusively by technology insiders. I analyzed the top 100 users from spring 2007, 2008, and 2009 to show this difference (see Table 1).

	May 22, 2007	February 13, 2008	May 12, 2009
1	Leo (leolaporte)	Twiterrific (Twiterrific)	ashton kutcher (aplusk)
2	Robert Scoble (Scobleizer)	Robert Scoble (Scobleizer)	CNN Breaking News (cnnbrk)
3	Twiterrific (Twiterrific)	merlin (hotdogsladies)	theellenshow (TheEllenShow)
4	Evan Williams (ev)	Jason Calacanis (JasonCalacanis)	Britney Spears (britneyspears)
5	Darth Vader (darthvader)	Justine (ijustine)	Barack Obama (BarackObama)
6	merlin (hotdogsladies)	Michael Arrington (TechCrunch)	Twitter (twitter)
7	John Gruber (gruber)	Dave Troy (davetroy)	John Mayer (johncmayer)
8	Chr15 P1r1LL0 (chrispirillo)	CNN Breaking News (cnnbrk)	THE_REAL_SHAQ (THE_REAL_SHAQ)
9	Jason Calacanis (JasonCalacanis)	Veronica (Veronica)	Oprah
10	Biz Stone (biz)	Leo (leolaporte)	Jimmy Fallon (jimmyfallon)
11	Veronica (Veronica)	Evan Williams (ev)	Ryan Seacrest (RyanSeacrest)
12	Justine (ijustine)	Darth Vader (darthvader)	Demi Moore (mrskutcher)
13	Scott Beale (laughingsquid)	John Gruber (gruber)	iamdiddy (iamdiddy)
14	Mr Messina (factoryjoe)	Biz Stone (biz)	The New York Times (nytimes)
15	Dan Cederholm (simplebits)	Stephen Colbert (StephenColbert)	Lance Armstrong (lancearmstrong)
16	Jack Dorsey (jack)	woot (woot)	Perez Hilton (perezhilton)
17	Steve Rubel (steverubel)	Dave Winer (davewiner)	Coldplay (coldplay)
18	TÇ (t)	Bloggers Blog (bloggersblog)	Al Gore (algore)
19	Bryan Pearson (bryanpearson)	Chr15 P1r1LL0 (chrispirillo)	The Onion (TheOnion)
20	BBC News (bbcnews)	amber mac (ambermacarthur)	Evan Williams (ev)

Table 1: Top Twitter users by year (2007-2009)

In 2007, the top twenty users included four bloggers, three video bloggers, three Twitter employees, two developers, two designers, one marketer, journalist and

entrepreneur, one company (Twitterific, makers of a Twitter client for the iPhone), one “fakester” (Darth Vader), and one news organization. In 2008, the makeup was similar: four bloggers, three videobloggers, two entrepreneurs, two journalists, two Twitter employees, two companies, and a single developer, blog, fakester, and comedian. The top 20 had almost entirely changed by 2009, comprised of musicians, actors, personalities, sports figures and politicians, as well as television shows and news organizations. Evan Williams, the founder of Twitter, was the only constant. This means that when I began conducting interviews in 2007, it was possible to have 200 followers and rank among the top users: the technology had a clubby, insider feel. By 2009, it was almost impossible for an average person to be among the top users once Britney Spears and Barack Obama were racking up millions of followers. Popular video-blogger Veronica Belmont summed it up:

Twitter was very much in the Valley and very much in San Francisco in its early days. So of course, you know, people like me and people like Kevin Rose and Leo [Laporte], who were covering it on their shows and podcasts very early got a lot of followers very quickly, and now that it's gaining more mainstream success, and the general public are becoming more aware of it, and the people in the limelight in the general public are starting to get more followers as well. And it's interesting to see how the tech clique is now suddenly mashing up against the mainstream media, the mainstream actors and politicians who are picking up on Twitter and realizing its potential, it's definitely 'times they are a changing' and Twitter is seeing that in a large part of that right now.

My fieldwork took place during a period when Twitter was transitioning from an early adopter user base to a mainstream social media tool.

Twitter affords status display in three different ways: follower numbers, re-tweets, and @replies. First, the number of followers is a clear status affordance shown on each individual user's Twitter profile. Most interviewees knew their follower number exactly, and could often identify how many followers close friends and associates had as well. In the tech scene, this number demonstrates a user's "worth" as a Twitterer, to a certain extent; sites like *Twitterrank* and *Twitterholic* aggregate and display these numbers in a strict ranking, and they are constantly compared. As of April 2010, the top Twitterer is actor Ashton Kutcher with 4.7 million Twitter followers (according to *Twitterholic.com*). By the time I wrote this chapter, Veronica Belmont had 1.6 million followers, while Kevin Rose had 1.1 million. Not only does follower number literally measure popularity, it implies influence, visibility, and attention, all highly valued in the tech scene. Veronica can tweet something like "For future reference, a vodka tonic before cardio kickboxing is probably not the best course of action" and have it read by more than half a million people—more than some television shows. Because number of followers connotes such status, some people actively court new followers by cultivating an audience, frequently replying to followers, and tailoring tweets to their followers' interests (Marwick and boyd 2010).

When I asked Derek Overby, a social media strategist for the real estate site *Roost.com*, why people were concerned with their Twitter numbers, he responded:

I think they have to. If they weren't at the level where they were, they would want to be there. Because it's like, and maybe it's not

an ego driven thing, maybe it's a purely business thought, but I think if you're not being followed by a lot of people, you're just kind of -- I wouldn't say you're insignificant because you're significant to your group of followers. But to be able to touch 25,000 or 75,000 or 150,000 people with one push of a button -- specifically to Twitter -- is very powerful.

But I think the best line to come out -- I don't know if you saw Guy Kawasaki's video today? It's very interesting because he said he used to do the same thing. He wanted to be on the opening Twitter page because he said, "How can I get more followers." That was his goal, to get as many followers as possible. But he said he puts more emphasis on re-tweets. Because he said if people are re-tweeting your information it means that it's relevant information that people find interesting.

Overby refers to venture capitalist Guy Kawasaki (more than 250,000 followers), who decided to discard follower count in favor of number of re-tweets (RTs) in order to measure his "success" at Twitter. Boyd et al.'s extensive discussion describes re-tweeting as "the Twitter-equivalent of email forwarding where users post messages originally posted by others" (2010, 1). For example:

```
Kevinrose: RT: Facebook is cool but Twitter is the
sh*t! (via @mrskutcher) haha Demi Moore speaks the
truth :)
```

Kevin Rose re-tweets @mrskutcher (actor Demi Moore) and adds his own commentary: "haha Demi Moore speaks the truth :)." People re-tweet for many reasons; as boyd et al. write, "retweeting can be understood both as a form of information diffusion and as a structure within which people can be part of a conversation. The spread of tweets is not simply about getting messages out to new audiences, but also about validating and engaging with others" (boyd, Golder, and Lotan 2010). Re-tweets usually imply that the original message was funny, clever, useful, or otherwise worth repeating. Kawasaki implies that

follower account is less useful than re-tweets as a metric because it does not measure *usefulness*—but he still relies on a metric to determine whether or not his account is helpful to others. Usefulness, as a measure of success, echoes an instrumental, business-like approach to social media use. Kawasaki wants to be useful to others.

Third, the @reply, consisting of the @ sign and username, lets users target a conversation to or reference a particular user, but these tweets can be viewed by anyone through [search.twitter.com](http://search.twitter.com), the public timeline, or the sender's Twitter page (Honeycutt and Herring 2009 provide a detailed discussion of @replies). For instance:

```
Nick: @Mike_FTW Sorry, I can't hear your punchline  
over the sound of how old I'd have to be to get it.
```

```
ArielWaldman: looking forward to wine, cheese, and  
watching Secretary with @timoni @lauraglu  
@leahculver. in my top favorite movies.
```

@replies are designed to get the attention of a particular user; many fans @reply celebrities or highly-followed people in hope that they will answer. People also use the @username convention to mention a person in a tweet, as does Ariel Waldman in the above example. Although @replies originated as an informal convention, Twitter incorporated them into the technology. Clicking on an @reply brings you to that user's profile, and on the Twitter.com home page, the "@username" appears; clicking on this reveals a list of tweets by others that include one's username. Frequent @replies imply popularity, having an engaged

and active audience, or creating an interesting Twitter stream that encourages audience engagement.

The ability to attract and command attention is highly valued because it demonstrates significance and information quality; informants assumed that people with very high follower numbers were “good at Twitter,” which entails attracting a wide audience through interesting content and ongoing interactions with the audience. Like follower numbers and @replies, RTs are a measure of influence and attention. Note that both @replies and RTs began as *emergent* mechanisms but have since been built into the official Twitter website, as well as many third-party clients; thus, they have become *status affordances* as well. Emerging through use by early adopters in the tech scene, these conventions were adopted by Twitter itself and integrated into the software.

### Metrics

Twitter demonstrates the importance of metrics to the technology industry, both for technology and business purposes (e.g. measuring a website’s success, traffic, or profitability) and for determining personal status. Megan McCarthy explains:

A lot of people around here are engineers, are very, they're not very good with subtleties and cues and the numbers are easy. You can understand numbers, you know... You can put them out, and numbers will never change on you. Like, you know, if you're bearing things on somebody's looks, for instance, well, what someone looks like at this instant, they might wake up the next morning and look completely different. And so how, or you know,



they might lose 20 pounds, and then that changes. But, it's not fixed. Numbers don't change on you.

Knowing this, many social media applications have incorporated “leaderboards,” the term for a videogame scoreboard, which allow direct comparisons based on some sort of quantified number. People track different metrics based on the technology which is trendy, but underlying principles are constant. Glenda Bautista, a business strategist and blogger since the late 1990s, explains how bloggers used to compare number of hits (visits to one’s website), but now compare Twitter followers:

I'll pull up the life cycle of bloggers. Status. I think that status, way way back, and I'm not sure if that's the case anymore, but it's definitely the same concept, only repeated over Twitter. Right? Where status is-- who's linking to you at all times. Get linked by Kottke! Get lots of hits. I mean the thing is that... I mean it's all like reincarnations of the same thing to me. It's like Memepool is like Digg.

Adam Jackson compares Technorati, a blog ranking site, to number of Twitter followers:

I'd say a year ago the big thing was you want your blog to be in the Technorati Top 5000 or 1000, and Scott Beale was always talking, "I'm the top 200 blogs", and that was a big deal to him. Then it shifted to, did you reach the 5000 Facebook friend count, with the maximum Facebook Friends. The latest thing is of course Twitter followers.

Owen Thomas goes even further back, to quantifiable metrics in traditional media:

I think that in the old days it would be clips, right? How many column mentions did you get in the newspaper? The heads of Wall Street brokerages compare their column inches and "heard on the street." Nowadays everyone has a Google Alert on their own name.

The frequency with which that pings; the frequency in which those alerts come is also a measuring status. @replies on Twitter. I think you're exactly right with anything that can be counted. These guys, they're engineers by and large. They think if you can't count it, then it's not...

Bautista, Jackson, and Thomas all draw lines of connection between earlier metrics and those related to Twitter. These metrics all measure *visibility and attention*, important social values in the tech scene which relate to the idea of the audience, the market, and the celebrity.

The primary of metrics to the scene reveals the infiltration of business and engineering principles into day-to-day social life. In the scene, work-life balance is abandoned for integration of business and social life. People pursue personal projects in their free time which can look remarkably similar to their paid work, such as building a personal website rather than coding one for a client. Metrics also illustrate the importance of clarity and transparency to the engineering mentality. Metrics provide a clunky, if measurable, way to compare people to each other that does not require the subtlety of personal interactions and sizing up status. They also demonstrate how visibility and attention function as social values.

### Visibility and Attention

Twitter illustrates the close attention paid to metrics which measure attention. Marianne Masculino, a “Happiness Engineer” for the blog company Wordpress, told me that to her customers, “readership is a huge thing, a lot of

people love the SEO [Search Engine Optimization], love to get their numbers and love looking at their stats hourly, daily kind of things.” This same quest for attention leads people to tailor content to their perceived audience (Marwick and boyd 2010). C|Net blogger Andrew Mager told me:

You have a sense of power when you're updating 1900 people. If it also goes to Facebook, there's another couple thousand people on there that get it. So, you also have to craft your message a little bit better, too. It's funny. If you send a text message to your friend, you don't think about it, you're just typing... but if you're going to send a text message to a thousand people, it has got to be a good one.

This can lead to a sense of ongoing performance; Megan McCarthy scoffed, “I think if nobody was watching I think half the people in Web 2.0 would not know what to do with themselves.” People who attract attention without any sense of accomplishment or skill are sometimes derided as “famewhores,” implying that visibility itself is not enough. Just as Kawasaki distinguished between followers and number of re-tweets, visibility based on *merit* is what people admire.

Technology bloggers like Om Malik (GigaOm), Michael Arrington (TechCrunch) and Robert Scoble (Scobleizer), who have audiences in the tens of millions, are good examples of status based on visibility versus merit as the tech scene defines it. Kara Swisher describes, “You have these people who have hustled their way into that space, not based on being successful, per se, as a captain of industry or venture capitalist, but because they've become A-listers. There's a very small list of people like that who have a ridiculous impact, but there really aren't very many of them. Arrington, Scoble, people like that, the kind

of people who have hundreds of thousands of people stumbling over their words.” Although a tech blogger’s ability to command huge audiences is a status symbol, their lack of technical or entrepreneurial skills is a mark against them. Technical knowledge functions as cultural capital and a primary status symbol which trumps attention in this instance. This shows the complexity of status in the scene; while engineering and programming norms and mores are built into the fabric of the Northern California tech scene, the affordances of social media create a parallel track of highly valued practices. Tantek Çelik demonstrates this conflict: “There’s another example. Robert Scoble. He’s got a lot of status. But he hasn’t built any websites, he is not a programmer, he’s not technical, and he’d be the first to tell you all those things. Right, but he has a lot of status. So what’s going on there?” Malik, Arrington and Scoble are able to reach large numbers of people, understand the players and technologies that matter to the community, and access high-status people as a result of this status. This is especially impressive to other bloggers and people aspiring to join the community who read TechCrunch and GigaOm to learn about the technology scene. While their high status may seem inexplicable to programmers, these bloggers are central to a larger network of social media enthusiasts who understand audience and visibility as primary markers of status.

Twitter shows the importance of quantifiable metrics, influence, attention, and visibility to the San Francisco social media scene. Status is afforded through public connections and follower numbers, @replies, and re-tweets. These social

values are embodied in the technology and thus encourage status-seeking behaviors that privilege audience and performance. Notably, there is a cottage industry of Twitter tools like TweetDeck, HootSuite, and Twitterfall which simplify monitor usernames, hashtags, and other topics as they are mentioned on Twitter. These tools are widely used by companies and brands, but also by individuals to monitor @replies, re-tweets, and references to their friends, partner, band, and so forth. These applications reveal the expectation that individuals would *want* to monitor and manage their Twitter handle. This self-surveillance applies tactics that companies use for brand management to the individual; we will see how these functions are used by individuals as we investigate self-branding, life-streaming, and micro-celebrity.

### Conclusion

In social contexts where applications like Facebook, Foursquare, Flickr and Twitter are part of daily life, status is signaled using both emergent mechanisms and status affordances. For these users, offline status affects how they are seen online, and vice versa. A famous person with an infrequently updated or mundane Twitter feed might have hundreds of thousands of followers, while an unknown with sparkling wit could come to prominence on the service. Social media provides a way for people who aspire to join the tech scene to network, learn community norms, and boost their status. To understand how status functions in the tech scene, both face-to-face, in-person interactions and online, computer-mediated communication must be examined as part of a whole.

The status structure of the Web 2.0 community is deeply influenced by the ideology of Web 2.0, incorporating both countercultural traits and Silicon Valley's accelerated business culture. The tech scene transforms the values of openness, transparency, and creativity into participation in entrepreneurialism capitalism, work/life integration, heavy social media use, and the inculcation of large audiences. This community reflects values drawn from engineering and programming culture, as it prioritizes consumption based on functionalism and practicality rather than "conspicuous consumption," although travel, gadgets, and wealth are still experienced as status symbols. Entrepreneurs occupy the top rung on the status hierarchy, and entrepreneurship functions as an extremely powerful myth which justifies a social hierarchy partially based on gender, race, and class by framing it as a meritocracy. In this chapter, I focused on the ways that gender discrimination is furthered through media and interpersonal discourse.

This shared set of values and beliefs about social life contextualizes the production culture of social software and helps to explain some of the assumptions about "users" and "social behavior" in social media. Articulated social networks reveal access and connections. Status is measured through quantifiable metrics for attention and visibility built into social media. The primacy of gadgets normalizes always-on internet participation. Twitter facilitates a type of self-presentation and attention to metrics that resembles the highly-valued entrepreneurialism of the scene. The internet has facilitated decentralized production of content that can be easily distributed to a networked audience

(Benkler 2006). Blogs, online video and digital pictures created by average people can reach millions of people worldwide, something that would have been impossible before the World Wide Web. This potential means that attention and visibility are highly valued, as larger audience means more influence and more recognition. And audience can be easily quantified due to the metrics built into most social media that measure readers or followers.

Looking at some of the conflicts and nuances in status hierarchies demonstrates intrinsic tensions in Web 2.0's combination of neoliberal capitalism and techno-utopianism. Status requires either a commitment to entrepreneurial startup culture, self-conscious self-marketing, ongoing networking, or a combination of all three. High status is achieved through the integration of one's social life into the business of technology and social media, which values attention and wealth as much as technological knowledge and innovation. In the next chapters, I look at three status-seeking techniques—self-branding, micro-celebrity, and life-streaming—and link them to specific neoliberal discourses to show the contradictions inherent in a mix of egalitarian participatory rhetoric and celebratory capitalism.

## CHAPTER IV

### I CAN MAKE YOU AN (INTERNET) CELEBRITY OVERNIGHT: PERFORMING MICRO-CELEBRITY

#### Introduction

A celebrity is one who is known to many persons he is glad he doesn't know (H.L. Menken).

The contemporary United States is celebrity-obsessed. CNN's news ticker publicizes the latest celebrity adoption as golfer Tiger Woods apologizes for infidelity on ten networks at once. Supermarket tabloids, once denigrated as lowest-common-denominator reading material, have proliferated, with circulations in the millions. Actresses and singers have replaced models on the covers of fashion magazines, and online gossip sites and cable networks chronicle the every move of a crop of low-level stars, many famous for media exposure rather than accomplishment. Today, young people not only imitate celebrity, but expect it: in Jake Halpern's *Fame Junkies*, 50 percent of grade school students agreed with the statement "I will be famous one day" (Halpern 2007). These are artifacts of *celebrification*, the process by which celebrities have become more central to our culture than before, which has affected virtually every area of popular culture, as well as politics, business, and interpersonal relationships (Rojek 2001; Milner 2005). Understanding how and why people make meaning



from celebrity culture in their daily lives is essential as we see the process of celebrification trickling down to blog writers, social network site participants, YouTube stars and other social media users (Senft 2008).

In this chapter, I theorize the concept of *micro-celebrity*, a way of thinking about the self as a persona presented to an audience of “fans.” Micro-celebrity is the result of various shifts and changes in technology, entertainment media, and labor conditions which enable and glorify celebrity while positioning self-promotion as a necessary skill for success. Micro-celebrity as facilitated by social media is one way in which the “cultural logic of celebrity” and its emphasis on publicity and attention has affected self-presentation and interpersonal interaction.

First, I look briefly at the history of celebrity and different perspectives on celebrity and fame in media and cultural studies. I describe micro-celebrity as a *practice*, and link it to social media and the celebrification of modern culture. I examine the practice of micro-celebrity in the San Francisco tech scene, specifically newcomer Adam Jackson’s lived experience of micro-celebrity. Jackson epitomizes the use of micro-celebrity to gain status and demonstrates the hard work, networking, and entrepreneurialism valued by the technology scene.

Next, I discuss how micro-celebrity is talked about. Analyzing the gossip blog Valleywag shows how the distinction between *achieved* and *ascribed* micro-celebrity is deeply influenced by the values of the tech scene. Gossip transforms micro-celebrities into character tropes and narratives that provide an evaluative framework for behavior. People who do not fit the model of the modest

entrepreneur are far more likely to be assessed negatively by others. This also illuminates the negative consequences of micro-celebrity. A case study of New York tech celebrity Julia Allison demonstrates how micro-celebrity behavior is assessed on a gendered continuum influenced by the values of the tech scene. Micro-celebrities experience the negative aspects of mainstream celebrity without the protections (bodyguards, agents, legal resources) and rewards available to the truly famous.

Finally, I frame micro-celebrity as a status seeking technique which values and emulates the attention given to “mainstream” celebrities. I analyze the pictures, blogs, tweets, and so forth produced as part of micro-celebrity practice which exemplify what I call *aspirational production*, content production that places its creator in a high status position. This also applies to the production of media *about* micro-celebrities. As a status-seeking technique, micro-celebrity demonstrates the contradictions and tensions between “traditional” entertainment culture and internet fame. It also provides an example of how the omnipresent values and practices of celebrity culture are infiltrating and influencing interpersonal interaction.

### Literature Review: Fame and Celebrity

Media and cultural studies scholars have viewed celebrity in many different ways (Dyer 1986; Gamson 1994; Marshall 1997; Rojek 2001; Ferris 2007). Celebrity has been framed as a historical process (Braudy, 1986); as a status system (Milner 2005; Kurzman et al. 2007); as part of the mass culture

industries (Rojek 2001; McLeod 2006; Kjus 2009); as a semiotic system (Dyer, 1986; Rahman 2006); and as the apex of democratic individualism (Marshall, 1997). Graeme Turner defines celebrity as:

...a genre of representation and a discursive effect; it is a commodity traded by the promotions, publicity and media industries that produce these representations and their effects, and it is a cultural formation that has a social function we can better understand (2004, 9).

Turner outlines three primary scholarly definitions: celebrity as a way that people are represented and talked about; a process by which a person is turned into a commodity; and an aspect of culture which is constantly being re-inscribed and re-formulated (fandom, gossip, etc.).

In terms of representation, one body of literature examines the history of celebrity and fame (Braudy 1986; McDayter 2009; Mole 2009). In his extensive history, Leo Braudy argues that although fame has existed since the time of Alexander the Great (who he calls “the first really famous person”), it has changed greatly over time. Tracing the history of fame thus reveals the changing nature of what it means to be public and how a society defines achievement. Fame becomes a key means of analyzing cultural values; the values of a culture determine the importance of *public* behavior, or what Warren Sussman bemoans as the replacement of character with personality (Braudy 1986; Gabler 1998, 197). Braudy identifies the significance of media to the practiced reality of fame; as media changed from portraiture and literature to films, television, and the internet, the importance of the image increased, as did the number of people

considered famous (1986, 3-4). Similarly, Mole (2009) looks at the fame of Lord Byron in the burgeoning print culture of the early nineteenth century and links Byromania with Byron's appearance as a literary brand in newspapers and magazines, while McDayter traces the origins of celebrity to the literature, theater, fashion, and music of the Romantic era (2009).

The semiotics of celebrity and what celebrity "means" to contemporary society have been investigated by theorists like Richard Dyer, whose book *Stars* introduced critical inquiry into studies of fame. In *Stars* (1979) and later work like *Heavenly Bodies* (1986), Dyer investigated discourses around icons like Marilyn Monroe and Judy Garland, the creation and circulation of the star-image, and the impact of these images and discourses on individual and collective identities (Holmes 2005). Dyer's work primarily focused on classic Hollywood film stars, but he emphasized the importance of understanding what individual stars mean to audiences, particularly how they embody "dreams and needs" (Ferris 2007, 377). P.D. Marshall further argues that celebrity is a construct that links democracy and capitalism, demonstrating the promise of meritocracy, since celebrity culture tells us that anyone can be a star if they work hard enough (1997). In modern society, celebrity has thus become synonymous with freedom, self-improvement, self-development, and the power of individualism.

Several scholars have examined the political economy of fame, looking at celebrity as the literal commodification of the individual (Marshall 1997; Turner 2004; Cashmore 2006; McLeod 2006; Milne 2009). This work examines the

importance of celebrity to the industry of mass culture, such as the movie studios, television networks, publishing industry, and so forth. Celebrities are used to sell products and promote media, but more generally serve as consumption engines.

As Ellis Cashmore writes:

The exhilarating prospect of buying into celebrity culture has both dulled and stimulated the senses of a generation. A world of glitz, glamour, and excitement awaits anyone with enough money. Celebrities perform as ever-present titillations, relentlessly teasing us to make ourselves more like them. Buying commodities is usually our only recourse (2006, 15).

From this perspective, celebrities represent the ultimate in commodification, the logical conclusion to expanding capitalist markets (Rojek 2001; Ferris 2007).

Milner, for instance, argues that today's celebrity matches the large scale of multinational media corporations, which primarily distribute entertainment products (2005).

Behind much of this work is the "cultural decline hypothesis" (Evans 2005), which holds that widespread fascination with celebrity represents a breakdown in social standards and intellect, making it easy for capitalism to take over the thoughts and minds of duped consumers. Scholars in the Frankfurt school exemplify this approach, scoffing at "the reward of stardom [offered to] a random few in order to perpetrate the myth of potentially universal success" (Marshall 1997, 9). In this point of view, celebrities personify the trivial, dangerous decadence of American culture, created by media conglomerates to sell commodities to a mass audience (Lowenthal 1961; Ewen 1989).

Rather than seeing celebrity culture as all-consuming and monolithic, other scholars have examined how celebrities organize how people think of the world, serve as models for behavior, and create avenues for cultures to work through complicated issues. For example, the popularity of ultra-masculine bodies in action movies of the 1980s helps us to understand hegemonic masculinity in the Reagan era (Jeffords 1994). Celebrity images are culturally pervasive; they have become part of our day-to-day lives (Turner 2004, 17) and part of the raw material through which we construct identities and engage in public discourse (Gamson 1994; Feasey 2008; Beer and Penfold-Mounce 2009). For instance, Rebecca Feasey investigates how women use the British tabloid *Heat* to bond with other women and comment on their own fashion choices (2008). Similarly, Beer and Penfold-Mounce trace user-constructed narratives of teen queen Miley Cyrus to show how celebrities are fit into “consumable narratives” that shape the way fans view their own lives (2009).

These types of studies have given rise to a large body of literature around fan/celebrity relationships and fandom in general. People who enjoy consuming celebrity culture have often been pathologized, portrayed as miserable or lonely, or viewed as cultural dupes (Jenson 1992; Feasey 2008). The more contemporary uses and gratifications approach to celebrity maintains that people interpret stars differently, and make meaning and use of them in their own lives. Organized fandom has become a subject of study in its own right (Jenkins 1992; Baym 2000; Jenkins 2006); in the tradition of active audience studies, theories of participatory

culture examine how people draw from media texts to create and produce their own cultural products (Lessig 2004; Jenkins 2006).

It is important to avoid generalizing celebrity fans. Joshua Gamson's ethnographic work on celebrity audiences identified five distinct groups of celebrity watchers. *Traditional* celebrity watchers accepted the idea that celebrities rose to the top through natural merit and had a low awareness of the production elements of fame. More skeptical watchers, *second-order traditionals*, recognized the role of publicists and campaigns in celebrity creation, but still believed the "real life" narratives of famous people. Gamson defined a third group, *post-modernists*, as highly engaged watchers who saw the publicity/celebrity machine as fictional, taking pleasure in understanding how it was created. Finally, a last group, *game players*, enjoyed trying to determine what is authentic and what is artificial about the celebrity realm. Gamson writes:

A good chunk of the audience reads the celebrity text in its own language, recognizing and often playing with the blurriness of its vocabulary. They leave open the questions of authenticity and along with it the question of merit. For them, celebrity is not a prestige system, or a postmodern hall of mirrors, but... a game (1994, 173).

These groups show the diversity of fan perspectives, arguing against the premise that fans are collective cultural dupes.

Another perspective, what Evans calls the "populist democracy" position (2005, 14) argues that reality television and the internet have democratized celebrity (Young 2004; Kjus 2009). This is primarily a popular media discourse which claims that although celebrity was once only available to an elite, today,

regular people can rise to the top through their talent. When YouTube first became a sensation in 2006, journalists and pundits frequently claimed that it would democratize celebrity and allow for talented dancers, singers, or comedians to become famous without using the Big Media machine (Marwick 2007). The recent rise to prominence of teen heartthrob Justin Bieber, who began his career posting home videos on YouTube, would seem to support this point of view. Similarly, it has been argued that reality television is more participatory and potentially liberating than traditional scripted television programming (Bondebjerg 2002; Tincknell and Raghuram 2002). But despite the use of the term “reality,” contestants on shows such as *The Bachelor*, *Survivor*, *America’s Next Top Model*, and *Project Runway* are typically cast for their appearance or adherence to type. As reality television has shifted from relatively open texts like *Big Brother* to melodrama like *The Bachelor*, most shows are almost entirely scripted and can involve 100-page outlines (Adalian 2005). There is little difference between these types of reality television programs and traditional scripted shows in terms of spontaneity or alternative or progressive participation possibilities. While a few reality stars, like Kelly Clarkson and Carrie Underwood from *American Idol* and Christian Siriano from *Project Runway* have gained mainstream fame, for the most part, these are exceptions rather than the rule. The same goes for online stars, whose rise to mainstream fame is almost entirely dependent on legitimization by the mainstream media. These developments have contributed to the rise of micro-celebrity as a status-seeking practice.



### Micro-Celebrity as a Practice

An Internet celebrity is an unemployed person, often a student, who is widely known among the members of an e-subculture or clique. The term itself is a misnomer because people who use the internet are not popular IRL. Most Internet celebrities have more friends on their LiveJournal friends list than anyone else, and it is to these vaunted heights of e-fame that all self-respecting attention or comment whores aspire (The Encyclopedia Dramatica).

Celebrity is inextricably interlinked to media. A celebrity is *celebrated* on a large scale, and without media, his or her images and actions cannot spread beyond a limited local audience. Thus, as media has changed over the last several hundred years, so has celebrity (Rojek 2001). While people have always attempted to gain the attention of others, many historically significant people strategically used literature, monuments, paintings, or portraiture to solidify their status. For example, Alexander the Great cultivated an image of himself as a god, heir to an immortal throne, and hired historians, bards, and poets to spread this myth throughout his empire (Braudy 1986, 4). The first mass media celebrity was Lord Byron, whose romantic exploits, passionate poetry and handsome face were widely disseminated by the burgeoning print culture of the early nineteenth century, creating a “brand” that was consumed by an international female audience and fuelling what Bryon’s wife called *Byromania* (Braudy 1986; McDayter 2009). The invention of film and radio in the early twentieth century created a demand for constantly updated content, which increased in turn the “names, faces and voices” featured and boosted the number of people who were

well-known (Boorstin 1961, xxxiv). These famous people fueled the popular appetite for theater, radio, and motion pictures, and served as common reference points for a large, diverse, and increasingly urban immigrant population (Henderson 2005).

Today, ideas about celebrity have been primarily influenced by broadcast media. We expect celebrities to be ubiquitous and accessible through the false intimacy of talk shows, yet simultaneously inaccessible and brokered from public access by a coterie of managers, agents, and publicists. The average person's only contact with these high-status people is as a fan or audience member. Moreover, the Hollywood mythos of celebrity is someone with the "X-Factor"—a special spark, talent, or charismatic personality which inevitably leads to fame. For instance, golden age movie star Lana Turner was purportedly discovered at a soda fountain by an agent who saw her celebrity potential. *American Idol*, the top-rated American television show for the past five years, shows the rags-to-riches ascension of contestants from waitresses and salesmen to bona fide pop stars. This shows how celebrity reflects ideas of individualism and democracy. Within the discourse of mass culture as meritocratic, celebrity suggests that fame could happen to anyone as it transforms people into consumable personas (Gabler 1998). As a result, celebrity is considered a personal quality, something someone *is*: Madonna *is* a celebrity.

But these concepts of celebrity are changing. First, celebrity has become a broader phenomenon in which image, spectacle and drama are expected in

politics, business, and many other social spheres beyond entertainment. Second, mass culture has fragmented into many channels of “narrowcast” niche media, bringing to light people formerly known only to particular subcultures, from NASCAR drivers to goth musicians to technologists. Third, the nuts-and-bolts of celebrification, from managing one’s image to doing photo shoots, is exhaustively chronicled in tabloids, gossip blogs, young adult and chick lit novels, and on television programs like *Entourage*, *American Idol*, *Kell on Earth*, *America’s Next Top Model*, *Project Runway* and the slate of “celebreality” shows starring famous people like Ashlee Simpson, Kirstie Alley, and Kathy Griffith. Finally, social media technologies like Twitter, MySpace, blogs, YouTube and Foursquare have enabled both famous and non-famous people to generate vast quantities of personal media, manipulate and distribute this content widely, and reach out to (real or imagined) audiences. These shifts have created a new definition of celebrity as a set of practices, self-presentation techniques and subjectivities that spread across social graphs as they are learned from other individuals (Marwick and boyd 2011). In these contexts, celebrity becomes something a person *does*, rather than something a person *is*, and exists as a continuum rather than a binary quality. Thus, anyone can practice celebrity to a greater or lesser extent.

Micro-celebrity is the logical conclusion to these many shifts and changes in mass culture. Terri Senft, in her book *Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks*, defined micro-celebrity as “a new style of online performance in which people employ webcams, video, audio, blogs, and social

networking sites to “amp up” their popularity among readers, viewers, and those to whom they are linked online” (2008, 25). Micro-celebrity can be understood as a mindset and set of practices in which one’s online contacts are constructed as an audience or fan base, popularity is maintained through ongoing fan management, and self-presentation is carefully assembled to be consumed by others. These practices are intimately connected to social media. Henry Jenkins coined the term “participatory culture” in his 1992 ethnographic study of fandom, *Textual Poachers*, borrowing the term “poaching” from de Certeau. In a later study of *Star Wars*-derived internet culture, Jenkins explains the basic concept of participatory culture. He writes:

Patterns of media consumption have been profoundly altered by a succession of new media technologies which enable average citizens to participate in the archiving, annotation, appropriation, transformation, and recirculation of media content. Participatory culture refers to the new style of consumerism that emerges in this environment... Media consumers want to become media producers, while media producers want to maintain their traditional dominance over media content (2003, 286).

This type of cultural production is a crucial part of establishing and maintaining micro-celebrity. While fans use cultural raw materials to create content about media properties like *Twilight* or *Star Trek*, micro-celebrity practitioners create content about *themselves*. The new media technologies that enable participatory culture—video editing software, blogs, digital cameras, forums, and so forth—similarly facilitate personal content creation and dissemination. The celebrification of the contemporary United States has created both the impetus for micro-celebrity and the raw materials for it as a practice. Micro-celebrity

practitioners imitate music videos, paparazzi photographs, self-help books and celebrity interviews in their creative products.

Micro-celebrity is also about closeness and accountability. Micro-celebrities construct their online viewers, friends, or followers as an audience or fan base, use social media, e-mail, or chat to respond to them, and feel obligated to continue this interaction to boost their popularity, breaking down the traditional audience/performer spectator/spectacle dichotomy. The micro-celebrity has direct interaction with her fans, while traditional celebrities only give the illusion of interaction and access. This interaction is crucial to maintaining the micro-celebrity's fame or notoriety; it is a form of self-marketing, and self-branding. Self-branding is the strategic creation of identity to be promoted and sold to others; personal interaction is a differentiation point for the micro-celebrity.

Veronica Belmont, herself a famous video blogger, explains:

I'm actually super, super lucky with my fans because there's definitely a feeling of a conversation going on, as opposed to me just broadcasting things. On my blog, I respond to comments. I respond to all my email. On Twitter, I reply, not publicly always, but I will always direct message someone if they have a specific question or comment. I just want to keep the lines of communication open because I feel once you lose that, you lose that relatability, and you lose that ability to converse with your audience. Then, suddenly, you're on this pedestal, and it's just not as fun, and it's not as watchable.

Regularly viewing the cast of a television show in your living room every week creates a feeling of intimacy and familiarity that communication scholars Horton and Wohl called "para-social interaction" (1956). These para-social relationships can be emotionally gratifying, to the point where people tune in to particular

programs to check in with their friends. Micro-celebrity extends this to networked webs of “real” interaction: IM, chat, comments and face-to-face meetings.

Micro-celebrity as a subject position is independent from the number of followers an individual has; after all, every piece of online content has a presumed audience, and most young people share some sort of content online, even if only a Facebook profile (Lenhart et al. 2010). This means that someone with only a few online connections can still view themselves through the lens of micro-celebrity. It is a way of thinking about the self as a commodity that draws from advertising, reality television, and the cultural logic of celebrity. Micro-celebrity practice requires a degree of self-commodification to create a “publicizable personality;” as Sternberg writes, “performers now intentionally compose their persona for the market, and do so through methods learned from the celebrity world” (1998, 3). The micro-celebrity self is carefully constructed and performed to attract attention and publicity, modeled after what appears in the media. To better understand these processes, I examine how it is practiced in one particular community: the San Francisco tech scene.

### Micro-Celebrity and the Tech Scene

Fameballs: individuals whose fame snowballs because journalists cover what they think other people want them to cover (Jacob Lodwick, founder of CollegeHumor.com).

The phenomenon of micro-celebrity is widely recognized within the technology community; high-status people, due to their visibility, are often

referred to as “internet famous” or “micro-celebrities.” *Wired* magazine’s Julia Allison cover included the headline “Get Internet famous! Even if you’re nobody.” The micro-famous are recognized on the streets, in movie theaters, and are surrounded at by fans technology events and conferences like South by Southwest (where I witnessed Kevin Rose on a red carpet, and “mommy blogger” Heather Armstrong, aka Dooce, backed up against a wall by her fans). They are name-dropped on Twitter using the @reply function (“At the Rev3 Holiday party with @veronica lamenting that @ryanblock & @kevinrose are nerdily playing chess. Getting shots now”). People brag about meeting micro-celebrities, hanging out with them, and attending parties with them; their technologies and accomplishments are lauded, and their content is read, re-tweeted, re-blogged, and discussed.

These practices imply that micro-celebrity is synonymous with high-status. As I will show, the relationship is more complex than simple correlation: within the scene, attention-seeking is acceptable to an extent, at which point it is labeled “famewhoring.” But for the most part, it is those known in the scene for accomplishments and visibility who command high status. This is an enviable position.

The degree to which a member of the tech scene will admit to being impressed by this micro-celebrity is a mark of naïveté (and therefore status). Many interviewees described moving to San Francisco and being bowled over by meeting internet famous people, only to quickly disclaim that they no longer felt

that way. Adam Jackson, who at the time I interviewed him had only been in San Francisco for nine months, explained:

I always found tech parties as a way for me to gauge how I'm doing on my projects. Because when I first—the Crunchies last year was my first Web 2.0 event that I went to. I came over here to visit, for MacWorld, I went to the Crunchies, it was my first party, I didn't know anyone... And I read my Twitter posts from last year. I was meeting people for the first time, I'd never met before. I MET KEVIN ROSE -- all caps. That kind of crap. And that's how it was a year ago. And I look back to this year, it's so much different. Everyone that I talk to, knows who I am... It's a totally different landscape. So that's how I judge how I'm doing. In Web 2.0 not everyone that's successful makes money.

Jackson marks his own status not only by showing that he has met Kevin Rose, but that he has moved past the stage where Kevin Rose impresses him to the point where he himself is recognized as a micro-celebrity. Derek Overby, a social media strategist for the real estate site Roost.com and co-founder of the *100 Interviews Project* with Morgan Brown, which interviewed “some of the biggest names in social media and technology,” was in the midst of this transition when I interviewed him (disclaimer: Overby also interviewed me). I asked, “what did you learn about the social media community from doing this project?” He responded:

They are much more approachable than I thought possible. At the end of the day, they're just average -- they may be a little bit smarter, they may be a little bit more connected, but they're still just human beings. I don't think a lot of them take their "celebrity" too seriously. You can really just have fun doing what they're doing. Chris Brogan said the best line, he said, "I never eat alone."

There are several stages to becoming a Web 2.0 scene insider, one of which is familiarity with the various micro-celebrities in the technology community. In my role as ethnographer, I asked people, “Who is Leo Laporte?” or “Who is Garrett



Camp?” and often got funny looks in return. I’m notoriously bad with names and faces, which is a serious deficiency in a culture obsessed with networking, information, and connections. Being able to keep up with a large number of personalities, their projects, dating life, associates, friendships, blogs, and tweets was necessary to participate in the public life of the community. I began to follow many of the “internet famous” on Twitter, added others on Facebook and jotted down fieldnotes about who they were, but it was only through several years of social interactions that I began to keep them all straight. The ability to manage information overload is a mark of competence in the San Francisco technology community. But beyond simply recognizing the key micro-celebrities, one must move from viewing them as celebrities, to people, and then finally as no big deal, or for those with the highest status, as peers and friends.

The outsiders, people who recognize micro-celebrities and are impressed by them, are what Adam Jackson describes as “Web 2.0 fanboys,” a global community of people who follow the ins and outs of the San Francisco technology industry without directly participating in it themselves. (This term reflects the presumption that all these fans are male, which is not the case.) Some “fanboys” are involved in their local technology community, while others work on online creative projects, hoping to be recognized. Some will eventually move to San Francisco to pursue their dreams (as did Adam, Leah Culver, Kevin Rose, and virtually everyone else that I met in San Francisco). Through Twitter and blogs like TechCrunch, Mashable, and Silicon Valley Insider, Web 2.0 “fanboys”

can follow the latest developments around the hottest startups and technologies. Because virtually all the significant people in the scene maintain blogs, Twitter accounts, or Flickr photostreams, it is easy for someone who is not physically in San Francisco to participate vicariously in the scene. For example, Megan McCarthy, a blogger and former Valleywag writer, began her career in tech journalism by reading the personal websites of people mentioned on technology blogs; since many blogs cover the same characters and create narratives out of technological and business developments, people famous in the San Francisco technology community are often admired and followed by those geographically remote. Laughing Squid founder Scott Beale describes:

You get here and you get into it, and you forget about it. Like a guy from Zendesk which is this helpdesk we use, who I met with at dinner in SOMA, I ended up taking him over to some, just some drinkup someone was having. I forget, but it was like, people from Flickr and Digg and all these. .. And he's like, "Holy crap! You just took me to ground zero." Like, "I did?" That was just like any party that we do. This guy lives in Hong Kong and he doesn't see this stuff but he sees these names online. I think that's what it is, and Twitter makes it even more, right, so you see these names repeated and @ replied and, you know, they wanna meet this person. They don't even know who they are or why they want to. Like I bet all these people were like, who's Robert Scoble and that kind of stuff. But they see his name and they're like, "I should meet him." And if they meet him, they're like, "Oh! I met this person."

The visibility of social media celebrities makes their names recognizable, marking them as people of value or importance. Visibility works as a status marker, extending to the physical instantiation of the person, and then to people who meet that person. As Kurzman et al. describes in their discussion of celebrities and

status, “When a celebrity deigns to interact with ordinary people, we consider ourselves honored... celebrity status may rub off in a small way on the inferior party” (2007, 356).

This process is most obvious at events. At South by Southwest, when virtually every well-known member of the technology community convenes on Austin for a long weekend, the divisions between those who personally know micro-celebrities and can thus socialize with them, get VIP party invites and so on, and those who cannot are most distinct. For example, the social news site Digg holds meetups and live tapings of the online show DiggNation around the country, where founder and public face of the site Kevin Rose is treated with adulation. I met a group of college students at the Digg party at South by Southwest in 2009 wearing home-made shirts; a girl—a *fangirl*—had made one that read “I ♥ Kevin” (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: Digg Fans at SXSWi 2009

This clearly marks the “insider” and “outsider” members of the community.

Marianne Masculino, who works at the blog site WordPress, explained her feelings about web celebrities:

But after a while, you just-- they're people, they are doing their job, they are doing work, they are doing what they love to do. So to me it is kind of funny, when I went back home at Christmas time and Matt went back and we had like a little meetup, and people were lining up to take pictures with him and I was like -- it's just Matt! It is a little weird but I understand like, now I am looking at it from a different view, and I'm like, it's odd and I really cannot pinpoint what it is about that, but for me, it just turned around, like "OK, well, they're people, it's not that big of a deal."

Marianne works directly with Matt Mullenweg, the young founder of WordPress, a well-regarded and highly-followed entrepreneur. She describes returning home to Texas for a meetup, a company-sponsored event where people using the WordPress blogging software can drink, network and meet WordPress employees. Marianne realized that her own status had changed since moving to San Francisco when she saw her hometown friends reacting to Mullenweg, who, after all, is simply one of Masculino's co-workers. Similarly, Kevin Rose was very good friends with my roommate in San Francisco and was frequently over at our apartment, once to help my roommate take down the Christmas tree! Due to my interviews and constant networking, I became acquainted with many micro-celebrities and began to feel a sense of my own rising status in the community as a result.

While everyone in the tech community recognizes micro-celebrity, attitudes towards it vary wildly. Some people see micro-celebrity as a natural consequence of any social group, particularly one made up largely of former “nerds.” Derek Overby mused:

And I think geeks have always wanted to be at the center of attention. Because I think back in the days that you were always shining, you were always -- because I remember back when I was in high school, it was like, if you were kind of a nerdy geek, you sat and ate by yourself and had all your other geek friends that you would hang out with. It was always the jocks versus the nerds. But mostly I think there's been a level of respect for being able to sit down and program PHP or whatever, that people are envious they can't do that. So it's just been elevated into a celebrity or at least a fondness for what they've accomplished.

Hillary Hartley echoed this attitude:

Well, I think that our culture needs celebrities. So I don't think it's any wonder that a specific niche group, like geeky people, techies, need that same sort of celebrity. I have good friends who are doctors and lawyers and very smart people, and they sit down religiously with their *People* magazine. They just crave it. And our culture definitely craves that a bit. We create it, we crave it. So, I don't think it's any wonder that, honestly, our little niche of the world has done that same thing.

Whether micro-celebrities are an explicit effect of the geeky nature of most technology workers, or an outgrowth of any social scene, this point of view sees micro-celebrity as a natural, normal part of life. Of course, while every social scene will have high-status people, the wider reach of micro-celebrity does distinguish it from, say, famous automobile engineers.

Other people see it as inexplicable. Glenda Bautista told me:

For me, I think what's really weird, and I'm sorry this is kind of coming off the subject, but I think it's sort of weird the way that

people have been fetishizing geekdom. It's really strange to me. I said this to Matt [Mullenwag], and I said this, actually, to my friend, MJ [Kim], a long time ago. This is way before, it had to have been early 2003. I'm six months in the Bay Area, or something like that. I said, "So guys? I don't get it. You're like dating that dude who designs for Blogger. Why are all the nerds like your rock stars? I don't understand. It's really weird."

On the other hand, some people think the entire thing is disgusting and respond to it strongly. (At SXSWi 2010, when I told one group of people I was giving a talk on micro-celebrity, they rolled their eyes). Scott Beale dismissed the term "famous," as did Annalee Newitz, former tech columnist for the *SF Bay Guardian* and editor of the Gawker science fiction blog *I09* in answer to the question "What do you think about Internet celebrity in general?"

Um, I, I have to be honest, I find it completely repulsive. I mean, you know, there's some Internet... "Some of my best friends are Internet celebrities." [laughs] ...you know, sometimes people become popular just because they're doing something cool. And, you know, that's not really their fault. For people, I think, who pursue it purely just to manipulate the network and manipulate people's responses, um, I don't find it fun, um, really. And I-I find the people who do it a little, I would say, deeply scary. ..So I would say I find it to be heinous at worst and kind of uninteresting at best.

Newitz makes a distinction between people who become famous for a popular internet meme or piece of software—in our interview, she referred to *I Can Haz Cheezburger* and *Cute Overload*, two highly-trafficked blogs—and people who pursue attention and popularity for its own sake. This distinction, between *ascribed* and *achieved* micro-celebrity, demonstrates the complex relationship between micro-celebrity and status. In the next section, I provide a case study of

Adam Jackson to demonstrate how micro-celebrity is used as a status-seeking technique.

### Micro-Celebrity in Practice: Adam Jackson

Scott Beale referred me to Adam Jackson, telling me that “he embraces every aspect of social media to the 10<sup>th</sup> degree.” Jackson was a young Web 2.0 fanboy from Jacksonville, Florida, who moved to San Francisco after avidly following the latest technological developments on blogs like TechCrunch and Mashable. I interviewed Adam nine months after his move, at a coffee shop near the Tenderloin almost entirely full of young people with Apple laptops. He was wearing a t-shirt advertising No-Starch Press, which publishes geek and technology books, and a Gary Vaynerchuk terrycloth wristband. While I was impressed with his drive and work ethic, Jackson was very sincere about things like web celebrity and number of Twitter followers, which most of my informants openly mocked (while privately taking seriously). Because Adam had only lived in San Francisco for a short while, he was going through an acculturation process to the technology scene. As Scott Beale related to me:

When he showed up [in San Francisco], he had the whole Justin.tv rig on and we were like "People don't do that anymore."...So he's all of a sudden, this is the guy who like, I remember we were going to like, a Justin.tv party and like, Kevin [Rose] and those guys were hanging out, you know? There was a big crowd and he's like, “How can I get with like the cool kids?” I'm like, “C'mon, Kevin's not like that at all. He just has his own crowd.” 'Cause Kevin always does and people come up to him, you know... [Adam] is someone who's just like really into it...I told him like, “Yeah, now there's some kid somewhere on the East Coast that's like, “I wanna be Adam Jackson.”

“The whole Justin.tv rig” refers to wearing a head-mounted webcam attached to a laptop carried in a backpack, which constantly streams live footage to the internet, the origin of the term “life-streaming.” Justin Kan, the founder of Justin.tv, broadcast constantly for most of 2007 before hanging up his baseball hat (a friend of mine was very excited when he showed up to her 30<sup>th</sup> birthday party). At the time our interview took place, Jackson was transforming from someone impressed by micro-celebrities to an insider working at a hot company and gradually attaining micro-celebrity status himself. His attitudes towards micro-celebrity and the way he viewed himself and his audience exemplifies engagement with micro-celebrity practice as a way to boost one’s status.

Adam is goal-oriented and a hard worker. When I interviewed him in 2008, he was working full-time at a company called Yoono doing community evangelism, writing a book about Twitter, maintaining a social calendar site, two blogs, and ten Twitter accounts, and finishing up “Adam’s Block,” which he described as “a project that involved a webcam in the city that documented crime and various activities on my street corner [which] became national news” (Nevius 2008). One of Adam’s main activities was attending tech events; I frequently saw him out and about at meetups, conferences, and parties. As a result, Jackson described his typical schedule: he wakes up at eight, works for two hours, goes to the Yoono office from 10-4, attends one or two tech parties, returns home at 11, and works from home until 3 AM. He saw this as a means to an end:



I really moved here to really bust butt and make a million dollars by the time I'm 30. That's what my goal is. And I'm 22 now. So I think it's possible. At this rate too, I mean I'm working a lot of hours. I don't sleep two nights a week. And I do tons of work. I'm really focused on my goals. And my goals aren't to complete a specific project. My goals are to do something that inspires someone else.

Adam believes that when he finally comes up with a winning idea, having a large number of Twitter followers and community connections will make it easier for him to find funding. He explained that networking in the San Francisco scene and becoming known to the community is a key part of potential success:

I just tell people be there. Be at events. Be at places where those things are good. Be at a cafe where you know a lot of Web 2.0 people hang out. Hang out in these circles and then you might get lucky if you have a good idea. But you've got to do both, you gotta have a great idea. I'm not just going to link to you just cause you asked me too. So people really need to work hard, really bust their ass and then also put some time into the community, so that the community knows they're there for them.

Besides networking in person, Adam was an obsessive Twitterer (he told me “It's really changed the way I live. I think that everyone should deserve to have that chance to use Twitter and really use it to change their lives too”). He used Twitter for everything from weather and traffic reports to finding sponsors for his events. Adam spent a lot of time perfecting his Twitter technique to keep his audience interested and grow his follower numbers:

There is a reason why I can post 150 times a day and still have 2000 followers. People seem really interested in what I am saying. I get more replies than most of the tech experts, because my things are very, they make you want to stick to them and reply. I happen to have a knack for it I guess. I spent a year and a half changing the way I tweet, on a monthly basis, to find that algorithm of success.

## Adam tweets on a variety of subjects:

Any album that makes me inspired to blog and write and share is an ace in my book. Very few albums hold that title.

Hello @Starbucks. Thank you for the wonderful Ethiopia Clover Brew that's in stores. Wow.

Hilarious post by @DocPop on @LaughingSquid today! <http://bit.ly/c9jPae> (PS saw the doc on Caltrain last week yo-yoing. Mad skillz!)

One week with @DodoCase - I'm ready to return it. I don't like the case one bit. Handmade isn't the best process. Just a selling point.

I took last week off at the gym and just focused on at home cross fit and cardio. I'm back today going to work upper body. Inhaling Creatine

My latest post on @TheAppleBlog is up: "The Future of Apple's Retina Display" <http://bit.ly/bzOMRB>

Jackson viewed his Twitter followers and blog readers as an audience, and was very focused on maintaining high follower numbers and producing content to interest and inspire his fans. The persona that he presented to the world was carefully crafted to fit his career goals. Many of his actions and choices, like going to tech parties, blogging prolifically, mentoring younger entrepreneurs, inventing hashtags, and sponsoring events, were modeled after people he admired, such as gadget blogger Ryan Block, Scott Beale, technology journalist Larry Chiang, microformats pioneer Tantek Çelik, blogger Michael Arrington, and entrepreneur Jason Calacanis. Adam expressed admiration for their work ethic, community involvement, intelligence, honesty, and initiative and believed in demonstrating these qualities in his day-to-day life.

Adam took micro-celebrity quite seriously. He explained the importance of connecting with well-known tech people:

I went on social networks to find those author's profile pages and connect with them that way. In that, because when I figured out that most of the guys that are writing about tech live in San Francisco or New York, or most people that are podcasters go to this conference every year, I wouldn't have found that out unless I had been looking at their personal stuff. I don't usually follow Engadget to read Ryan Block's stuff. I follow RyanBlock.com and what he's doing. I use his day to day actions to kind of sculpt my life and that's just one example. So, I associate with the people that these guys are friends with and you'll kind of get in the scene. I could be an expert at certain technology, I could be an expert at memory and ram, and write about it every day and, but I would never ever catch the eye of the important people unless I was, you know, flocking with those that were already in the know.

He sees little point in socializing without networking; he told me that he was disappointed in a recent social media wine-tasting trip to Napa because the attendees were taking it as an opportunity to unwind and relax.

This enthusiasm made him a figure of fun to some of the more seasoned members of the community. One informant dismissed him as someone “who believes the hype.” She told me about a group of high-status people who had invented a social media site called PheltUp, “The Social Site for Thought Leaders,” which they were promoting on Twitter as if it were real. (This was clearly meant to poke fun at some of the more bombastic “social media gurus” who were considered ego-driven braggarts.) One night, people began to tweet about a fictitious PheltUp party, first saying it was at a popular venue, and then that it had been moved to a secret location. Jackson fell for the joke, and began asking people on Twitter where the party was. My informant clearly thought that

Adam, while not a self-proclaimed “guru,” was at least guileless and gullible. But primarily Adam was a newbie to the community. He openly expressed feelings about the social media scene which marked him as lower-status than those who claimed to dismiss the appeal of micro-celebrity culture, as the constant hype and noise of the blogosphere is purportedly ignored by many long-time San Francisco residents who have witnessed multiple boom-and-bust cycles. He represented a young person striving for micro-celebrity status as a way to become successful in a community that he highly respected.

Jackson demonstrates how micro-celebrity is a learned status-seeking practice which both reflects the values of the technology scene and is intimately integrated with social media tools. He constructed his own Twitter and blog personas based on traits he admired in high-status people like bloggers, venture capitalists, and entrepreneurs, including access to a network, visibility to audience, work ethic, and community involvement. Adam used Twitter to strategically seek and inculcate an audience, altering his content production based on what he thought would “inspire” his followers. This reflects the status structure of the technology community which prioritizes personal products that illustrate passion and insight, and how social media is used to communicate these values. And Jackson incorporated networking into his personal goals and presentation, viewing it as essential to success in the scene. Notably, this networking took place both in-person and using social media tools, indicating the intertwined nature of “online” and “offline” interaction. Micro-celebrity intrinsically reflects the

importance of access, attention, visibility, and entrepreneurial persistence in successful status-seeking, all values deeply influenced by Silicon Valley's history of venture-backed capitalism.

In early 2010, Adam made big changes in his life: he moved to a quieter San Francisco neighborhood, stopped sharing as much personal information online, broke up with his girlfriend, and began working at the mobile startup Brightkite. On his blog, he wrote about Roger Ebert's response to critics:

“Resentment is allowing someone to live rent-free in a room in your head.”

This speaks loudly about many of the reasons that I've pulled back from being online so much. I call it “micro-celebrity” because that's what it is only because I've been called that a few times. I consider it being famous for not really doing anything. I don't think I've done enough to have 3,000+ Twitter Followers or 30K people reading this blog every month but I do and that comes with some responsibility and yes, some stalkers. Celebrities have it rough and without a support system, it's easy to let things get to you. Ebert's wife posed an excellent question, one that Laura said to me very often when I criticized others after just expressing my distaste and displeasure of being called “fat” by some anonymous commenter on my blog. Of course, I'm not as wise as Ebert nor as comfortable in my own skin to have such a terrific quote in response to the situation.... What wisdom inherited in this quote that truly excites me about one day being able to say this out loud and truly believe it and live it (Jackson 2010).

In the year since I interviewed him, Jackson has experienced many of the negatives of micro-celebrity and although he still is wholly committed to technology work, he is no longer naïve about the realities of micro-celebrity practice. Instead, he seeks a balance between online popularity, in-person socializing, fitness, travel, cooking, and his other interests. His story illustrates the tensions intrinsic in adopting micro-celebrity as a status-seeking practice:

although Adam experienced benefits from his increased status, the micro-celebrity persona comes hand-in-hand with significant downsides, and is not a direct path to higher status. In the next section, I look at how micro-celebrity is talked about within the community, focusing on the distinction between *achieved* and *ascribed* micro-celebrity and its complex relationship with status.

### How Micro-Celebrity is Talked About

Micro-celebrity is not only a practice that one engages in; it is also an appellation given to people based on their accomplishments. Both people who *achieve* micro-celebrity and those who are *ascribed* it are subjects of scrutiny due to their visibility within the scene. Although successful micro-celebrity practitioners may be able to elevate their position in a social hierarchy, those who pursue attention and visibility for its own sake are liable to find their personas and activities policed and judged by others. Analyzing the gossip blog Valleywag shows the types of discourses that exist around micro-celebrity in the scene and how these are deeply influenced by the normative notion of success embodied in the entrepreneur: namely, white, male, and wealthy. People who do not fit this model are far more likely to be assessed negatively by others. Furthermore, this takes place partially on publicly available media like Twitter and blogs, meaning that gossip, rumors, and judgments are persistent and searchable.

### Achieved / Ascribed Micro-Celebrity

There is a continuum of micro-celebrity from ascribed to achieved, though people elevated to this status in either way experience similar effects. *Ascribed* micro-celebrity is the production of celebrity media about people well-known in certain subcultures— for example, a tech blog publishing paparazzi photos of Steve Jobs and Google CEO Eric Schmidt drinking coffee in Palo Alto, or a SXSWi party incorporating a red carpet and professional photographers— mapping celebrity culture on to a social sphere. While online micro-celebrity is often ascribed to people who are recognizable from online memes, such as Tron Guy or the Numa Numa kid, micro-celebrities with the highest offline status in the scene are those who boast business or technological accomplishments, such as Gary Vaynerchuk and Kevin Rose. These ascribed micro-celebrities may shun the spotlight, or they may use micro-celebrity practices to manage their audience once they reach a certain level of online fame. Within the tech scene, they are treated almost as mainstream celebrities and assigned a high level of status, depending on the source of their fame and the community producing the media. People in the tech scene are interpellated as the audience for these micro-celebrities, dusting the industry with a sheen of glamour. Emulating mainstream celebrity industry creates worth: since celebrities represent the top of the status system, ascribing celebrity to high-status people in subcultures allows members of the scene to draw parallels between the highest status people and the technology world.

*Achieved* micro-celebrity is a self-presentation strategy that includes creating a persona, sharing personal information about oneself, performing intimate connections to create the illusion of friendship or closeness, acknowledging an audience and constructing them as fans, and using strategic reveal of information to increase or maintain this audience. Social media technologies are an intrinsic part of this process; for my informants, these activities primarily took place on Twitter, with its stark metrics of follower numbers that invite comparison and competition. Other technologies, particularly blogs, digital photos and videos, are used to establish an online presence and live a public life. Significantly, micro-celebrity practice uses mediated self-presentation techniques drawn from “traditional” celebrity culture in day-to-day interactions with other people. Thus, relationships between individuals become similar to relationships between celebrities and audiences (Milner 2005).

This distinction between achieved and ascribed is important as many people in the community find extreme micro-celebrity practitioners problematic. The pursuit of internet celebrity for its own sake is dismissively referred to as “famewhoring” or “fameballing,” and is usually applied to people without any particular skill or accomplishment that might merit their fame. For example, someone like Jacob Lodwick, a successful (and wealthy) company founder, garners respect for his accomplishments. Even though Lodwick is eccentric, dates beautiful women and posts personal information and strange, home-made videos online, his accomplishments outweigh these actions. On the other hand, Nick



Starr, an out gay man and Apple fanboy who posts constant updates on his sex life and weight loss (even tweeting his liposuction), is considered desperate for attention. This distaste means that the successful micro-celebrity practitioner must walk an extremely thin line between maintaining an audience and maintaining high status in the community, and going overboard to the point where they become a figure of fun. “Ascribed” and “achieved” are intertwined to the point where achievement that is considered sufficient to rightfully inhabit the micro-celebrity subject position is highly variable and context-dependent. In the next section, I use a case study of the Silicon Valley gossip blog Valleywag to discuss *how* celebrity was ascribed to individuals and how the behavior of people within the tech scene was publicly policed and judged against the values of Silicon Valley. Just as mainstream celebrity media treats celebrities as characters to be written into often fabricated plotlines, Valleywag fit micro-celebrity personas into pre-existing narratives and character arcs that reflected both long-standing celebrity tropes and the meritocratic mythology of the technology scene.

#### Ascribing Micro-celebrity: Valleywag

Valleywag was a Silicon Valley gossip blog which posted rumors and snarky, even cruel, commentary on people in the tech industry. Part of the Gawker Media blog company, Valleywag ran from 2006-2008; in November 2008, it was discontinued and editor Owen Thomas was given a column on the popular media blog Gawker (Wikipedia Contributors 2010a). Valleywag alternated stories about

company acquisitions and technological developments with dating gossip, affairs, leaked personal e-mails and videos, and pointed take-downs of wealthy young people, ascribing micro-celebrity to people like Leah Culver and Kevin Rose. Valleywag drew from celebrity tropes, like the cocky self-made man or the woman sleeping her way to the top, to create narratives and characters from the actions of technology workers. Like tabloids, Valleywag depended heavily on unsubstantiated rumors, overheard snippets of conversation, and insider connections to generate gossip (Hempel 2006). Valleywag reporters monitored content created by micro-celebrities, such as tweets, videos, social network site profiles, blog entries and digital photos, highlighting items they found controversial or noteworthy. The blog served to police the actions of micro-celebrities, creating standards for normative conduct; anyone found violating these standards was liable to find themselves a target.

Kevin Rose, Julia Allison to date (2007)  
Leah and Brad's breakup leaves gossip blog despondent (2007)  
The dotcom douche of Beverly Hills (2008)  
Ariel Waldman, Twitter, and the "whore" algorithm (2008)  
Filthy rich Matt Mullenweg calls rival "dirty" (2008)  
Google CEO pulled over for driving with a cell phone (2008)  
Chris Messina and Tara Hunt: It's still a breakup even if no one blogs it (2008) (Sample Valleywag Headlines)

Valleywag reporters lived in San Francisco, went to technology parties and events, and were often friends with the people they covered. I interviewed former editors Owen Thomas and Nick Douglas, and two former reporters, Melissa Gira Grant and Megan McCarthy, to learn why Valleywag existed, what it tried to cover, and how the staff justified running some of the nastier stories.

The first editor was Nick Douglas, a slight, red-headed aspiring comedian who was hand-picked by Gawker publisher Nick Denton to work for Valleywag, dropping out a semester before finishing college to move to San Francisco at the age of 21. I met Nick in 2006, and interviewed him in 2007 about his move:

Well at first, I was just thrilled, fucking thrilled. Like every conversation. I remember I spent this one summer in Houston and I remember one time when I was sitting in this cafe, some guys were talking about Google Maps, and I wanted to be in their conversation just because it happened to be about Google Maps. Like that was something I couldn't take for granted, that people would be talking about online and the internet, and so when I came out here for a couple of months, I was just blown away. Goggle-eyed. I was a little star-struck by all these people. Because I had been reading blogs for ages, and I got hired for Valleywag because I was writing *Blodgebrity*, which was basically a Gawker or Valleywag about bloggers. So I was meeting a bunch of people who'd I written about and really like built into micro-celebrity status in my mind.

Denton claimed that he chose Douglas precisely for this reason: new to the scene, he would blog about subjects that more seasoned journalists would consider off-limits (Hempel 2006). Like many San Francisco transplants, Douglas went through a period of enculturation which required him to both recognize and (eventually) feign a blasé attitude toward the well-known members of the tech community. Nick was an incredible source of information about people, and I often interrogated him at parties, where he was an omnipresent figure, to ask him who someone was, or why a certain company was poorly regarded. While Douglas was always friendly and nice to me—to the point of disingenuousness—many people regarded him with, at best, suspicion, viewing him as a hypocrite

who curried favor with the Web 2.0 elite while writing poisonous prose about them.

Valleywag identified important characters in the tech scene and wrote about them again and again, trying to find a chink in the armor or a personal foible of someone with micro-celebrity status, particularly people who fit into good narratives. Nick Denton, the founder of the blog and head of Gawker media, emphasized creating and following characters that readers could recognize. The coverage of these characters was often tailored to fit archetypes, rather than the other way around. I talked to a former Gawker editor who said they only wanted “plot point” stories; they would only write about an event if it fit a character’s arc, or plot, which had been pre-determined by Gawker. Douglas explained:

Denton definitely cares about narratives. So there are a few things, constant things, he was always telling the editors about at Gawker, like more contexts. It would always [be] who is the person you have just written about. We have to know because we need more context and also tie this into a large story. So we always try to have this large metanarratives and archetypes and we try to find people to fit that. There is the archetype of the young software founder and there is a whole usual story line. Founder finds investor, founder turns down buyout offer, founder gets cocky, and then founder ruins his business.

Many people were *ascribed* micro-celebrities as a result of this: they were wealthy or interesting enough to fit into a particular narrative which Valleywag had assigned them. As mentioned in the last chapter, Leah Culver, the founder of Pownce, was characterized by Valleywag as a woman “sleeping her way to the top,” and so any story about her dating or sex life was fair game.

Douglas was fired in late 2006 for covering people Denton did not believe were of general interest. In a memo leaked to the *New York Times*, Denton wrote, “Anytime a writer settles in too closely with the subjects he/she’s writing about, there comes the inevitable tradeoffs: favor trading, and an elevated sense of one’s own importance to the field at hand. Both, to some degree, ended up being the case here” (Sorkin 2006). Marketer Tara Hunt and technologist Chris Messina, for example, were well-known in San Francisco but virtually unknown outside of the scene; Douglas covered their breakup on Valleywag. I interviewed former reporter Megan McCarthy, who worked both for Douglas and Denton. McCarthy was soft-spoken, sharp, and very intelligent; I found her insightful and analytical. She explained:

These people are billionaires that you're talking about. Why wouldn't you want to know more about their lifestyle? The problem was - I think this was why Nick Douglas got let go - the actual billionaires don't really want the press. They like the money, but they want the right kind of press. They don't want people to talk about them in stories and stuff that they're not approving. It becomes easier then to write about people that want to be in there. Which is what, if you look at the end of Nick's tenure he was writing about a lot of Web 2.0 people, who didn't matter. They don't have any money whatsoever. They have like, a blog. And they've never made any money. They're never going to make any money. They just want to be famous for fame's sake. And it really wasn't interesting to people outside of the scene, because who were these people. They thought they were great, they kept feeding Nick different stories about themselves, with the "Oh my god, this is such a big deal" and it's really not. I mean, it might be a big deal to them and their five friends, but anyone else would be like, who are these people?

This quote shows the tension between *achieved* and *ascribed* micro-celebrities.

Legitimate entrepreneurs like Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg shunned the

spotlight; Zuckerberg rarely went to parties and had a long-term girlfriend. While Valleywag attempted to dig up dirt on Zuckerberg or the Google founders, it was easier to write about people like Julia Allison or Tara Hunt, who constantly broadcast details of their life online. McCarthy displayed a certain disdain towards these “Web 2.0” people, who she clearly saw as attention-seekers without merit. This also speaks to the limitations to micro-celebrity. While some micro-celebrity practitioners are able to translate their fame into a better job or a book deal, very few achieve the financial success or legitimacy given to mainstream celebrities. For the most part, micro-celebrities need further legitimization to reap the benefits of real fame.

While typical celebrity gossip columns cover traditionally feminine concerns like sex, relationships, parenthood, and fashion, very little of those topics found their way to Valleywag. Valleywag had to balance stories of interest to the high-status tech workers with those of general interest to the larger population; the majority of readers were not San Francisco insiders, but Web 2.0 fanboys. Megan McCarthy explained that Valleywag was looking for stories about “sex or money,” but mostly money:

People would talk about like the ultimate in Valleywag story, people like, they would be like, I bet you really want a sex scandal to come out. And the answer to that is no. There's a hierarchy of stories that we wanted. Yeah, sex and money. Those are the two things. And money was way higher... And you always want to know how much... And it's the one thing that people can actually judge each other on, because it is numbers....A lot of people around here are engineers, are very, they're not very good with subtleties and cues and the numbers are easy.

The idea of comparable metrics is an important one in the technology scene (see the previous chapter for a discussion of status metrics). Sex is difficult to compare, as are looks; McCarthy said, “Everyone is like, ‘we're not really good looking out here’ so you can't even run pictures of really good looking people, you can't be interested in that.” But Owen Thomas saw reporting on sex scandals as a way to bring humanity back to metrics-focused nerds:

Ideally the convergence of those two [sex and money]... But, I mean that's because money, you know, money is actually the sex in Silicon Valley. So, I think, you know, the fact that everyone tries to basically pretend that they're disembodied brains and that they're changing the world - I guess that they're not being taken by sex or money. But really, if you look at every social network around, it's about getting laid. Mark Zuckerberg was basically building a system so that he could rate Harvard girls. MySpace Tom was actually running an Asian porn site on the side.

This type of over-the-top language, generalizations, and strong moral judgment was typical of Valleywag's black-or-white approach to gossip.

Valleywag also turned its reporters into micro-celebrities. Douglas, Gira, and McCarthy all told me that writing for Valleywag had made their personal brand more visible, as well as encouraging sycophantic behavior from others. McCarthy scoffed, “But, the people who are like, ‘Oh, my god. I met someone from Valleywag,’ I instantly knew that they were kind of naive. And they really didn't know what was going on in terms of—you could tell they were very, sort of new to the system.” People who were truly high-status were not impressed by Valleywag or its reporters; instead, they claimed they did not read Valleywag or rolled their eyes when it was mentioned. But because Valleywag was a blog rather

than a newspaper, and did not adhere to any sort of objective standard of journalism, the writers were encouraged to put themselves into the stories. As a result, their opinions and beliefs became part of the story and the brand. Since most of the Valleywag staff were freelance writers, they engaged in micro-celebrity practice such as frequent twittering, maintaining personal blogs, talking to fans, and so on.

Many of the Valleywag staff developed a jaded, even contemptuous attitude towards their subjects, which was reflected in their writing. As former reporter Melissa Gira Grant, a long-term feminist activist, told me, “I became really cynical after writing there for like a month. I understand how that happens to people who work for Gawker. People with all this experience, who know what they're doing. Once you are inside of it, you should see the stuff that never makes it. You should see all the conversations that never make it to the public. You should see all the things that we pass on, that are like really crazy.” This cynical attitude toward the technology industry helped staffers justify the blog’s existence and their own writing.

My interviewees defended Valleywag in several ways, claiming variously that the blog revealed hypocrisy; provided investigative journalism of an industry that celebrated its own existence; covered legitimate celebrities with significant influence; and wrote about subjects who opened themselves to scrutiny by posting personal information online. Owen Thomas is surprisingly genial and friendly despite his sharp online presence; many people had “warned” me that Thomas



was a very nice person, and I enjoyed talking to him. But Thomas was a big proponent of exposing hypocrisy. He said:

Well, there's some level of hypocrisy. You know, I like to say the fundamentals of hypocrisy in Silicon Valley is that everyone says they want to change the world. And that's true. They want to change the world from one in which they're poor into one in which they're rich.

The first two stories posted on Valleywag exposed a romantic relationship between Google founder Larry Page and executive Marissa Meyer, and revealed that Google CEO Eric Schmidt was in an open marriage with a mistress. This information was widely known in Silicon Valley, but other technology blogs had avoided writing about it in order to maintain access to Google insiders (Wikipedia Contributors 2010a). Thomas thought the rest of the business press was toothless and failed to report on important stories; unlike them, Valleywag was not afraid of losing access to high-status tech people. Valleywag often poked holes in press releases and puff pieces. Thomas, for example, loathed Elon Musk, the lauded founder of Tesla Motors. He told me Musk had blatantly lied about his last two companies and that in both instances he was fired by venture capitalists before the companies were sold. Thomas viewed Musk as an egregious liar with a history of founding companies and running them into the ground, and he saw Valleywag's reporting as a check on Musk's hubris. He explained that it was Valleywag's responsibility to point out when high-status individuals were being outright hypocritical:

Now, you know, does it matter that Digg was almost out of money and they managed to raise \$20 million in the very last minute after

the sale of Google fell through? I mean in the end, I guess not, because they have the money, you know and it will last them some years. But, is it important to know that, you know say, their CEO was looking people in the eye and saying everything's fine and we've got plenty of money and, we're not going to sell the company, even as they're trying to sell. I think, you have to know that in order to judge people's character. Otherwise, you're just going by their representation themselves which [can be totally different].

Another justification for Valleywag's existence was that it critiqued people who were already living "public" lives. Kara Swisher told me:

It's just gossip. It is a gossip column. They have them in New York for all the media services. Then there's the New York Post, Page Six, and all that crap. I think we say when people are all indignant about Valleywag, "Do you read US weekly?" And they are like, "Yeah," And I'm like, "Well, hello. Shut the f-up. If you enjoy that..." none of that stuff is true about those celebrities. And they go, "Well, they don't know. They sign up for that." I'm like, "So do you kind of by appearing on all of those magazine covers. Aren't you fabulous? Maybe you need to be taken down." I don't know. I don't have a problem with it.

Owen Thomas similarly saw the people he covered as legitimately famous who deserved as much critique as "traditional" celebrities. People who lived public lives were therefore fair game in a world saturated with celebrity culture:

This whole argument, that these people haven't chosen to live a life of public exposure, that they're just geeks. This is what I hear over and over again and it's kind of tiresome. Of course they're trying to parlay their personality, their intellect, their presence as a thought leader in the industry, into a bigger career to get more success for their business. I mean, they're trying to be just in public. The thing is they've got this excuse, "Oh! I'm just a geek. I just write code and, therefore, I am somehow off-limits." When you dig into it with just a teaspoon it falls apart as an artifice.

The attention economy, which treats visibility as status, makes it important for anyone with ambitions to succeed in the technology industry to take advantage of

public living. But by doing this, they were making themselves open to the type of scrutiny that had traditionally been open only to entertainment celebrities. Melissa

Gira Grant explained:

That's really the thing: the more the big deal, I think, that people position themselves as, the more fun it is to watch them fall. I feel like inside people really ask for it themselves. It's a horrible thing to say, but if you do want to be a big player or a scenester, this is part of what comes with that. It's clinging to this. It's being the way to wrap your own personal sense of success up in how much people are talking about you, and you can't control that.

Thus, some of the negatives about mainstream celebrity, namely lack of privacy and ongoing commentary by third parties, was applied to sub-cultural celebrity to raise it to the level of mainstream celebrity. While Thomas, and indeed all the writers, seemed extremely sincere in their belief that they were taking down hypocrisy, Valleywag's predilection for reporting on things that have nothing to do with company valuations, shareholders, or anything similar—breakups and the like—makes it difficult to justify the blog's existence entirely from this perspective.

For the most part, Valleywag was vilified among people in the tech community. Michael Arrington posted a story on TechCrunch, “When will we have our first Valleywag suicide?” and wrote:

Celebrities have had to live with this kind of nonsense for decades, which explains why some of them pull out of society entirely and become completely anti-social. Perhaps, some argue, they bring it on themselves by seeking fame. But for people in Silicon Valley, who are not celebrities and who have no desire other than to build a great startup, a post on Valleywag comes as a huge shock. Seeing your marriage woes, DUI or employment termination up on a popular public website (permanently indexed by search engines) is

simply more than they can handle. They have not had the ramp up time to build resistance to the attacks (Arrington 2008).

More mainstream blogs refused to link to Valleywag stories and Nick Douglas was banned from several events, including Arrington's TechCrunch parties. (Because I often skulked in the corner at parties writing in a notebook, I was mistaken for a Valleywag reporter several times, not always in a friendly way.) While many people claimed that they never read it, it was clear by the way stories were discussed and passed around that it had a significant effect on the community (Hempel 2006). This manifested itself in extreme ambivalence; some absolutely hated Valleywag, others obviously enjoyed being covered by it.

Melissa Gira Grant told me that it was difficult to get people to feed Valleywag with gossip because they didn't want to bite the hand that feeds them, imagining that they might be in the position of their boss one day. The Valley is so dependent on networking and flexible labor that burning bridges is unthinkable, as building and maintaining relationships is the key to success. This is a form of disciplinarity which puts the onus of responsibility on the individual to not violate the employer/employee agreement, rather than the employer to treat employees humanely. Grant said:

It's harder to get that kind of like editorial assistance, sniping, backroom gossip that Gawker gets, because in the Valley, even the lowliest worker thinks that someday they might be a founder. You know, and then they like, don't want to bite the hand that isn't even feeding them, they're like, "Oh! But I've got *one share!* How dare I sell out my employer!" who also might be like a slavedriver—But they would never say it, because the culture out here, it's like everybody could be something big... But as much as we value outspokenness and transparency, there's a lot more self-censorship

and a lot more self-restraint going on here, and not, you know... not pissing off-- everybody is a potential way up. Or something like that. It's not as transparent as it is in New York where people are kind of like highly competitive and ambitious, and here all of the ambition is couched in, "I'm doing this for the community."

Valleywag created an audience that sees through the eyes of the self-as-entrepreneur. The view of the tech worker as potential entrepreneur, founder, millionaire or the next Mark Zuckerberg propels the rest of the industry, with its long hours, hard work, no unions/overtime and no job security. The potential for great wealth denies any exploitation. And Valleywag, with its endless promotion of the entrepreneurial narrative, feeds this perception. As a result, the negative consequences of social media are usually blamed on naïveté and ignorance. People who get “dooced”—a term for being fired for one’s website, named after Heather Armstrong’s dooce.com— are responsible; they should have known better. Similarly, cruel gossip is partially justified by public content, although almost everyone in the scene puts something online.

So what is Valleywag’s significance to theories of micro-celebrity? The site magnified the “celebrity” part of micro-celebrity practice. A highly-read gossip column covering the lives, loves, outfits, and scandals of tech industry players inflated the profiles of the people it covered (Gawker was almost wholly responsible for Julia Allison’s rise to fame, as Allison was well-aware of). It mapped the values of celebrity culture on to the technology scene by publicizing gossip and rumors. Valleywag also demonstrated the process by which people were transformed into characters, as it ascribed public personas to regular people,

created plots around them, linked them to others, and tied them to familiar narrative tropes. Moreover, people who had been ascribed micro-celebrity by Valleywag were taken up and written about by other news sources, further inflating their visibility. For example, Kevin Rose was on the cover of *Inc.* and *BusinessWeek*, Leah Culver made the cover of *Technology Review*, and Julia Allison was on the cover of *Wired*, while blogs like *Get Off My Internets* analyzed the tweets and personal blogs of many of the Valleywag players.

Most importantly, Valleywag policed acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Micro-celebrities were held to standards primarily created and maintained by the Valleywag and Gawker editors and reporters which reflected the larger values of Web 2.0 culture. These standards were fairly conservative, including monogamy, or at least not promiscuity; lack of visible “fame-whoring;” spending money wisely rather than buying sports cars, mansions, or elaborate vacations; negligible political leanings; and above all, no hypocrisy. They were applied unevenly, particularly in regard to gender; while Thomas painted Leah Culver as promiscuous, he reported on but rarely judged Kevin Rose for his steady flow of attractive girlfriends. Overall, Valleywag’s values reflected the mythology of the tech scene which claims that financial success goes hand-in-hand with intelligence and hard work. Valleywag strongly enforced the anti-conspicuous ethos of consumption that prioritized gadgets and travel over designer clothes or fancy cars. This justified the enormous accumulation of wealth and attention by members of the tech scene. It was okay if people were visible or

extremely rich, as long as it was based on accomplishments backed up by entrepreneurship, intelligence, hard work, and creativity. Excessive display of wealth or publicly courting attention undermined the meritocratic myth by suggesting that success was not necessarily based on intrinsic personal characteristics. Valleywag's aggressively negative judgments on those who supposedly violated these unwritten rules served as a reminder of shared social norms.

The "Cyprus 20," a group of young New York City tech workers and founders who made a video of themselves lip-synching to "Don't Stop Believing" while on a vacation in Cyprus, were called out on Valleywag for epitomizing boom-time excess while the economy was declining and many companies were conducting highly-publicized layoffs. Grant explained:

So they did a lipdub, a private lipdub to "Don't Stop Believing." And the girls were all in matching bikinis, and the guys were all drinking beer. And they were like in bed together and in the swimming pool frolicking around. At this really expensive house, and it was just when all of these major layoffs had been announced and the stock market was tanking, and it had been leaked from their private Blip account. And Gawker got a copy of it, and it was on Valleywag... I think this was a great video to be like, that this is that ridiculous level of excess and out-to-lunch mentality. It's really just kids wanting to have a good time, to celebrate the fact that they have a stupid amount of money they don't even know what to do with. But it felt so heartless, considering the state of the economy. I think Sequoia Capital just had a meeting where they said "The fun is over." So, it was really bad timing. It was really, really bad timing.

And then the facetiousness on Owen's part-- he knows that people are doing this all the time. He knows there are way more decadent things going on every night of the week, but it seemed that these people were just a good target because of the hubris of making it—

and it was a lipdub, and it was perfectly done. It was like one long shot. Nobody screwed up. It was so perfect.

This video was presumably made for personal use, posted on a “private” social media account, and “leaked” to Valleywag (it is easily accessible on YouTube); it was not “public.” None of the people involved were responsible for layoffs. And the lifestyle it represents is one of wealth and leisure that motivates many young entrepreneurs (see Figure 5). Valleywag and TechCrunch, which picked up the story, claimed the participants were “ostentatious” and “tasteless,” but that seems a weak justification for endless public castigation.



Figure 5: Stills from "Cypress 20" video



While regular gossip columns also enforce normative standards for their subjects, the people covered in Valleywag were mostly 20 and 30-something workers without managers, publicists, agents, or any experience dealing with the press at the time that they became notorious. Many of them found the coverage to be extremely difficult at times, if not emotionally devastating. Valleywag justified using the model of celebrity gossip, paparazzi, and tabloids to analyze the technology scene by claiming to provide a check on tech scene hypocrisy. While it was true that some people involved were appearing on the covers of *Wired* and *BusinessWeek* and courting celebrity-like attention, others were not. Ultimately, the idea of using the tools of celebrity culture to analyze the lives of regular people is problematic, as the protections available to mainstream celebrities do not exist for micro-celebrities. This attitude justifies micro-scrutiny of anyone who puts content online; but since most young people put content online today, it opens the door for such scrutiny to be applied to almost anyone. And this scrutiny can be very harsh.

#### Micro-Celebrity as Experience

She isn't mentally stable enough to handle all the bullshit that comes along with a full-disclosure internet presence (Commenter on the *Oh No They Didn't* gossip blog, talking about actress Lindsay Lohan).

While there has been a great deal of analysis of celebrity culture from the perspective of fans and celebrity watchers, there has been little attention to how fame is experienced by celebrities. This is presumably because celebrities are

difficult to access beyond talk show appearances or autobiographies. While some celebrities speak openly about their negative experiences with fame, famous people are usually seen as ungrateful if they complain about the consequences of something they presumably wanted to achieve. This section deals with the experience of micro-celebrity, what it is like for its practitioners, and its positive and negative effects. While it is impossible to know if this can be extrapolated to the experiences of mainstream celebrities, we can presume that at least some of these experiences may apply to many other people who live life in public.

Most of the micro-celebrities I interviewed were candid about the strategic nature of their self-promotion. Although some micro-celebrities will claim that they are sharing information for some sort of nebulous social good, marketer and author Tara Hunt clarifies:

People try to be altruistic about it, but why else would you like give out personal pieces of your life to the web? I mean, if I just wanted to record the moments of my life I would write a private diary or keep my twitter private or keep my blog totally private... you put yourself as a public tweeter or public blogger and you start to write these things because you want people to read them. And why do you want people to read them? Well, maybe sometimes you want your mom to read them and maybe sometimes you want your friends that you've been out of touch with to read this stuff, but kind of mostly you want people to read them because you want people to know who you are and get discovered and people like you and grow in popularity. We don't really change that way. When you're an adult the growth and popularity isn't like the best dates than you can get. Although I've seen people tweet for that reason too.

Hunt characterizes micro-celebrity practitioners as “external validation junkies” who want attention from a larger audience than just friends and family. This

echoes the idea of the social web as an exhibitionist culture where personal blogging and self-portraits encourage an inward-focus (Lovink 2008). The view of oneself as public and of readers as an audience or a fan base is a key part of micro-celebrity, one which is calculated and deliberate. Leah Culver, a software developer who created the micro-blogging site Pownce, agrees:

You actually have it at any point at the same time the ability to say no. Like I could shut down Pownce, I could disappear, I could just quit. Someone else could take my place like I can just, you know, move away and nobody would remember me in a year or maybe even a month, right? So anytime you can quit. That's a nice thing about Internet stuff, though, too, right? You don't have to worry about the paparazzi stalking you.

Culver's first experience with internet fame was funding a new laptop by selling advertisements to be laser-etched on the casing for \$50 a square inch; she successfully paid for the laptop, the final product made the front page of Digg, and the project became an example of effective and cheap viral advertising. After that experience, Culver decided that she could handle a greater level of attention, and went on to found her own website, Pownce.

While Leah distinguishes internet fame from the negatives that come with mainstream fame, many of my informants did find micro-celebrity to be a difficult experience. Several micro-celebrities described the difficulty of trusting people and wondering whether they are mostly concerned with a high-status public persona. Kevin Rose told me, "I don't know how to handle new people that approach me that want to become friends because I don't know why they want to become friends with me. It's a really different experience than it was a few years

ago, to go to a party and meet people. Because you have to figure out what their intentions are.” Tara Hunt said, “Being a public figure is different. I do have to date differently and be way more...You can't be that sort of carefree person that I was before. I have to always sort of be a little bit more careful about who I date and how I date, and all that sort of stuff.”

Micro-celebrity requires people to police their image and be watchful of what appears in the public eye, especially with sites like Valleywag combing through user-created content. The persistence and searchability of social content like blog entries, photographs, and tweets means that relationships and personas are augmented by a rich context of digital information. For example, Glenda Bautista describes her careful monitoring of digital photography:

I mean, a lot of that sort of happens where a lot of what's implied in photographs that's literally taken over in one second, I mean ends up on Valleywag, something like that... I dated someone who's like pretty notorious in the community and the thing is that one day, you know, like, hand is positioned like around the waist, like not over the shoulder and I'm like, "Oh God, that's going to be taken out of context," you know what I mean? And then pretty soon like everybody has commentary on it. You know like my social life is completely up, it is completely up for debate, like a bunch of social... like strangers, like first of all the local media and a bunch of strangers, like you know really, really trying to understand about what's going on in that picture. And there are people involved. And they sort of have to clean up all those messes.

Bautista felt very negatively about having other people's perceptions of her shaped by the media—notably her dating life and ex-boyfriend. She described trying to blog under an alternate identity, reining back her tendency to comment on personal matters, and shoring up her personal brand in order to regain control

over her image. She said, frustrated, “everyone's perceptions of you are built upon the way in which people have documented you that you really honestly have no control over.” Author and business writer Sarah Lacy told me, “I mean everyone, everyone in the scene has had to give up their privacy. I've had to give up my privacy. Michael Arrington has. Even just people covering this scene...And so that makes you pull back.” While some of these complaints about privacy may also serve to enforce the micro-celebrity's own sense of status, it is true that micro-celebrity practitioners often give up after a short period of time due to the scrutiny of public living, which is compounded by the web. Tara Hunt, whose very public breakup was covered by Valleywag and *San Francisco* magazine (sample quote: “In a world not known for its epic romances, Chris and Tara used to be Web 2.0's version of Brangelina”) (Yeung 2008), has retreated back from the days of extreme public living, as has Culver, who sold her microblogging startup and retreated into her true passion, software development.

Many people I talked to spoke of the downsides to micro-celebrity life; namely, that there was constant “drama.” Living a public life can be very stressful and comes with a lot of gossip and intrigue, partly due to the scrutiny of blogs like Valleywag. Lacy described, “The part that's not fun is just the, you know, the exploitive part. I mean, the fact that it's like people know that if they write certain things about me it'll drive a certain amount of traffic so people will write nasty things. I mean that's kind of the part that sucks.” Glenda explained, “I think that for a while there was also the assumption that everybody was on guard... And I

mean nobody, when it was burgeoning, no one really knew what to do until like they had that one instance. Everybody has that one instance where too much is like, OK, totally like crossed the line. You know what I mean? And you can't tell the difference between like the way that the media has spun something versus when what you really honestly know to be true.” The prevalence of social media in the technology scene normalizes surveillance of oneself and others. Micro-celebrities often found that both their online and offline actions were publicized and discussed via social media. These discussions were in turn public, creating a fishbowl-like effect which normalized personal scrutiny. The media personality Julia Allison epitomizes this type of scrutiny and the negative effects it can have on micro-celebrity practitioners.

### Julia Allison

Julia Allison (real name: Julia Allison Baugher) is a 29-year-old New York City television personality and blogger who describes herself as “personally and professionally a handful.” She rose to micro-fame as the dating columnist for weekly events magazine *Time Out New York*, barraging the New York media gossip blog *Gawker* until they began to write about her. Allison is primarily known for blogging on the site Non-Society, which she founded in 2008 with two other attractive 20-something women. She posts continuous photographs, links, and tweets on her “lifestream,” and co-hosted a tri-weekly video show called TMI Weekly on Non-Society from 2008-2009. Although Allison is not exactly a

technologist, she is a frequent fixture at tech parties in New York and San Francisco, and was on the cover of *Wired* magazine to illustrate their story about internet fame. She is also a “professional talking head” and has appeared on hundreds of cable news, talk shows, radio shows, and so forth. Allison primarily writes about herself, chronicling her love life, social events, insecurity, issues with friends and family, vacations, and so on at her blog. She is very pretty, and usually appears in public with full makeup, an impeccable outfit, and her fluffy white dog.

The amount of negative attention targeted at Allison is almost staggering, much of which focuses on her personal life, looks and weight. Gawker sneered in its 2006 “Field Guide to Julia Allison:”

Allison's easy to spot at most any media party of consequence — she's everywhere, it seems — and she's famous for laying it on thicker than a toddler spreading peanut butter. She's *so* excited to see everyone she meets, she just *loves* you, you're so *great*, she *really* wants to be *best* friends, and so forth. All this is delivered along with self-deprecating complaints about her own bad habit of relentless self-promotion, but no matter how unsubtle the hint, she's not getting the message that she herself is sending. Who knows, perhaps dialing it down a bit might make that longed-for threesome happen sooner, or make that Silver Bullet finally obsolete (Mohney 2006).

A blog called Reblogging NonSociety, which responds—daily—to every post and tweet Julia creates, calls her “Donkey” and refers to her as “annoying piece of internet trash” and “another dumb trashy gold digger with a Tumblr” and posts comments like, “Sweetheart, you’re almost thirty. And when you don’t sleep all night, you look forty” (Juliaspublicist 2010; Partypants 2010). Wendy Atterberry

summed up the most frequent complaints about Allison on the popular women's blog The Frisky:

The thing is, for many of us, Julia represents so much of what is icky about blogging and social networking. She is shamelessly narcissistic and vain, having posted thousands of photos of herself over the years and staging incredible, over-the-top "photo shoots" simply to post on her blog (versus, like, using the images for advertising, the way photo shoot images are normally used). She's utterly obnoxious, and in a time when so many people are hurting financially, she gloats about expensive non-stop vacations, exorbitant gifts from boyfriends, and how many homes her parents own. It's gross. Not only that, but she's mean and unethical. She once publicly outed a fairly well-known ex of hers as having bipolar disorder, and more recently she is trying to sell Armani gift cards through Twitter that she allegedly offered up as a reward to an online contest she conveniently never chose a winner for. Julia Allison is so disliked, there's even an entire site devoted to mocking her every (virtual) move. Some, like Gawker, call her haters as pathetic as she is, but for others, it's simply schadenfreude at its finest (Atterberry 2010).

The hatred shown toward Julia is such that even Gawker wrote a series of articles trying to explain what motivates the women behind the Reblogging site (Lawson 2010b; Lawson 2010a). The justification given for the vitriol is usually that she represents a larger sort of grasping for attention that people find particularly distasteful, but much of it seems soaked in misogyny and a frightening desire to judge women based on their appearance.

Despite this negative publicity, which includes the number three position on *Radar's* list of "The Most Hated People on the Internet," Julia has become a micro-celebrity almost entirely through her own volition. Much of this has come about through sharing of intimate, personal information, outreach to a fan base, and the use of other social media to promote herself. If Paris Hilton is an expert in



using tabloid media to achieve fame, Julia Allison is an expert at using social media to achieve micro-celebrity. Her bio states:

Julia has a Facebook account, a Myspace page, a Flickr, a Twitter, a Friendfeed, four Tumblrs, three Movable Type blogs, two Vimeos, one YouTube and a photogenic white shih-tzu named Marshmallow.

Allison is highly conversant with personal technology, although her own interests are primarily relationships, fashion, and the like. She exemplifies two particular micro-celebrity practices: she projects a sense of intimacy by sharing highly personal information about her personal life, and broadcasts a very specific persona through the use of digital imagery, re-occurring markers of identity, and a consistent writing voice. But while the values of the tech scene reflect norms of masculinity, business, and engineering, Julia embodies femininity and more mainstream celebrity culture.

The ability to live life as a character marked by feminine identity characteristics, specifically Allison's predilection for high femme makeup, clothing, accessories, and pastimes, when combined with a limited sense of irony or satire, leads many detractors to view Allison as entirely shallow. Owen Thomas described how he sees Julia:

Julia is arguing the Julia Allison point. She is arguing the case for herself. And she doesn't have to actually believe it. She is arguing that she is a good editor, which she's not. She is arguing that she is a successful businesswoman, which she's not. She's arguing that she's a caring individual, which she's not. But, you know, it doesn't matter that all these things aren't true and that she may not actually believe them herself because she can argue the point. And that's all that matters to her - arguing the point...And then you start

defending the image rather than the authentic self. And basically, and that is especially important when there is no authentic self.

Thomas argues that Allison is entirely the persona that she presents to the world and that there is nothing further under the surface. Indeed, Allison represents a focus on appearance, possessions and girlishness that is antithetical to the dominant values of the technology scene. She is overtly feminine and openly courts attention, using her own image to attract and maintain her audience. But Allison's success threatens the myths that fuel the technology scene, which I believe is why she is so hated. Allison is undeniably pretty, and the strategic use of her appearance is threatening to the idea that brains, not looks, are what matters in achieving success. Although women are judged in the technology scene on their appearance regardless, Julia's assessment and presentation of herself as attractive invites an almost furious backlash that implies that a woman should not be the one to make that judgment. Ironically, Julia presenting herself as an object suggests an agented subjectivity that threatens the male-dominated social hierarchy. (This also angers women who want to be judged on their accomplishments rather than looks.) Her success seems to jeopardize the idea that attention is *earned* in some measurable way, devaluing her accomplishments as irrelevant.

Allison also illustrates that the line between acceptable information-sharing and "TMI" (too much information) is deeply gendered. Using social media for self-disclosure increases status *up to a point*, after which the person is typically categorized as an "attention whore," "oversharer," or "desperate."

Anthony Hoffman's critical discourse analysis of media coverage about oversharing found that the term was overwhelmingly negative, applied primarily to women, and had "the effect of creating a devalued subclass of information sharing online," mostly comprised of "sex and romance, intimate relationships, parenthood and reproduction, and so on" (2009, 71). Allison's detractors demonstrate a similar pattern of normative judgment around information-sharing. Her discussions of her dating life, desire to get married and Sex and the City-esque fantasies of urban life are labeled as "desperate," "delusional," and an "attention whore," because these topics are constructed as silly or irrelevant. That these are historically, intrinsically *feminine* topics is not coincidental. It is also not coincidental that the term "famewhore" includes the word *whore*.

I interviewed Julia in April 2010. She gave me more time than any other informant, and we spent three hours discussing her experiences as a micro-celebrity. She was extraordinarily open and candid, and I was surprised to find her intelligent and interesting. (Julia told me this is common when she meets someone for the first time, joking that people say "'You're not a total ditzzy retard-slash-asshole.' Um, Yay?") When I asked Julia how she deals with her detractors, she responded:

Hysterical tears, usually. It's not been good for me. And one of my girlfriends who just got her degree... said that I reminded her of an abused woman. Like literally.

She elaborated that the negative attention has "crush[ed] me a little bit" and is "beating me down." She said, "It's not even that many people, it's just the

relentless nature, and the sense that you're constantly judged... It can be literally debilitating, and it's very depressing." Allison has been dealing with online "haters" since she launched her first website in college, and has never really come to terms with the negative consequences of public living.

As a result, Allison has a list of protective techniques for dealing with negative feedback. These included turning off Google Alerts ("the first thing I did"), blocking all "negative people" on Tumblr and Twitter, and deliberately avoiding what is written about her online ("I told my friends—if you see something, don't tell me about it, don't mention it, don't send me a link, do not read it... I've asked friends and family, don't read the negative press. I've asked them not to Google"). Julia summarized:

It doesn't always work – but that's the only way I've managed to salvage some semblance of sanity – but even then, people get through with the negative e-mails, it just depends on how I'm feeling at any given time.

She had just returned from LA, where she lunched with *American Pie* actress Shannon Elizabeth, who professed to using identical techniques to manage her own bad publicity. There is very little information on how "mainstream" celebrities deal with the negative consequences of fame; Allison's anecdote suggests that they are similar, but her resources are far fewer. She does not have a handler, a bodyguard, a press agent, or a stylist. Although Julia receives the same type of online scrutiny as a "real" celebrity, she lacks the protections available to a rich movie star or model. In fact, Allison has lost lucrative sponsorship opportunities due to her negative fan base. She summarized: "I'm a normal person

with weird problems but I can't react like celebrities do—but I have the same problems.”

And while mainstream celebrities can get away with some degree of artifice, the presumed closeness of micro-celebrity and audience means that Allison must carefully disclose what she does to maintain her glamorous appearance:

And in many ways I'm more conscientious because of it, I'm honest, I can't get away with anything—I can't get away with anything! So I don't, anymore. I used to be probably a little bit, definitely not dishonest, but you know, we all try to make ourselves look better to other people, it's sort of a human nature. I can't do that anymore. If I get—like, I have extensions, I have to say it. Otherwise I get called out for it. If I—when I get Botox—I absolutely plan on getting Botox, I'm gonna have to tell people. Because if I don't, they will figure it out, or they'll call me a liar, or whatever. Every negative point I have, I have to be honest about. And it's—it's brutal. And it's also, on the other hand, ostensibly I'm doing what I love for a living. But it's—if I could go back, it's really hard to say [fix]. I'd probably go to Wellesley and get a PhD in sociology and live a very happy life. Out of the public eye.<sup>38</sup>

Again, these are specifically female-gendered practices that Allison is “forced” to disclose. She straddles the exhibitionist world of the internet, which values transparency and openness, and the traditional media business which is far more guarded. She cannot tweet about industry meetings or sponsorship contracts without violating professional agreements, but is then criticized online for purportedly fabricating job opportunities. Allison is attempting to translate her online notoriety into mainstream fame (she is moving to LA and frequently films pilots for dating and fashion shows), but the norms of her fan base and the

entertainment industry conflict. This suggests that her high online status will not easily transfer to another context.

The question of Allison's status in the scene is a complicated one. Thor Muller, in answer to the question "what kind of things do you think get people to kind of lose status in the community?" said:

I think that the blatant self-promotion thing is a clear one. I know that there are five Twitterers that for a while anyway were so blatant in their self-promotion; of course these people are now with 250, 000 followers, so maybe you can't argue with success. But the other side is, what do you want to be known for? And those people are known to some extent as blatant self-promoters. That's a biggie on it for me, and it is for a lot of people. The question there is does that mean that certain options will be cut off for people who are not willing to take the flak? You lose one kind of status and gain another. Like the Julia Allison thing. She may be a blatant self-promoter. She may not be doing anything of long lasting value, but she has amazing opportunities on a day to day basis, at least for the next little while.

Although Allison inspires vocal dislike, she also has access to rare opportunities. She covered many of the 2010 New York Fashion Week shows for an NBC online series, frequently appears on television, has shot a number of pilots, was featured in a Sony advertising campaign, and is very close friends with Mark Zuckerberg's sister Randi. These high-status markers are unavailable to most of her detractors. Her "haters" may debate whether or not she *deserves* these privileges (in a strong moral tone which harkens back to the myth of meritocracy), but it is clear that she has them.

It is unclear at this point why Allison continues to blog, considering the emotional effects of her publicity. She said:

And people say, well, why do you do it, why do you do it? I think my purpose in life, in so much as anyone has a purpose in life, is to communicate with other people, to be open, to talk about various issues; if I shelved this I would be shelving my purpose, but it's a continual struggle between opening myself up to judgment and to criticism and trying to shut down. That's why I quit the internet every couple of years.

Allison works for herself and clearly enjoys the benefits of her career. But since successful male technology entrepreneurs are the standard by which acceptable micro-celebrity is judged, her personal self-disclosures and over-the-top feminine persona which bring her fame simultaneously leave her vulnerable to extreme criticism. Allison lacks the financial and structural protections available to traditional celebrities, and her tribulations provide insight into the negative impact of fame on "average people."

### Motivations

Given the negative consequences documented in this chapter, it is worth asking why people seek micro-celebrity. Micro-celebrity does have positive consequences. For some, it can translate into money. I gave a talk on internet fame at SXSW Interactive 2010. My first question was from a young girl wearing punk clothes with a shaved head, her stubble dyed purple. She asked "Why do people do this if they're not making money?" For her, becoming internet famous was a means to an end: a way to achieve traditional celebrity, which she equated with wealth. But many of my informants found that their notoriety did not translate to more money; there was no equivalence between micro-celebrity status and income. For others, micro-celebrity was a way to advance their career. The

cultural logic of celebrity has infiltrated so many occupations that blatant self-promotion is stock in trade now for up and coming rap stars and actresses, but also software developers, journalists, and academics. Creating a public presence is therefore a necessity in order to secure and maintain a job. Sarah Lacy described this as work: “When people are buying your book and the base of fans is making you a brand, I think there's your responsibility to give back to that. And that's, it's very draining, but that's kind of the fun part of it.” Similarly, some social media firms will not hire people without blogs or Facebook profiles, which become signs of cultural participation (see chapter 5 for a discussion of self-branding).

But “micro-celebrity” and “high-status” do not necessarily go hand in hand. While Julia Allison and other prominent “oversharers” like Nick Starr (who appears in chapter 6) are well-known in their respective communities, neither is well-regarded. Perhaps this is because they are both up-front about their desire for attention. In the SF tech community, where people often claimed that status was based on an accomplishment like building a successful company or inventing a useful technology, such “famewhoring” was seen as distasteful and gauche. But in other communities, like the teen-targeted entertainment site Buzznet, the relentless self-promotion of self-styled models like Audrey Kitching and Raquel Reed was a normal and acceptable practice. The boundaries of micro-celebrity practice are very much contextualized by the scene that the person originates from, and can easily backfire. Moreover, there are plenty of high-status individuals, such as Mark Zuckerberg or Chris Messina, who no longer seek out



the spotlight. However, even if Allison is poorly regarded among technologists, she does reap the benefits of high status in other communities: she attends New York fashion week, wears designer clothes, and was hired by Sony to serve as a web spokesperson for the brand due to her network and influence.

Several informants described the changes micro-celebrity brought about in people. An ex-girlfriend of an internet entrepreneur spoke wonderingly of his newfound predilection for expensive clothes and trendy restaurants, saying she could no longer recognize in him the person she dated. Melissa Gira Grant described such men as “bubble hotties:” entrepreneurs who had gotten rich without developing the necessary social skills to handle it. Indeed, the attention and admiration that many micro-celebrities receive can be both validating and transformative. In *Fame: The Psychology of Stardom*, Andrew Evans and Glenn Wilson describe the difficulties of adjusting to new-found fame and how constant positive feedback can lead to self-absorption, narcissism, and grandiosity, as well as a resentment of public scrutiny (2001, 134-136). While micro-celebrity exists on a much smaller scale than, say, film stardom, it is possible that the increased attention could have similar affects. But mainstream celebrities have access to systems of attention brokerage, such as bodyguards, drivers, PR specialists, agents, and managers, while micro-celebrities rarely do. The constant negative attention given to many micro-celebrities, particularly the critiques of appearance and sexuality targeted to women, requires a very thick skin. Julia Allison described crying for three days after Gawker accused her of hitting on married

men, and many informants claimed they did not read Valleywag to avoid facing such criticism.

The primary motivator for pursuing micro-celebrity seems to be attention and status. While Adam Jackson wanted to increase his access and influence within the tech scene, Julia Allison wanted to attain a more conventional type of celebrity. Because celebrity culture is high status, micro-celebrity becomes a status-seeking practice that transcends individual communities and social contexts. In the next section, I analyze micro-celebrity as status and examine *aspirational production* as a technique to emulate the attention and visibility given to high-status individuals.

### Celebrity Status and Aspirational Production

“Celebrity” represents the top of the United States status structure, the epitome of individual success, achievement, financial security and glamour (Halpern 2007). Celebrities attract a great deal of attention, serve as role models, are granted legal privileges, and receive enormous financial benefits as well as free clothes, vacations, and so forth (Kurzman et al. 2007). Beyond the pragmatic benefits, “fame” has become a catch-all for the best life has to offer. Although it is obvious from browsing autobiographies or watching *Behind the Music* that celebrity is not a path to happiness, to many, fame represents the ultimate accomplishment.

There are well-known people in every social strata and subculture. From high school students to ultimate Frisbee players to romance novelists, people at the top of the status hierarchy are accorded respect and social and material capital (De Botton 2005). For instance, in fandom, the Big Name Fan (BNF) is “a fan with a large following” (Busse and Hellekson 2006, 11). The BNF might write well-regarded fan fiction or run a popular blog; they have their own fans, and retain some of the fascination of the object of fandom.<sup>39</sup> Since status hierarchies are omnipresent, what is the difference between high-status people and micro-celebrity practitioners?

In a terrific but rarely-cited article, sociologist Murray Milner Jr. argues that celebrity culture functions as a sort of overarching prestige system which has altered the way that status functions in contemporary culture. He identifies several important changes. First, visibility has become necessary for social status. Obviously a person who is entirely socially invisible cannot have any sort of social standing, but Milner’s point is that visibility has expanded due to new technologies, so “gaining visibility becomes an accomplishment in itself” (Milner 2005, 75). Second, he points out that relationships between people are becoming more like the relationships between celebrities and their audiences (2005, 74). This is due to new forms of technology and media, extended social networks that span greater distances, and a “more varied and complex” public face than in the past (2005, 74). Although Milner believes there is a greater divide between the “public” and “private” selves than in the past—something I would disagree with,

given that self-presentation has always varied in different contexts, and I do not find the public/private divide useful for describing identity—these premises foreshadow some of what I found during fieldwork.

In the last chapter, I discussed what made a person high-status in the technology community: visibility, wealth, entrepreneurship, conformity to a certain image, and recognition. This chapter deals primarily with people who *strategically* and *methodically* use social media to position themselves as celebrities, acknowledge and play to an audience, and construct a subject position that resembles that of a celebrity (a persona). In other words, micro-celebrity practice is a *status-seeking technique* that exists on a continuum; people practice it more or less, and although some practitioners are dismissively referred to by members of the scene as “famewhores” or “fameballs,” others use micro-celebrity to manage a pre-existing public persona that results from visibility due to business dealings, popular creative content, and so forth. Ascribed micro-celebrity assigns individuals a pre-existing celebrity subject position, complete with media scrutiny and fans. Given the high status of celebrity in contemporary American culture, playing with and creating micro-celebrity is a way to mimic that high status within a subculture. There are a set of normative assumptions about how micro-celebrity should be practiced, and how far someone should go to promote themselves which are revealed at moments of rupture: when there is a public disagreement, when someone goes too far, or when they are policed and called

out in public. These norms are constantly developing, changing, and altering micro-celebrity practice.

The marketing strategy of aspirational consumption is well-documented in books like Dana Thomas' *Deluxe* (2007) and James Twitchell's *Living it Up* (2003). Luxury brands like Louis Vuitton, Chanel, or Cartier knowingly position their products as outside the reach of the average person; a Louis Vuitton "Romance" bag costs \$1,300. By marketing lower-priced lines of sunglasses, perfumes, scarves, key chains and other trinkets, a luxury brand like Chanel can make a subset of their products available to middle-class consumers, widening the potential market. For example, the Marc Jacobs brand makes most of their profits from the juniors-targeted Marc by Marc Jacobs line, which runs \$100-800 per piece, rather than the couture Marc Jacobs line. A Ferrari keychain still retains some of the brand's aura, even though it costs a fraction of the price of a sports car. Brands use these objects to market themselves to the "entry-luxury" consumer base (Welch 2002). Similarly, during the 2000s, the concept of "affordable luxury" was introduced to middle-class Americans. A Starbucks latte costs \$4, which is more than a cup of coffee from a deli or brewed at home. The ability to spend an exponentially larger sum than is necessary on a prosaic cup of coffee interpellates the consumer into a subject position that can feel wealthy and elite. In both instances, consumption is tied to a sense of upward mobility. Status is conferred through the ability to purchase or share in a brand image.

The trope of the upwardly-mobile social climber attempting to pass themselves off as high status appears throughout literature, films, and television shows, from *The Great Gatsby* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* to *Joe Millionaire* and *Titanic*. Typically, this character is of working class origins and attempts to mingle with an upper-class social milieu through the consumption of the appropriate goods. But micro-celebrity reveals a twist on this: the *aspirational producer*. The aspirational producer is a social media user who creates content portraying themselves in a high-status light, whether that be as a beautiful fashionista, a celebrity with thousands of fans, or a cutting-edge comedian. *Aspirational production* positions the creator to be discovered, either by amassing a huge number of fans or by gaining legitimacy from mainstream media. Therefore, the content produced by aspirational production can be said to have a particular goal: increased status and popularity. Adam Jackson's thousands of tweets about technology reflects an aspiration to be a wealthy entrepreneur or technology pundit, as Julia Allison's glamour shots reveal her desire to be the next Carrie Bradshaw. Blogger Rex Sorgatz called this technique "fauxparazzi" in a *New York Magazine* story on the micro-famous: "taking photos of non-famous people staged to look famous, the gifted microfamer borrows from the paparazzo's handbook by choreographing photos that look accidental but are actually snapped from the perfect angle and with the perfect company" (Sorgatz 2008).

Aspirational production is related to conspicuous consumption, Thorstein Veblen's theory of consumption as a highly visible process which vicariously demonstrated wealth through the ritual use and display of consumer goods (Veblen 1899). But today, with celebrities on the highest rung of the status ladder, it is their goods and accoutrements that are emulated. In the *New York Times*, Juliet Schor called this "vertical desire, coveting the goods of the rich and the powerful seen on television" (Steinhauer 2005). But aspirational production is not always about coveting goods—most technology workers are not terribly concerned with clothes, jewelry, or handbags, although they are remarkably interested in the latest gadgets. Rather, it is about coveting *the types of attention given to celebrities*.

Because visibility is of prime value within the technology scene, micro-celebrity practitioners engage in attention-getting practices. Aspirational production thus mimics the subject position inhabited by the celebrity: being interviewed by another blogger rather than *Vanity Fair* or taking pictures of oneself rather than sitting for an Annie Liebowitz portrait. If there is no literal paparazzo to follow the rank-and-file technology worker around, he or she can stage a fauxparazzi shoot, have his picture taken by a photography blogger at a party, or even pose in front of a "step-and-repeat," the backgrounds covered with logos propped at the entrance of exclusive parties (see Figure 6). Caroline McCarthy describes the rise of New York City tech scene photographers, who

used the location-based software Dodgeball to find out where high-status technology workers were gathering:

Nick McGlynn... would use Dodgeball to find out where the parties were, or would know about them in advance. And then he started this photo site, "Random Night Out". If a bunch of people Dodgeball into a bar, sometimes he would show up with his camera and take pictures, that sort of thing... He, I think, was extremely formative in this crafting of a geek social scene, in that he would put up photos from them in the same way that the Cobrasnake would put up photos from hipster parties. And society blogs, like Guest of a Guest, suddenly started getting interested in his photos, too. And so, it minted this whole, like, "the tech people, the social media people," to the point where the girl who runs the blog did like a social media yearbook thing. Said that I would be the head cheerleader, which made me a little bit uncomfortable knowing what I thought of cheerleaders when I actually was in high school.

When someone is photographed by a nightlife blogger, they are placed into a subject position where they can be ascribed micro-celebrity. Although these pictures are published on blogs and sites like Tumblr rather than *US Weekly*, in an era where most people scrutinize Oscar outfits on fashion blogs rather than wait for a printed magazine, there is no significant difference. Ascribing micro-celebrity status is a part of aspirational production: creating celebrities in a scene that did not formerly have them allows workers to see themselves as the type of person who knows and congregates with celebrities. Technology parties with VIP sections, velvet ropes and bouncers, gift bags, and step-and-repeats are increasingly visible in San Francisco and New York City, allowing rank-and-file workers to participate in a more glamorous life than simple software development (see Figure 6).





Figure 6: Author with IRL founder Emily Gannett at Twestival party, 2010

Micro-celebrity interacts with the status of the technology scene in a number of ways. It maps values of celebrity culture (appearance, managing fans, a salable persona) onto the presentation strategies of social media popularized by Web 2.0. Micro-celebrity media both constructs the tech scene as a glamorous milieu and policies its values, particularly hard work, a “masculine” consumption ethos, and meritocracy. Micro-celebrity personas are transformed into character arcs and narrative tropes, and subjected to harsh scrutiny similar to traditional celebrities. But the intimacy expected of micro-celebrities from their audience

often conflicts with the ideals of entrepreneurship, which advocate deserving and inconspicuous success. As a result, micro-celebrity practice is met with drama, interpersonal conflicts, and ongoing surveillance, enabled and compounded by the omnipresence of social media.

### Conclusion

The popularity of social media has wrought many changes in our concepts of celebrity. Technologies like Twitter, blogs, YouTube and Facebook have enabled traditional celebrities to have more contact with their audiences and reach out directly to fans without mediating contact through a manager or fan club (Muntean and Petersen 2009; Marwick and boyd 2011). The internet has made it possible for average people to gain rapid fame inadvertently through the creation and dissemination of content. Similarly, a person well-known in a particular subculture can circulate to larger social groups using social media tools, even transcending their origins. And individuals can strategically seek celebrification through the practice of micro-celebrity. An individual can practice celebrity without the according mass fame that a celebrity like actor Angelina Jolie or rapper Jay-Z possesses; while micro-celebrity requires a (perceived) audience, it can be practiced by people with very small concrete audiences, such as a few blog readers or a dozen Twitter followers. The internet has exponentially increased this as the technologies used by the famous are now available to the average teenager, who can take endless snapshots of her outfits, blog her relationship woes, make

videos lip-synching to her favorite songs, and engage in endless bantering with her friends, fans, and rivals online. Even if only ten people are watching our fictitious teenager, she is practicing micro-celebrity. Micro-celebrity becomes the default pose for much social media.

Although some of the actions by the people profiled in this chapter may seem extreme, content creation has become part of everyday life for most people with even a passing interest in social media. As *Wired* says:

It's easy to dismiss [Julia] Allison as little more than a rank narcissist—and many of her vocal online critics are happy to do just that. But come on, admit it: You've spent a good half hour trying to pick out the most flattering photo to upload to your MySpace page. You struggle to come up with the *mot juste* to describe your Facebook status. You keep a bank of self-portraits on Flickr or an online scrapbook on Tumblr or a running log of your daily musings on Blogger. You strategically court the gatekeepers at StumbleUpon or Digg. You compare the size of your Twitter-subscriber rolls to those of your friends. You set up Google Alerts to tell you whenever a blogger mentions your name. See? Self-promotion is no longer solely the domain of egotists and professional aspirants. Anyone can be a personal branding machine (Tanz 2008, 109).

While *Wired's* audience is presumably more technically savvy than the average Joe, these types of practices are precisely what I mean when I refer to micro-celebrity practice as a continuum. On one hand, you have people who are strategically trying to gain online fame for some larger end, or even just for attention. On the other, you have typical content creation, originally meant for perhaps just friends or family, but with the ability to attract a much wider audience. In a celebrity-oriented society what is valued is what grabs the public's attention, rather than what's serious, difficult, important, or complicated—what

Jodi Dean calls the “ideology of publicity” (2002). In this publicity culture, we prize performative social skills. Whether one’s occupation is a call center worker, nurse, or college professor, the path to advancement rewards extroversion, the ability to synthesize information into bite-size chunks, and public-relations finesse. In a highly capitalist, highly service-oriented economy, this cultural logic encourages neoliberal subjectivity, independent management of lives and careers, and the use of consumer products for continuous self-improvement.

The cultural logic of celebrity partially explains internet fame, facilitated by the explosion in availability of technological tools and skills with which to express this logic. But the internet is not the cause of this behavior. Rather, in a celebrity-obsessed culture in which publicity tactics are increasingly demanded in all professions, the internet simply makes these techniques more available to the average person.

Traditionally, “celebrity” refers to superstars in the George Clooney and Angelina Jolie model of people known for good looks, hit films, and exciting personal lives. But today, for every Madonna, there are countless tabloid fixtures like Heidi Montag and Spencer Pratt, stars of the vague MTV reality show *The Hills*, known for their uncanny ability to attract and manipulate the paparazzi. Heidi and Spencer’s frolicking for the camera doesn’t pretend to be authentic, meaningful, natural, or spontaneous. Instead, it exists within a tabloid culture that has trickled visibly down into everyday life. Local party photographers like *The Cobra Snake* became celebrities in their own right by publishing digital photos of

hip young things out on the town, creating It Girls like sixteen-year-old Corey Kennedy, a fashion blogger whose parents were unaware of her double life until photos of her were published in *Nylon* magazine (and who has since appeared on the new *90210*). Paparazzi photos are markers of stardom, to the point where Westchester, NY firm Party with the Paparazzi provides fake photographers, videographers, and even news reporters to wealthy teenagers for their sweet sixteens.

It is not surprising, then, that micro-celebrity should be affecting the world of technology as well. Emulating the tropes of celebrity culture and treating “nerds like rock stars” interpellates technology workers as participants in an exciting, valuable, and high-status culture. For the participants themselves, micro-celebrity, whether achieved, ascribed, or a combination of the two, generally translates into higher social status within a community. However, this micro-celebrity is policed by others, and when someone goes too far in the pursuit of attention without other status markers (e.g. entrepreneurship, technological skills, accomplishments), they are condemned and lose status accordingly. As a result, micro-celebrity has very real effects on the San Francisco technology scene. On one hand, it helps to create a very visible elite stratum of individuals and a wider audience for products produced by their companies. On the other, it has tangible impacts on the people who pursue it. These can be positive, such as money, attention, adoration, and access, but they can also be negative, such as backlash, mean-spirited comments, cruelty, and mistrust. It is also incorporated into social

media technologies *themselves*, which are constructed to emphasize individual profiles and actions. Blogs are about recording and broadcasting one's individual thoughts, which assumes those thoughts are valuable and interesting. Photo-sharing sites presume there is an audience for someone's individual snapshots. And Twitter provides dozens of followers for even the most mundane observations.

Because social media technologies intrinsically require the sharing of personal information, they are able to broadcast a person's image or thoughts much further than these might have traveled in the past. Until recently, the average individual would never have had more than a handful of friends or family members view his vacation snapshots. Today, that person could get hundreds of comments on a photo album or even become a Flickr celebrity in his own right, and he will, most likely, take the time to respond to many of the people who comment on his pictures. This ability to interact directly with the audience is a key feature of micro-celebrity practice. While Angelina and George are kept from their audience by many layers of expensive security and ultra-elite social boundaries, anyone can IM or e-mail Julia Allison and expect her to answer—even people who have achieved a degree of micro-celebrity from making fun of her online. Given this, there is no clear, bright line between normal online content-sharing and micro-celebrity; instead, it is a continuum. Understanding the operations and effects of micro-celebrity is important in order to analyze the overall effects of both social media and celebrity culture.

## CHAPTER V

### HACKING THE ATTENTION ECONOMY: SOCIAL MEDIA AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN THE AGE OF THE PERSONAL BRAND

#### Introduction

During the 1990s, what Paul DuGay calls “enterprise culture” became the predominant business paradigm. Enterprise culture, as promoted by conservative discourse during the 1980s, is “one in which certain enterprising qualities—such as self-reliance, personal responsibility, boldness, and a willingness to take risks in the pursuit of goals—are regarded as human virtues and promoted as such” (Du Gay 1996, 56). Enterprise culture imparts agency and self-reliance while imagining an ideal worker who is simultaneously confident, conscientious, and venturesome (Wee and Brooks 2010). Moving away from Taylorist concepts of work which conceptualized the employee as a body to be managed, enterprise culture regulates the worker through self-regulation. Embodying the virtues of entrepreneurial capitalism is framed as a path to self-realization, self-improvement and happiness. This ideology maintains that workers who exemplify the “entrepreneurial self” find personal satisfaction by doing what is beneficial for business (Miller and Rose 1990).

In this chapter, I look at the ideology of *self-branding* as an example of enterprise discourse. In the second chapter, I traced the modern culture of creative, entrepreneurial labor to Silicon Valley and the dot-com boom (Neff, Wissinger, and Zukin 2005). Self-branding, or the strategic creation of identity to be promoted and sold to others, has moved beyond these roots to become a staple of career counseling and employment advice. Self-branding, as idealized in books like *Crush It* (Vaynerchuk 2009) and *The Four-Hour Work Week* (Ferriss 2009a), is intrinsically linked to social media technologies like blogs and Twitter, since self-promotion on a wide scale is impossible without an affordable system of distribution. The use of social media for self-branding is an example of enterprise self-regulation, or a “technology of subjectivity” (Ong 2006). Although Web 2.0 ideology positions self-branding as a way to find personal fulfillment and economic success, it also explicitly instructs people to inculcate a self-conscious persona which positions self-promotion, visibility, and comfort with idioms of advertising and commercialism as positive, high-status virtues. I argue that this persona is an “edited self,” requiring emotional labor to maintain a business-friendly self-presentation despite the advocacy of transparency and openness by social media culture. The branded self is an entrepreneur whose product is a neatly packaged, performed identity. Although the type of freelance project-based culture that is optimal for self-branding can be creatively fulfilling, the need for continuous self-monitoring demonstrates the disconnect between neoliberal ideals of identity and the reality of day-to-day life.



Despite a plethora of theoretical perspectives around the neoliberal self and self-branding (Du Gay 1996; Sternberg 1998; Lair, Sullivan, and Cheney 2005; Hearn 2008; Wee and Brooks 2010), there has been little to no empirical work on how these theoretical identities come into being. How does the social become economic? What is the fantasy of personal branding? How do people using self-branding want to be viewed? Do marketized practices meet the priorities of people who use them? Several scholars have examined how the enterprise self, or the neoliberal subject, is advocated in popular culture like makeover shows and reality television (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2006; Sender 2006; McMurria 2008). I extend this analysis to the link between the enterprise subject and social media. Social media allows for individuals to broadcast information about themselves to potential audiences of millions, emphasizing individual creation of identity that is presumed to be authentic yet marketable. The culture of Web 2.0 encourages a neoliberal view of the self, and facilitates identity construction and presentation strategies that draw from advertising and marketing tactics when applied to oneself. The branded self that results is highly visible and relentlessly self-promoting, creating a new version of the entrepreneur known for his or her performed identity rather than accomplishments.

### Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is a complex term with a long history. Although it is often used in a general and vague sense by academics, it has become such a loaded

word that I need to situate my use of it before moving forward. The term “neoliberalism” originated with economists affiliated with the German Freiburg School in the years after World War Two. Theorists like Rüstow, Eucken, Röpke, and Müller-Armack sought to decouple a classical liberal position, namely that market competition brings prosperity, from laissez-faire economic policy (Tribe 2009). The Freiburg school saw monopolies and cartels as a threat, and advocated humanistic, social values. In other words, “neo” liberals were attempting to make positive improvements to classical liberalism; they saw an unfettered faith in the free market as out of date, and pejoratively classified those who believed in it as “paleo-liberals” (Boas and Gans-Morse 2009).

Economic theories which progressives would today characterize as neoliberal were taken up by Chilean economists trained at the Chicago School who admired the “German Miracle” post-World War II. These economists studied under Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek, and implemented “rapid and extensive privatization, deregulation, and reductions in trade barriers” when they returned to Chile (Boas and Gans-Morse 2009, 15). While these practices differed greatly from the original normative ideology advocated by the Freiburg school, they took its name and became the first wave of a major reorganization of governments and political markets which would characterize the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s.

These policies and accompanying ideology would come to be called *neoliberalism*, which David Harvey defines as “a theory of political economic

practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey 2007, 2). Policies characterized as neoliberal, such as welfare reform, deregulation, and privatization, stress “trade openness, a stable, low-inflation macroeconomic environment, and strong contract enforcement that protects the rights of private property holders” (Ferguson 2006).

Today, “neoliberalism” has mutated into a catch-all that, in Boas and Gans-Morse’s words, “has become a vague term that can mean virtually anything as long as it refers to normatively negative phenomena associated with free markets” (Boas and Gans-Morse 2009, 152). Within the academy and progressive circles, neoliberalism has become shorthand for the worst excesses of globalization and capitalism. For example, in the introduction to Noam Chomsky’s *Profits over People*, Robert McChesney defines neoliberalism as “the policies and processes whereby a relative handful of private interests are permitted to control as much as possible of social life in order to maximize their personal profit” (McChesney 1999, 7). Critics link neoliberalism to the widening of the rich-poor gap, environmental degradation, imperialism, neo-colonialism, and the human cost of capitalist development.<sup>40</sup> It is used primarily by people who oppose market-based policies, and is rarely used by proponents, who prefer “free market capitalism,” “neoclassical,” “neoconservative” or “globalization” when advocating policies that would be considered neoliberal (Boas and Gans-Morse

2009). As a result, it has a frustrating analytic vagueness. Seiler writes, “Neoliberalism has been put to use by academics as both a descriptor of a shift in economic policy and an optic through which to view a disparate range of political, racial, sexual, literary, aesthetic, philosophical, educational, and religious phenomena” (Seiler 2009).

Boas and Gans-Morse distinguish three ways in which neoliberalism is used by academics: to refer to economic reform policies and development models, a normative ideology, and an academic paradigm (2009). I am not particularly interested in the market-based policies well-documented in work like David Harvey’s *Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2007). But like Harvey, I am interested in neoliberalism as an ideology, a discourse, and a form of governmentality (Larner 2000). For example, Foucault argues that “the terminology of the market economy becomes a ‘grid of intelligibility’ for all non-economic relationships, so that, for example, the conduct of marriages and households can be analysed in these terms” (Tribe 2009, 693).

I am most interested in how these policies manifest in self-governance and the emergence of new forms of subjectivity. Michel Foucault’s concept of governmentality – “the totality of practices, by which one can constitute, define, organize, instrumentalize the strategies which individuals in their liberty can have in regard to each other”—is a technique of governance which organizes the governed (bodies) by determining the strategies that people can use in interpersonal relationships and self-expression (1988, 19). In this tradition, neo-

liberalism is what Larner calls “a set of practices that facilitate the governing of individuals from a distance” (2000, 6). Ong writes that “neoliberalism can be conceptualized as a new relationship between government and knowledge through which governing activities are recast as nonpolitical and nonideological problems that need technical solutions” (2006, 3). Neoliberalism as a *technology of subjectivity* involves the infiltration of market principles into society, to the extent that individuals will organize themselves “according to market principles of discipline, efficiency, and competition” (Ong 2006, 4). For neoliberal market policies to operate properly, people must adopt subject positions, actions, ways of thinking, and discourses that are in keeping with neoliberalism as an ideology. These are far more effective when they are consensual and dispersed through capillaries of power than if they are imposed from the top-down.

The neoliberal subject is self-regulating, entrepreneurial, enterprising, and responsible, resembling the mythical *homo economicus* – the rational economic actor who carefully weighs choices and options. The subject interpellated by neoliberal discourse is, of course, imaginary. Jodi Dean describes this imaginary subject:

Neoliberalism offers its subjects imaginary injunctions to develop our creative potential and cultivate our individuality, injunctions supported by capitalism’s provision of the ever-new experiences and accessories we use to perform this self-fashioning- *I must be fit; I must be stylish; I must realize my dreams. I must because I can- everyone wins. If I don’t, not only am I a loser, but I am not a persona at all; I am not part of everone.* Neoliberal subjects are expected to, enjoined to have a good time, have it all, be happy, fit, and fulfilled (2008, 62).

This subjectivity is *taught* through various means by which neoliberal ideology becomes common sense (Harvey 2007, 39-40). I previously mentioned scholarship that links the emergence of reality television to the self-regulating neoliberal subject (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2006; Sender 2006; McMurria 2008; Ouelette and Hay 2008). Makeover shows like *What Not to Wear* discipline women judged as poorly dressed, explicitly teaching them how to inculcate a professional, middle-class aesthetic. On *The Biggest Loser*, trainers Bob and Jillian teach morbidly obese Americans about nutrition and fitness. Anna McCarthy writes, “to see reality television as merely trivial entertainment is to avoid recognizing the degree to which the genre is preoccupied with the government of the self, and how, in that capacity, it demarcates a zone for the production of everyday discourses of citizenship” (2007, 17). This normalization of neoliberal subjectivity takes place in other popular media like self-help books, talk shows, lifestyle magazines, and films like *Freedom Writers* and *Slumdog Millionaire* (Jones 2007). Other academics have looked at the teaching and governance of speech acts as part of neoliberal economic development; Deborah Cameron’s influential essay, “Styling the Worker,” examines how call center workers are taught to talk and respond in particular ways that further the goals of an economy increasingly dependent on service positions (Cameron 2000).

In this chapter I look at the concrete effects of a particular neoliberal technology of subjectivity—specifically, self-branding—on those people who embrace it. The self-branding paradigm has been identified by many scholars as a

clearly neoliberal form of self-governance (Lair, Sullivan, and Cheney 2005; Hearn 2008; Wee and Brooks 2010). Self-branding encourages people to take on the responsibility of economic uncertainty by constructing identities that fit current business trends. In other words, people self-regulate to fit economic paradigms. The critique of self-branding assumes that those engaging in it are allowing “market colonization” of their most intimate thoughts and feelings; that they are re-making themselves to be sold to large corporations, becoming “ideal” employees based on an imaginary sense of what employers might want, and allowing personal feelings and relationships to become sullied by market forces. In the next section, I look closely at self-branding discourse.

### From Brands to Self-Branding

#### What is Self-Branding?

In August 1997, on the leading edge of the dot-com boom, Tom Peters wrote an article for internet gold rush magazine *Fast Company* called “The Brand Called You.” Apart from Peters’ mention of his new career improvement CD-ROM, the article reads as if it was written in 2010. Peters wrote:

The main chance is becoming a free agent in an economy of free agents, looking to have the best season you can imagine in your field, looking to do your best work and chalk up a remarkable track record, and looking to establish your own micro equivalent of the Nike swoosh. Because if you do, you'll not only reach out toward every opportunity within arm's (or laptop's) length, you'll not only make a noteworthy contribution to your team's success -- you'll also put yourself in a great bargaining position for next season's free-agency market. The good news -- and it is largely good news -

- is that everyone has a chance to stand out. Everyone has a chance to learn, improve, and build up their skills. Everyone has a chance to be a brand worthy of remark (1997).

The article was a response to several changes: the popularity of huge corporate brands, the rise of project-based work cultures, entrepreneurial labor models, and the gradual popularization of the internet:

The Web makes the case for branding more directly than any packaged good or consumer product ever could. Here's what the Web says: Anyone can have a Web site. And today, because anyone can ... anyone does! So how do you know which sites are worth visiting, which sites to bookmark, which sites are worth going to more than once? The answer: branding. The sites you go back to are the sites you trust. They're the sites where the brand name tells you that the visit will be worth your time -- again and again. The brand is a promise of the value you'll receive (Peters 1997).

Peters advised readers to identify their distinguishing characteristics and write a 15-word statement differentiating themselves from their peers. He told workers to think of their skills using the “feature-benefit” model of major corporate brands: every feature generates a corresponding benefit for the customer, the employer. Peters instructed readers to ask themselves: “What do I want to be famous for? That’s right—famous!”

The article spawned a cottage industry of personal brand experts who write books with titles like *The 10Ks of Personal Branding: Create a Better You*, *Career Distinction: Stand Out by Building Your Brand*, *Me 2.0: Build a Powerful Brand to Achieve Career Success*, *The Brand Called You: The Ultimate Personal Branding Handbook to Transform Anyone into an Indispensable Brand* and *The Power of Personal Branding: Creating Celebrity Status with Your Target*



*Audience.* Many technology conferences now hold sessions on self-branding, and there are entire self-branding conferences such as *BrandCamp University* and *Using Social Media to Align the Corporate and Personal Brand*. Dan Schwabel, a personal branding “guru,” launched “Personal Branding Magazine,” which comes out quarterly in PDF format and contains interviews with notable personalities like Vanna White and MC Hammer. In the wake of the 2008 economic recession, personal branding moved beyond its origin in white-collar consulting and technology, and became a popular career strategy for people in all industries.

Self-branding is primarily a series of marketing strategies applied to the individual. It is both a mindset, a way of thinking about the self as salable commodity to a potential employer, and a set of practices. The mindset is a philosophy or ideology which fits squarely within the precepts of enterprise culture, holding up a go-getter free-market mentality as a positive and almost moral goal. This is congruent with overall self-help culture, a hugely profitable branch of publishing which advises constant self-improvement as a way to manage anxiety over economic and social uncertainty (McGee 2005, 12). But self-branding takes this one step further, encouraging individuals to adopt and internalize advertising and marketing techniques to strategically create a self-presentation designed for a panoptic corporate audience.

In practice, most self-branding books and seminars begin with a series of exercises to define the personal brand, suggesting that one needs to *uncover* a truth or passion that can easily be sold or monetized. Dan Schwabel in *Me 2.0*

provides a “Personal Discovery Assistant” which helps readers “learn more about yourself, where you are right now, and where you want to be in the future” (Schawbel 2009, 86-87). In *Make a Name for Yourself*, Robin Fisher Roffer outlines a “Developing Your Brand Description” worksheet, which encourages readers to fill in the statement “I’m [my brand] because [justification],” identify their core values, passions, and talents, and write a brand description based on these findings (2002, 37-38). These exercises imply that the reader is excavating a true, authentic self to present to an audience.

The second part of self-branding practice typically involves setting goals. Tim Ferriss calls this “dream-lining,” “an exercise in reversing repression” where the reader lists five things they dream of having, being, and doing (2009a, 57). Finally, the readers connect these two steps by strategically creating an identity targeted towards an audience. At Julia Allison’s Learning Annex class on micro-celebrity and personal branding, she told the audience to write five documents:

1. Full bio: Write as if someone was writing a profile of you
2. One page: Narrow down; three or four paragraphs; who you are, what is your brand
3. Elevator pitch: 30 seconds
4. 140 characters: Appropriate for Twitter.
5. Tag line: 2-3 words, e.g. Joe Blow, celebrity architect  
(Fieldnotes, April 6, 2010)

Self-branding practitioners identify strengths and goals and use advertising and marketing techniques to frame them for an interested audience. Drawing from celebrity profiles, press releases, corporate relations and slogans, people selectively choose certain traits and experiences to show to the public. People are

advised to use social media to promote this newly-created personal brand and find clients, employers, advertisers, or fans. Within the discourse of self-branding, each person has an authentic set of talents, passions, knowledge and skills which can be discovered through self-examination. As long as these truths are positioned in the right way, they will be immensely useful to the right employer and create wealth and happiness for the person behind the brand. Sternberg describes the ultimate fantasy of self-branding, which resembles the celebrity persona:

Within any industry, corporation or profession, the aspirant reaches the economic apex when she becomes a celebrity, a human icon. Now colleagues cite her name with awe or jealousy when she is not present; subordinates show deference as a matter of course; her ideas are respected by the very fact that they arose from her; even to meet her is an honor; and all long to hire her, work with her, and gain her counsel, were she only available. Now lifted above the usual competitive anonymity, the performer can use her hard-won iconicity to assert advantages over competitors and to command for her services a market premium (1998, 10).

Self-branding is largely celebrated in marketing literature, but has been heavily criticized in media studies, sociology, and cultural studies for its encouragement of blatant self-commodification, which Hearn argues is a false consciousness primarily beneficial for employers (Hearn 2008). Lair et al. see personal branding as unethical, furthering an unequal system and distorting social relations, emphasizing “political maneuvering, competition, and cynicism” and furthering alienation (Lair, Sullivan, and Cheney 2005, 335). They emphasize that self-branding does not transcend age, class, and gender, ignoring systematic inequalities in work environments. Wee and Brooks argue that self-branding is an example of “symbolic domination,” allowing governments and companies to shift

the responsibility for the problems of late capitalism on to the individual subject (2010). While I share many of these concerns, I think it is necessary to look at how this operates on both an individual and community-based level.

While self-branding represents a particularly overt form of self-commodification, identity work has been intimately linked with corporate branding and commercial products for many years. The escalating prominence of brands and branding since the 1970s is concomitant with increasingly sophisticated advertising techniques which have moved from overt hucksterism to abstraction (Frank 1998). Brands have evolved from a way to identify products and make grandiose claims about their properties to conceptual emotional and experiential signifiers (Holt 2002, 80). Representation and blatant promotion have been replaced with campaigns that position brands as the psychological embodiment of “valued social and moral ideals” (Holt 2002, 80). These advertising strategies transform branded goods into representations of entire lifestyles and philosophies. Apple has come to symbolize creativity and anti-corporate domination, while Dove represents a blow to repressive beauty standards.

These projects are undertaken by advertising and marketing agencies at the companies’ behest. Apple has invested heavily in its brand image, which one marketing agency describes:

Apple has a branding strategy that focuses on the emotions. The Apple brand personality is about lifestyle; imagination; liberty regained; innovation; passion; hopes, dreams and aspirations; and power-to-the-people through technology. The Apple brand

personality is also about simplicity and the removal of complexity from people's lives; people-driven product design; and about being a really humanistic company with a heartfelt connection with its customers (Marketing Minds 2008).

To further this image, Apple's "Think Different" campaign emphasized Apple's creativity, non-conformity, and innovation through images of famous forward-thinkers such as Jack Kerouac, Albert Einstein, and Amelia Earhart (Fitzsimons, Chartrand, and Fitzsimons 2008b). Apple is also famous for its beautifully-designed products and control over the entire user experience, from buying products at special Apple stores through purchasing music for the iPod through iTunes. Although Apple has a small percentage of global market share compared to Microsoft-compatible PCs, the brand is a status symbol among college students, urban bohemians, artists, and other taste-makers, and its loyal customers are very devoted. Apple exemplifies a technology company with a very sophisticated and successful emotional brand.

Anthony Giddens famously described the "self as a reflexive project" (1991, 198), meaning that in late capitalism, identity has become something to be constructed and worked on rather than something fixed. As part of this active identity work, brands are imaginary resources for identity work, self-expression, and lifestyle construction. Arvidsson describes:

As sort of virtual real estate, [brands] occupy a valuable position in the life-world (or, to use marketing terminology, the 'minds') of consumers... brands work as a kind of ubiquitous managerial devices by means of which everyday life is managed, or perhaps better, programmed, so that it evolves in ways that can potentially generate the right kind of attention (2006, 7).

Branding is an attempt to imbue consumer products and services with evocative social meaning, which people can use for self-expression (Hearn 2008, 200). For example, a young soccer player might wear a Nike cap to reflect Nike's evocation of goal-oriented female athleticism. This self-definition through brand affiliation was common in the technology industry; using an Apple laptop, for example, especially a new model, marked one as discerning, hip, and tasteful. T-shirts and stickers from trendy technology companies like Twitter, Foursquare, or Brizzly were popular; at one event, I spied stickers from Flickr, Dopplr, Pownce, Nasa, Laughing Squid, Colab, Creative, VML, Wikipedia, current.tv, Fireagle, and Yahoo! Hack Day on Ariel Waldman's laptop.

Self-branding is significantly different from the use of brands as identity markers, since it actively teaches people to view active identity construction *as* a product. Thus, people define themselves both *through* brands and *as* brands. This ability has been amplified by the internet; in the next section, I discuss how social media technologies are a crucial part of contemporary self-branding strategy.

### Self-Branding, the Internet and Social Media

Internet technologies allow individuals to employ the same sophisticated branding strategies as modern multi-national companies. In fact, self-branding in its current form is only possible because of the internet, for three reasons. First, while it is economically prohibitive to purchase advertising time on a television

screen or in a newspaper, this is not true for websites, allowing individuals to have online presences that are equal to those of large companies. Tantek Çelik explained why he owns <http://www.tantek.com>: “You’re basically putting yourself on the same footing as a company. So that’s status, right? You want to talk about like status? Like companies have URLs. Well, I have my own URL. I don’t need to have my Facebook or whatever, I have my domain.” Owning a dot-com domain, in Tantek’s opinion, enabled him to occupy an online position equivalent to (and independent from) a major consumer brand. Leah Culver agreed. “So if you can own your name, in that your first name associated with being a person is you, that’s pretty good, right? Matt Mullenweg is really proud of this. He owns Matt or-- he doesn’t own his domain name, but he owns the top search results for Matt. His business card says, go to Google, type in Matt, and press ‘I’m feeling lucky.’” The internet made it possible for tech-savvy individuals to view their identities as significant online brands, something they could “own” and manipulate.

Second, the internet makes it possible to disseminate personal information to a much greater audience than before. The internet is the only mass medium where average people can distribute content globally, instantly, and cheaply. Before the internet, a person wishing to self-brand would have been limited to putting up fliers at grocery stores, going door-to-door, buying advertisements in the local paper, or attending industry-only events (which may have been inaccessible), none with reach beyond a small, local population. While self-

branding books advise people to create more traditional self-promotional material like resumes, portfolios and newsletters, the internet makes distribution inexpensive and simple. Self-branding is not only about creating an image of oneself, but of making that image accessible to others.

Third, most social media tools are designed to focus attention inward. Social network sites, homepages, and blogs chronicle the thoughts, actions, and activities of average individuals. These individuals are connected to each other through the network rather than traditional ties of geography, religion, or family. Within social media, the subject is self-interested, competitive, and mobile, consisting of constant self-referencing (my thoughts, my activities), done in sight of an audience, with the assumption that someone is interested and watching. The social media persona via the profile is strategically composed and designed to be viewed and to elicit a particular reaction. This normative social media subject is attuned to the needs of micro-celebrity, self-branding and similar strategies.

These three factors differentiate self-branding from earlier business-oriented self-help guides like Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Self-branding promises global fame and great wealth. It assumes that a successful self-brander will have fans, an audience, and a community of people interested in their actions. Thus, self-branding produces a different set of status markers than traditional entrepreneurship, specifically, visibility and attention. Social media configures these values through technical status affordances, bringing the potential audience to the forefront by turning ephemeral status or



reputation information into quantifiable metrics, such as blog analytics, number of Facebook friends or Twitter followers. Comments, references, and Twitter @replies become indicators of successful self-branding, demonstrating value through the awareness of others. True self-branding success is usually portrayed as owning a small business or becoming a freelancer, avoiding more traditional businesses that do not understand the power of the internet. The self-brander expresses creativity and innovation through her use of technology to adapt to structural economic problems, furthering the neoliberal critique of institutions identified in chapter 2. Once again, personal technology is positioned as a superior solution to long-term societal ills.

### Self-Branding in the Social Media Scene

Self-branding is a prominent self-presentation strategy among technology workers and people in the social media scene. Many people I met had incorporated marketing concepts into their self-descriptions, using marketing jargon to describe themselves and their actions. They explained goals, strategies, and tactics for success in business-like terms. In this section, I look at how my informants viewed and talked about self-branding. Branding, and the personal brand, came up constantly at technology events. People generally perceived self-branding as positive and necessary. While several people expressed skepticism, others thought of the individual brand as something real and concrete that required maintenance and upkeep. Even those who scoffed at the most egregious

jargon still noted its necessity. This emphasis on self-branding translated into social practices, such as the use of social media, elevator pitches, networking, business cards, and blogs.

### Talking About Self-Branding

Several of my informants used the language of personal branding to describe themselves. Ariel Waldman said “More recently, I’ve kind of self-branded myself as a digital anthropologist, because a lot of what I do, and what I get paid to do, is be actively involved in online interactions.” Ariel had worked in several different areas of the technology industry, and the term “digital anthropologist” created a commonality between the various parts of what enterprise culture would label a “skillset,” or job skills. She could market herself to potential employers using the distinctive but easily understood term “digital anthropologist.”<sup>41</sup> Similarly, a man I met at a conference called himself a “change agent”—someone who facilitates change (much like Marianne Masculino’s job title, “Happiness Engineer”). These terms use advertising and marketing terminology to aggressively describe a set of skills and tasks in a catchy and appealing way which is easily consumable by potential employers.

More traditionally, Tara Hunt said “I would describe myself as an author, speaker, consultant, and marketing strategist, with a heavy focus on online strategy” while Anu Nigam called himself a “serial entrepreneur and an angel investor.” Both Nigam and Hunt used enterprise language to place themselves as

modern workers in the high-technology sector. Hunt’s self-description included her promotional activities, author, speaker, and consultant, as well as her specialization in online marketing strategy, positioning herself above the average marketing drone. Similarly, while Nigam described himself as a “serial entrepreneur”—a high-status term for someone who launches several successful startups—he worked as a rank-and-file engineer at many of them. These techniques, coining slogans to describe oneself and emphasizing the positive, are key parts of self-branding.

Why did people self-brand? Self-branding was primarily viewed as a savvy way to make more money and a necessity in technology culture. Venture capitalist Anu Nigam explained the process by which people used Twitter and blogging to advance their careers:

There's a lot of people out there are trying to get attention and trying to be famous. And that's just what's happening as technology enters the mainstream and now it's become a worldwide thing where the brand matters. Actually, that's what blogging has done. In general, if you write a book too, it's brand identity and people are paying for your brand now. They're paying for you to write. They're paying for you to join, when they hire you there, they want your skillset and they also want to tell everyone.

Nigam describes one way that people viewed self-branding, as potentially helping their careers. When the financial software company Intuit hired Tara Hunt, who had built her own reputation using Twitter and her blog HorsePigCow, they accessed her extended network of fans and followers, and made themselves look savvy for hiring a well-known social media user (Hunt left Intuit after four months to return to her native Canada). For freelancers, contractors, or

consultants, self-promotion was necessary to find a steady stream of clients. Much of this self-promotion comes under the umbrella of “self-branding.”

But in practice, what did self-branding necessitate? Sarah Lacy, a technology journalist who wrote a book about 2.0 culture, *Once You're Lucky, Twice You're Good*, explained:

I think being Sarah Lacy the reporter is blogging, is doing my show, you know, going out and reporting, going to dinners. I think having to be Sarah Lacy the brand is being on TV, being on radio, giving speeches, going to parties being visible, being out there.

There is little discernible difference between self-branding and self-promotion. Self-branding was seen as distinct from actual work, which, for Lacy, was “writing and creating content.” Speaking at conferences, networking, and doing media appearances was a way to promote “Sarah Lacy the brand” in order to get better jobs, plum assignments, and drive book sales. This tactic is explicitly advocated in self-branding books. For example, Dan Schwabel’s *Me 2.0* advocates writing personal press releases “to announce one’s brand to the world”, inculcating personal relationships with bloggers to encourage link-backs, and contributing to publications to reinforce an image as an expert.

Not everyone is comfortable with self-branding. At a networking event, I met a young man named Ben, who was working on a radio show called GeekSpeak in Santa Cruz. Ben struggled with self-branding strategies, because he couldn't determine a focus: he worked in several technical fields including audio and video. Ben was at an early stage of his career where he needed to figure out his interests rather than focus on marketing himself, so self-branding was not

useful for him. Other people do not like the emphasis on audience that self-branding requires. Caroline McCarthy, who at the time of this writing has 15,000 Twitter followers, told me, “I’ve only really recently—my Twitter followers only started to really shoot up in the past couple of months. Honestly, for me, it’s kind of scary because I don’t want to be a brand pusher. I don’t want everybody listening, but they are.”

### Practices

The personal brand is intrinsically linked to social media since the web is the platform that allows people to “compete” with traditional brands (it is no coincidence that the rise of social media parallels the rise of self-branding). As Schwabel writes:

As more people tune into media online, you have more of an opportunity to broadcast your brand and command exposure for your personal niche. That is not to say that if you appear on TV, the radio, or in print magazines, your brand won’t gain exposure, but these expensive options are out of reach for most personal brands. The internet, by far the cheapest medium you can use to build an audience, is leveling the playing field (2009, 156).

Having a successful online brand involves choosing a distinct username, signing up for social media accounts,<sup>42</sup> distributing content using the internet, and promoting it using social media. Potential personal branders should at least have a central web presence. Leah Culver summarized, “So the personal branding includes your domain name and your blog and if you do projects, a list of projects that you worked on and here’s the link to my projects.” At her workshop on personal branding, Julia Allison laid out a website structure that included sections

called Meet me, Work with me, E-mail me, Social media links, Blog, Articles, Videos, Press, Recommendations, and Best of. (Note that the “best” technology for self-branding changes frequently; at the time of my fieldwork it was Twitter, a few years before that it was blogs, and in a few years it will be something else.)

Creating and distributing online content is a way to create expertise without actually holding a professional job in a desired field. I asked Veronica Belmont how she would advise someone to make it big in San Francisco. She responded:

Looking for a job in your industry, whether it's podcasting or blogging, I always suggest that people start their own podcast or start their own blog, and just write about the things that they are really passionate about and that they really love. That way there is something to fall back to, when they put their resume out there, they can say, "Look, I've been covering the subject for two years now in my personal blog and I'm obviously versed on the subject." I think that goes a long way on getting jobs and with getting your name out there.

Similarly, social media presence can give legitimacy to job titles or company affiliation (Although this is not necessarily the case outside of Silicon Valley).

Megan McCarthy explained:

Silicon Valley is very forgiving of strangers who just show up at the doorstep. I mean, you can have any hook whatsoever that gets you in. The company you work for can do that like if you're with a hot startup, like if someone is like, "Oh, I work for Digg." You instantly say, "OK, that's that type of person." It sort of gives you entrance or a membership in a tribe, almost, but you can also create your own legitimacy. You can just start blogging every day, like "Hi, oh, I'm Megan. I write for My Blog," and then suddenly it's like, "Oh, OK, that's great. You're a blogger," and that makes sense to people.

Megan began her career blogging about tech parties on Valleywag for a few hundred dollars a month (described in chapter 4), and is now a full-fledged technology journalist and editor despite her lack of formal training. Megan's affiliation with a well-known technology brand opened doors for her, but this can also be done with a personal blog. Note that in that case, the personal blog has to be successful; I ran into many cases of people with blogs that were poorly-designed, badly written, or unread, which made their proprietors seem like amateurs.

In person, the most widely practiced self-branding skill was networking. I encountered networking constantly during my time in San Francisco; there are tech industry events literally every night that involved meeting other industry workers. At networking events, people pitched each other, talked for a few minutes about any commonalities, exchanged cards, and introduced others. Networking requires comfort with small talk, the ability to talk to anyone, and the talent to connect people with others they might want to meet. The self-branding angle comes with the ability to successfully “pitch” other people—summarize your business in 30 seconds or so, ending with an action item (we're looking for funding, PR, engineers). Pitching “off book” (memorized) was absolutely necessary to network successfully. Here are some examples of pitches from my fieldnotes:

We create a social mesh where people feel connected to each other with similar taste.

My job is to help people find interesting stuff on the Internet with very little effort. I think we're different from the other sites because we're really driven around kind of like a single click kind of metaphor, where you kind of like channel surf. That's a very different experience from what you get on Digg and such. So even though we're in kind of the same space and social media as a lot of other sites, the experience you get is quite different.

Both these pitches came from the founders of tiny startups. In the startup scene, a “personal” brand pitch was often a company pitch (since many companies were two or three people), and the same skills went into formulating each. For freelancers, the pitch statement was the personal brand. I had to learn my own pitch in order to be comfortable in networking environments. Without a pitch, conversation doesn't flow smoothly, determining commonalities is impossible, and the other person often becomes uncomfortable. My pitch went something like “I'm a PhD student studying how people use social media to increase their status. I'm looking at self-branding, micro-celebrity, and life-streaming, and I'm looking for people in the industry to interview.” This took me four or five months of practice.

Business cards are a physical instantiation of the personal brand. At networking events, people exchanged cards if there was even the slightest chance that they might be mutually useful (I came back from my fieldwork with several hundred business cards). Business cards sometimes carried fanciful titles like “Director of Awesome” or “Mac Daddy,” but many people gave out personal cards which listed contact information and the person's projects, and were usually designed to work with their brand identity: professional, serious, carefree, etc.



For example, one business card contained links to an individual's website, twitter, Facebook, Skype, e-mail, phone, and address, all using the same internet nickname. Another card that I got at South by Southwest 2008 read:

Hello, my name is Kathryn Finney, aka "The Budget Fashionista", aka "America's Best Shopper", aka "The girl with the cool shoes". I write a blog, which led to a book, which led to lots of TV, which led to a blog network. Email me at [email address] or visit [thebudgetfashionista.com](http://thebudgetfashionista.com). Happy Shopping.

This card succinctly conveys Finney's brand: a friendly, frugal fashion guru with a budding media empire. The card is hot pink with a simple sans-serif font.

A final necessary component of self-branding was monitoring one's brand. Many people set up Google Alerts which e-mailed them whenever their name popped up online, or used Twitter and third-party software like TweetDeck to track how often they were @replied or re-tweeted. Others spent hours on Facebook, Flickr or Google tracking search results for their name. Glenda Bautista describes this process:

Your personal brand is being affected by—your personal brand or identity, your online identity is being developed by people around you. You know. And again like it kind of touches on the point where I say, you know, "it's not really within your control." You know, you constantly have to police yourself. You constantly have to police other people, police your friends. Like nag them to take photos down. It's exhausting.

This brand monitoring becomes a form of labor which can be highly emotional and very taxing. People had to constantly imagine themselves through the eyes of others, creating a "dual gaze" of internalized surveillance. Because most individuals developing a personal brand are connected to a networked audience in

which their friends and family interact with their online presence (Marwick and boyd 2010), informants had to check on their friends' activities to make sure that nothing they did in a social context showed up in more professional contexts, such as tagging photos on Flickr or Facebook. This caused conflicts when better-known people felt that others were using them for increased brand recognition through affiliation, a process that Bautista called "flooding:" peppering content streams with mentions of high-status individuals even if they were not really close friends. People also had to demonstrate relational ties between themselves and members of their audience, and this often required performing intimacy and interest in others, even when it was lacking. Interpersonal relationships were intertwined with self-branding edicts, and the two often clashed.

### Skepticism

Self-branding is not without its critics. By the end of my fieldwork, the term had become such a cliché that when I interviewed April Buchert about her experience volunteering at a BarCamp offshoot called LaidOffCamp, she said, "A lot of personal branding [workshops] in the afternoon, which is one of the reasons I was so happy to be in the coat check. Because it was like 'Ahh, no thanks.'" The enormous influx in books and conferences about personal branding had made the term omnipresent and clichéd, but almost uncriticized.

Stowe Boyd had no problem criticizing. He compared self-branding to Freudian psychology and multi-tasking, two widely accepted ideas with, in his opinion, no validity:

The self-branding thing, the thing that you're treating yourself like you are a product, is a relatively new meaning that's only been around about 15 years. But, it's so embedded now into the American psyche. I mean, it's like Freudian psychology in the '50's. It's like you couldn't argue against it even though there was absolutely no evidence to suggest that it was true, that Freudian psychology had any therapeutic benefits. Nothing. And now it's all debunked.... But the point is it became the accepted way of thinking about how the human psyche worked, and how we interact, and so on. So self-branding is like that now. It's a commonplace, you can't convince people that it's un-useful metaphor because everyone takes it for granted... This is an example of a people taking as a given a certain way of operation and people sort of accept it.

Boyd saw personal branding as a prevalent philosophy which has fully inundated his social milieu. Again, this speaks to the specificity of this ideology, as it is located primarily in white-collar, technology-savvy working cultures. But he sees no value in it. (Boyd's intelligence, hubris, and self-confidence comes through in his easy dismissal of Freudian psychology.) In his personal blog, Boyd explained further:

I don't buy the personal branding metaphor. Remember that metaphors are not 'true' or 'false': it's inductive. If the listener doesn't get it, or buy into it, a metaphor fails. For me, objectifying ourselves as products just rubs me the wrong way. I am not a product I am trying to sell. I am a person, and I want to be respected, listened to, influential. As I wrote earlier this week, it is ok to want to make a difference in the world, to influence others, and to take actions that make that more likely... It's only natural. But we can simply talk about reputation, authority, and influence, and drop the '90s personal branding mumbo-jumbo, now (Boyd 2009).

Boyd has a problem with the overt self-commodification of the branding metaphor (as I do myself). However, from my perspective, his critique of the commodification angle of personal branding was rarely repeated by people in the scene, perhaps because the technology scene is already so saturated in commodification and the primacy of business language and philosophy.

### Learning How to Self-Brand

There is a lot of explicit instruction in technology culture, with self-professed geeks and nerds enjoying learning new things, being exposed to different ideas, and debating the merits and philosophies of various technologies, political ideas, trends, and events. Intelligence and the ability to parse and process vast amounts of information are highly valued, and the emphasis on self-improvement and “life as a project” means that learning takes place in many different ways. People often adopted successful social media professionals like Michael Arrington (TechCrunch) or Tony Hsieh (Zappos) as role models, went to see them at conferences, read their Twitter feeds, and explicitly imitated their actions. Conferences are perhaps the primary physical site for learning, where people listen to the ideas of famous keynote speakers, attend panels, and spend a lot of time sharing thoughts and ideas with other attendees. Online, people can watch taped talks from SXSWi, TED, and Ignite, read blogs, and talk about what they are learning. This instruction runs the gamut from how to program to self-

help material on working out, dating, and fashion. Learning how to self-brand is no different.

In this section, I look at two business self-help books that originated in the technology sector, Gary Vaynerchuk's *Crushing It* and Tim Ferriss's *The Four Hour Work Week*. Both books are how-to guides on becoming a successful entrepreneur using social media. Vaynerchuk and Ferriss were frequent speakers on the conference circuit with thousands of Twitter followers and numerous media appearances. I chose these books both for their centrality in the technology scene and because they exemplify discourse around the motivated, entrepreneurial self who uses social media and the current conditions of neoliberal globalization to get ahead. I argue that both teach readers to inculcate a type of identity presentation divorced from interpersonal relationships and traditional ties, instead centrally locating the self in a competitive, insecure business environment that takes place primarily through social media. *Crushing It* advocates constant e-mail and Twitter self-promotion, what Vaynerchuk calls "The Hustle," in order to adapt to changing business models brought about by the internet. *The Four-Hour Work Week* explicitly instructs reader to take advantage of neoliberal byproducts like the unequal wage structure in the United States and India, favorable exchange rates, and the constellation of new multi-level internet marketing practices like Search Engine Optimization (SEO), Google AdWords, and ebook sales. Both books emphasize *passion* and *authenticity* as key to a successful, happy life, which is represented as synonymous with financial success. They hold up an

ideal, not just in terms of financial success, but of the type of identity that should be presented through social media.

These books present themselves as apolitical self-help guides. Using motivational language and success stories, Vaynerchuk and Ferriss tell people how to achieve success in the late capitalist world of outsourcing, freelancing, recessions, and mass layoffs, albeit in very different ways. Both authors advocate a single-minded capitalist ethos where every interaction is a marketing opportunity and socioeconomic success is inevitable if one is just smart and savvy enough. Rather than criticizing the economic conditions which have made constant work, self-marketing, and job insecurity an ever-present part of white collar work, Vaynerchuk celebrates the opportunities inherent in this climate, and Ferriss presents a series of hacks that allow North Americans to take advantage of outsourcing and globalization to live what he calls the “new rich” lifestyle, which seems to primarily consist of travel, extreme sports, and competition.

This emphasis on changing oneself to fit the status quo contrasts with other forms of “enlightened” capitalism, such as green business, social entrepreneurship, and business ethics, which advocate structural change within capitalism to minimize harms to people, nations, and individuals (Gunningham, Kagan, and Thornton 2003; Barry 2004; Nicholls 2006). These movements and methods vary greatly, and not all of them advocate changing governmental or legal institutions, as there is a complex interplay of increased or decreased corporate regulation versus voluntary compliance (Gunningham, Kagan, and

Thornton 2003). Advocating social responsibility or environmentalism also functions as a public relations strategy for many corporations (Barry 2004). Regardless, these philosophies focus on corporate contributions to economic, social, and environmental problems, and emphasize reforming the institution rather than the individual within it. Vaynerchuk and Ferris do not examine structural failure beyond identifying it as such and framing it as a motivation for “self-improvement.”

Both books are instruction manuals for neoliberal governmentality, constituting examples of *technologies of subjectivity*. They explicitly focus on self-presentation strategies, such as how to turn in-person meetings into “networking” and how to choose positive words for self-description. These instructions are unambiguously teaching people what Ong calls “the individual internalization of neoliberal traits” (2006, 11). The policies and ideologies of neoliberalism are thus *translated* into desirable traits and how-to manuals. Neoliberal ideology is converted into books, seminars, videos, instantiated technologically through social media, and operationalized through self-presentation strategies and interpersonal practices.

These two books also show the centrality of social media to neoliberal technologies of subjectivity. It is not that self-branding is the only way that social media technologies can be used, but people are encouraged to use these technologies for self-branding, particularly in the community that creates social media. Given that Silicon Valley is an imagined center of neoliberal philosophy,

these books reveal a fantasy of how social media can be and *should be used*. The best practices within social media are those that parallel status markers in an imaginary neoliberal regime: flexibility, visibility, and self-reliance.

### Crushing It

Everyone—EVERYONE—needs to start thinking of themselves as a brand. It is no longer an option; it is a necessity (Vaynerchuk 2009, 9).

Gary Vaynerchuk began his career as a liquor store owner. Vaynerchuk inherited Shopper's Discount Liquors from his father, and claims that he increased the store's revenue from four to fifty million dollars a year in eight years (Vaynerchuk 2009, 2). To promote his online wine-selling business, Gary created an online wine review program called WineLibrary.tv (now at 865 episodes), which he describes as the beginning of "building his personal brand." The success of his blog, Twitter stream, and WineLibrary.tv has made Garyvee, as he is known on Twitter and to most people in the tech industry, into a sought-after speaker, best-selling author, and owner of a social media consulting company. He is known for his hyper, excitable stage presence, frequent use of profanity, and claim that he writes to every single person who e-mails or @replies him. Gary is personable and charismatic and is idolized by many aspiring entrepreneurs, primarily young men, as his methods come off as very masculine. *Crush It*, the book that teaches the Garyvee method of success, became a best-seller; despite tepid reviews (Publishers Weekly said "his unappealing swagger—



repeated stories of how he crushed it and dominated grate particularly—gives his story more the tone of adolescent peacocking than of worthwhile and sober business advice”) it currently has a 4 ½ star rating on Amazon with 425 reviews.<sup>43</sup>

*Crush It* is a slim book with large type that is only 142 pages long. The primary message of the book is that if you follow your passion and use social media to generate and spread content, you will be recognized and financially rewarded. Your passion is what you care the most about, whether that be tortilla chips, worms or marketing, which Gary advises turning into a personal brand and leveraging across all forms of social media such as Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, and YouTube. Vaynerchuk suggests that the person who creates the best content in any category will be acknowledged and benefit accordingly, whether by commanding enormous speaking fees, getting paid for blog advertisements, or landing television interviews. Vaynerchuk is not advocating promoting a company, a product, or a service. He is advocating promoting *the individual*; what the individual actually produces or does is secondary to his or her self-promotional skills.

Unlike most self-branding guides, Vaynerchuk does not guide the reader through exercises or worksheets. Rather, he maintains that success will come if you work hard enough. While Gary has three maxims, love your family, work superhard [sic], and live your passion (Vaynerchuk 2009, 2), the book focuses on the latter two, since he advocates working pretty much all the time:

Live your passion. What does that mean, anyway? It means that when you get up for work every morning, every single morning,

you are pumped because you get to talk about or work with or do the thing that interests you the most in the world. You don't live for vacations because you don't need a break from what you're doing—working, playing, and relaxing are one and the same. You don't even pay attention to how many hours you're working because to you, it's not really work. You're making money, but you'd do whatever it is you're doing for free (2009, 3).

What does this work consist of? Gary outlines a 13-point program in the last quarter of the book. First, the reader should choose a passion and learn everything he or she can about it, “absorbing every single resource you can find.” Like most personal branding gurus, Vaynerchuk tells people to buy a domain name and register their username at every social media site. He then tells readers to “start pumping out content” (2009, 105). “Content” is an industry term that used to refer to “writing” or “articles,” but now includes blog entries, tweets, videos, audio, podcasts, and social network site profiles. Once the reader has written a blog post or made a video, Garyvee tells them to tweet about it, and then spend hours linking to it on related blogs and websites. This method primarily comes down to relentless self-promotion using the web, regardless of the reader's specific passion. Vaynerchuk even says “if that sounds tedious or repetitive, just close this book and go do your best to enjoy the life you've got because you're not cut out for this” (2009, 107). With all his talk of loving life and living passion, Vaynerchuk is primarily advocating creating linkspam.

How does this make money? Vaynerchuk claims that the “big fish will be jumping straight into your hands” (2009, 109). He suggests putting advertising on your blog, getting on the lecture circuit, selling products, using affiliate links,

writing articles, holding seminars, and “consulting.” This chapter is ten pages long and vague; for the most part, it seems that Vaynerchuk thinks that the best content will rise to the top and opportunities will create themselves (he sites examples like celebrity blogger Perez Hilton and comedian Andy Samberg as role models, neither of whom used his techniques).

It is hard to believe that these vague financial opportunities are worth the complete lack of work/life balance that Gary advocates. Vaynerchuk suggests that every social opportunity, including picnics and weddings, are networking opportunities; tells readers to work between 7pm and 2 am after working a regular 8-5 job; and to turn down opportunities to spend time with friends and family in order to focus on the “hustle.”

No matter how successful you get, you cannot slack off or the grass is going to grow, the paint is going to peel, and the roads will start to crumble. Stop hustling, and everything you learn here will be useless. Your success is entirely up to you (2009, 13).

Anything insane has a price. If you’re serious about building your personal brand, there will be no time for Wii. There will be no time for Scrabble or book club or poker or hockey. There will be time for meals, and catching up with your significant other, and playing with the kids, and otherwise you will be in front of your computer until 3:00 AM every night. If you’re employed or retired and have all day to work, maybe you knock off at midnight instead. Expect this to be all consuming (2009, 89).

This suggests that if you aren’t a success after doing all this late night hustling, it is simply because you aren’t working hard enough. Vaynerchuk says, “Someone with less passion and talent and poorer content can totally beat you if they’re willing to work longer and harder than you are” (2009, 88). This demonstrates

how self-branding functions as a technology of subjectivity, encouraging readers to adopt a lifestyle of non-stop work, which, of course, benefits contemporary capitalism. The onus of responsibility for success is placed on to the worker, and the complete infiltration of work into social and family life is presented as normal. *Crush It* tells readers that failing to achieve economic success is not due to structural equality, a lousy economy, or stagnating wages; instead, it is the fault of the worker, who is positioned as an entrepreneur without a safety net.

Garyvee doesn't mention that this approach simply won't work for people who don't share his intelligence, charisma, technical know-how, entrepreneurial spirit, or have a family business to fall back on. While Gary's success was extraordinary, it has not been replicated by the legion of followers attempting to "Crush It" through home-made videos about accounting and real estate, most of them imitating Gary's brash spirit. Furthermore, it is much harder to "monetize" a passion for secretarial work, social justice, feminism, European Union politics, or community gardening than it is wine, entrepreneurship, or real estate. It is unsurprising that Gary's followers seem mostly to work in technology and marketing, since these are fields where commodification of ideas is normalized and possible. And finally, perhaps people do not want to live a life where they cannot play poker, read books, or go to hockey games. Being your best, in Vaynerchuk's world, is being a marketable version of yourself twenty-four hours a day.

## The Four-Hour Work Week

I believe that life exists to be enjoyed, and that the most important thing is to feel good about yourself (Ferriss 2009a, 294).

*The Four-Hour Work Week's* author Timothy Ferriss is a man's man, the type of guy who brags about winning the gold medal in Chinese kickboxing by exploiting a technicality (in this case, pushing his opponents off an elevated platform). He advocates finding a "muse," a product that generates plenty of income but requires little supervision, giving the reader enough time to pursue his or her true interests: wakeboarding, visiting Asia, or learning gourmet cooking, living the life of the "new rich." At the same time, Ferriss looks down at white-collar jobs and suggests a series of techniques to diminish busywork and spend less time at the office. Ferriss is an infamous self-promoter (after *Wired* named him the number-one self-promoter of 2008, he added it to his official bio) and a consummate personal brander. His book has been a bestseller since its publication and was recently reissued with a hundred pages of expanded content, mostly entries and comments from his blog, which has an ardent following. Ferriss is an angel investor in a number of popular startups like Digg and StumbleUpon, speaks frequently at conferences like FooCamp and eTech, and regularly appears in the media. Recently, he launched an online video show with Digg founder Kevin Rose, where they discuss the minutia of everyday life.

*The Four-Hour Work Week* is replete with exercises and worksheets for the potential entrepreneur. Ferriss advocates living like a millionaire regardless of capital, making enough money to take "mini-retirements" which involve

vacations in foreign places and wholeheartedly pursuing hobbies and activities. In order to do this, Ferriss advocates a process called “dreamlining,” which is basically brainstorming goals like the adolescently masculine “own an Aston Martin DB9” and “find smart and gorgeous girlfriend,” and coming up with concrete plans to achieve them, which involves determining how much money these goals would cost. To pay for all this, Ferriss suggests leaving traditional employment and choosing a “muse,” a product or service that can make money without much oversight (in practice, his disciples tend to sell “information products” like weight loss ebooks or real estate speculation DVDs). The self-sufficiency of the muse comes from copious use of outsourced and freelance labor to answer customer e-mails, manufacture products, make websites, and do personal errands. While Ferriss’s book is not a guide to self-branding *per se*, its emphasis on entrepreneurship using the internet is a reaction to modern anxieties over rapid business transitions brought about by new technologies. Ferriss provides step-by-step guides to tools like Google AdWords, automated sales templates, Search Engine Optimization, online shopping carts and print-on-demand services to determine, test out, and launch the muse. He describes people who take advantage of these tools to work remotely or start their own businesses as the “new rich” with control over “what you do, when you do it, where you do it, and with whom you do it,” which he refers to as the “freedom multiplier” (2009a, 22).

*The Four Hour Work Week* is also a response to the social anxiety over outsourcing and the loss of American competitiveness in the global economy. Rather than worrying whether one's job will be outsourced to Bangalore, Ferriss teaches readers how to use VPAs (Virtual Personal Assistants), workers in India who do errands and research for \$4-20/hour, to deal with research tasks, customer service, and even relationships—Ferriss quotes an *Esquire* article written by self-experimenter AJ Jacobs (author of *The Year of Living Biblically* and *The Guinea Pig Diaries*) who uses a VPA to apologize to his wife. The use of these services by average people is only possible due to the exchange rate between the United States and developing countries like India. Similarly, Ferriss encourages his readers to travel for extended periods of time to countries where the cost of living is significantly lower, like Argentina and Thailand. He writes, “If you can free your time and location, your money is automatically worth 3-10 times as much.” (Ferriss 2009a, 22).

Unlike Gary Vaynerchuk, who advocates working all the time, Ferriss advocates working as little as possible. The second step of his plan, “E is for Elimination,” consists of chapters full of tricks to decrease one's workload, such as eradicating small talk, refusing to attend meetings, answering e-mail only once or twice a day, and maintaining an “information-poor diet” by ignoring blogs and news sources to boost productivity to the point where the reader can actually work a “four hour work week.” Of course, this assumes the reader has a white-collar desk job in management, marketing, or business, with plenty of phone calls,

meetings, and e-mails to answer. His techniques are not so useful for people in service industries, manufacturing, or labor.

Instead of spending time on work, Ferriss believes in a life of constant self-improvement. While Ferriss does recommend splurging on a few big-ticket items if the reader really wants to, he also advocates paring down personal property to simplify travel. He exemplifies the lifehacking philosophy “to live is to learn” (2009a, 294) and recommends that the new rich spend their time traveling, learning new languages and skills (he mentions martial arts, a variety of athletics, ballroom dancing, and Irish flute), doing service work and volunteering. This fantasy lifestyle of “continual learning and service” (2009a, 293) represents the idealism of technology workers taken to the logical extreme, and demonstrates the emphasis on experience, intelligence, and travel as high-status activities in the technology scene.

### Learning a Neoliberal Ideal

Both *Crush It* and *The Four-Hour Work Week* are explicit instruction manuals in surviving without an economic safety net. Ferriss and Vaynerchuk assume that the changes that have been wreaked on industries like journalism and the recording industry are prescient of larger shifts in the American economy, namely, institutional failure. They strongly advocate independence from corporate structures, encouraging people to start their own businesses. Both use the motivational language common to both neoliberalism and American self-help



culture, extolling readers to imagine and bring about an ideal life. While in Vaynerchuk's world work is a passion and everyone can be an entrepreneur, to Ferriss, constant self-improvement, travel, and language acquisition are the real goals of life, and work only functions to pay for them. Since both Gary Vaynerchuk and Timothy Ferriss have legions of supporters who follow their instructions to the letter—their blogs contain hundreds of comments and video testimonials from grateful readers who found success using their methods—these techniques clearly do work for some people. But both books present a fantasy life as realistic and desirable, and position strategic self-presentation based on commodity culture as the way to achieve it.

Unfortunately, not everyone is able to follow these leads. Most obviously, Vaynerchuk's advocacy of non-stop work is simply not realistic for people who want to live full lives. Derek Overby describes how his non-stop use of social media created problems at home:

My wife came out and just said, "What are you doing? You're losing a connection with me and, more importantly, your kids." I was like, "Wow." That was eye-opening, like having to go to rehab or something. [laughs] Social media rehab. So I just kind of took a good look at it and said, "Maybe I'm going a little overboard." I was really trying to establish myself within the circles, so I just toned it down a lot. So now I go home and I'll maybe stay up until 9:30 or 10:00, then I just shut it off and say, "I've got to have a real life, too."

Although Vaynerchuk claims "family first" as one of his core principles, the idea of having no separation between work and life, a common Silicon Valley ideal, alienated Derek from the people most important to him—his family.

*Crush It* also assumes that hard work leads inevitably to success, implying that people who do not succeed have not worked hard enough. This is a characteristic neoliberal philosophy which places the burden of stability on the worker rather than the employer. While the worker is creating a self-brand, building an entrepreneurial self, monitoring Google Alerts, building a website, writing free articles for newspapers, giving free seminars, and doing various other forms of immaterial labor, who is profiting from this free work? In Ferriss's case, the techniques that he advocates can really only be pursued by a minority of people before becoming unaffordable—not everyone can game Google AdWords—and the price of outsourced foreign labor is prohibitive to average Americans, especially those without lucrative jobs. His book is useful for people who are technologically savvy, self-motivated, and intelligent, with financial safety nets from jobs at white-collar firms. This specificity of class position—and with it gender, race, and sexuality—is never noted in the book.

It may seem easy and obvious to critique these works, but they are taken seriously by many people in difficult economic circumstances. If anything, people in the tech industry would be more successful using these techniques than average because they are immersed in social media and are able to network with more significant people; many of my informants had met Gary or at least corresponded with him via e-mail (he brags about answering every e-mail he gets). The exemplars touted by Vaynerchuk and Ferriss are primarily people like them: intelligent white-collar workers who are social media savvy. That these

techniques are held up as something that everyone should emulate—and if one tries, and fails, it is a matter of not working hard enough—is simply not realistic.

### Theorizing the Branded Entrepreneur

The entrepreneur is a powerful figure in American mythology. Orvis Collins and David Moore write:

In some respects, the entrepreneur is a heroic figure in American folklore akin perhaps, to Davy Crockett and other truly indigenous epic types— stalwart independents who hewed forests, climbed over the mountains, built new communities, rose from nothing to something, and did all the things American heroes must have done to build a great nation (1964).

American culture places a high value on the “self-made man” and the rags-to-riches story of Horatio Alger, which is persistent in both popular discourse and business writing (Ogbor 2000).

In chapter 3, I identified the entrepreneur as *the* highest status individual in the tech scene. Status in this community is conveyed primarily through the business of technology, and entrepreneurs represent the highest rung on this ladder. They personify values of individualism, technological innovation, creativity and intelligence that reinforce the sense of the tech scene as a meritocracy. They are also wealthy, or hold the promise of wealth. This image of the entrepreneur is persistent; Rogers and Larsen described it during the Personal Computer boom of the mid-1980s:

The story of how the Apple computer was born illustrates many aspects common to high-technology entrepreneurial adventures in Silicon Valley: Someone frustrated by a particular problem decides

to do something about it, and in the process creates a new product that many people want to buy. Surprised by success at first, the entrepreneur forms a new company, and after overcoming many difficulties, may attain huge financial success. It's a special kind of dream. The sudden exhilaration of achieving entrepreneurial fame has a heady effect on the instant businessman, not unlike the consequences of sudden success for professional athletes, movie stars, and rock musicians (1984, 8).

This is almost entirely consistent with the dot-com boom dream described by Po Bronson: “The Valley is about the *opportunity to become* a mover or shaker, not about *being* one. That opportunity is what gets young people to move here every day from Illinois and India and Canada” (2000, xxiv-xxv). The image of the high-tech entrepreneur is remarkably similar across twenty-five years of technology development: young, rich, famous, and intrinsically risk-taking, innovative, and intelligent—and within reach.

The entrepreneur is also a key figure in the neoliberal paradigm. Sarah Banet-Weiser and Marita Sturken, in their study of street artist Shepard Fairey, write “the entrepreneur... is understood as an ambitious individual, dependent on no one but him/herself, a person who ‘owns’ his or her own labor and is thus accountable for not only profit but risks accumulated by this labor” (2010, 273).

This position is celebrated while the actual laboring acts of capitalism, like factory work, are made invisible. The entrepreneur is presented as a subject position which anyone can and should step into. Banet-Weiser and Sturken elaborate:

This creative entrepreneur is celebrated and romanticized because of the kind of work ostensibly produced: no gritty, industrial products that workers care nothing about (but which are, of course,

still necessary for all capitalist industries), but rather artistic and innovative expressions of inner creativity, products which workers care intensely about, with passion driving the production process rather than a mind-numbing need for minimum wage (2010, 274).

This subject position is remarkably similar to the self-brander advocated by Vaynerchuk who “lives” his or her passion. But obviously not everyone can be the creative entrepreneur; beyond ideology, the creative industries are comprised of levels of laborers, and those who do not direct their own studios like Fairey often live precariously without economic or social stability. Thus, the emphasis on the entrepreneur obscures inequalities and exploitation within the neoliberal system of labor.

The self-branded entrepreneur is distinct from Donald Trump or Bill Gates in that s/he embodies flexibility, fluidity and change. A successful self-branded entrepreneur attracts attention and visibility, achieving fame for his or her *identity* rather than what he or she produces. The self-branded entrepreneur relentlessly promotes *him or herself* using social media to create economic security in the absence of stable employment. In other words, social media, which places a premium on attention, reputation, and visibility, creates a different kind of entrepreneur. Entrepreneurship carries over the status markers of successful social media use and is reconfigured in the process, producing different kinds of status-seeking practices. While the tech scene still values wealthy young entrepreneurs like Kevin Rose (Digg), Evan Williams (Twitter), and Dennis Crowley (Foursquare), self-branding discourse suggests that the status ascribed to tech entrepreneurs can be gained through a personal brand rather than a single

innovation. Having many Twitter followers or blog readers carries social currency among self-branders; books about personal branding suggest that this can be equivalent to the millions of dollars and other privileges that accrue to successful entrepreneurs.

### Branding and Visual Discourse

How does self-branding engage with the visually performative culture of exhibition common to other forms of online status-seeking? In chapter 4, I discussed the importance of the visual to micro-celebrity culture, as shown through “fauxparazzi” photos and the proliferation of fashionable, attractive self-portraits on Julia Allison’s website. But while social media affords self-presentation through the visual as much as the textual, self-branding discourse de-emphasizes the photograph in favor of the blog post or tweet. This is gendered. Terri Senft identifies the role of “confession, celebrity, and sexual display” in women’s self-representation. Second Wave feminists believed that sharing personal stories in consciousness-raising groups would create greater understanding of the impact of politics on the individual. But today, women are encouraged to confess that which titillates men, rather than stories that inspire women (2008, 3). Thus, the attractive headshot or sexy picture plays a much larger role in women’s online self-presentation than men’s. The one branding guide in which I found extensive discussion of appearance was targeted towards women. In Robin Fisher Roffer’s *Make a Name for Yourself*, she writes

“Packaging is all about appearances and what they signify in the marketplace, and how you can and should use how you look as an integral part of your brand” (2002, 134). Both Gary Vaynerchuk and Tim Ferris produce a lot of videos, but they do not offer themselves up as models for display as Allison or MySpace pinup Tila Tequila do.

Women in the scene who seemed to care about their appearance “too much” were often viewed as ignorant or stupid and thus alien to the tech scene.

One informant told me:

Do you know Shira Lazar? She's a prime example of what I think of in that realm. She was a one-way communicator, because she used to come on Seesmic a lot, and she would just deluge the timeline with what she thought was important, but she would put stuff out there and then she would never interact back with you. I just don't know if someone like her is doing it for the right reasons. Yeah, she comes from the TV industry. She's an entertainment reporter in L.A. or something like that. She asked a question [at a conference panel] like that. How does someone like me - you know - how am I taken seriously? Almost saying, well she didn't say it directly, but she was like, "Well I'm so beautiful, " or whatever, they're not taking me seriously because I can really do things. And she probably could. She's an excellent speaker, she's obviously got a great brain on her but she forces the issue.

My informant thought Lazar was pursuing fame for the wrong reasons, carpetbagging on Web 2.0 without a real love for technology while trying to capitalize on her looks. Veronica Belmont, who is simultaneously young, attractive and knowledgeable about technology and science fiction, was accused of the same thing:

I don't like it when women portray themselves as just a talking head or just a chick in a low cut shirt talking about gadgets. That really bothers me and I feel it really sets us back several steps. It

shouldn't happen, but it does. When people accuse me of that behavior, when I dress nicer one day, wear some makeup suddenly. You know you get a few comments. Dude, you know me. You know I'm not that way. You know I care about this stuff. Once you gently remind people, they tend to come around.

For women in the tech scene, conventional good looks are suspicious and antithetical to intelligence; thus, women are judged on appearance while men are not. Since self-branding discourse in social media is primarily written by men, it emphasizes ways of speaking and cleverness, and technologies like Twitter and blogs which take advantage of these modes. Emphasizing visual modes of performativity would feminize the discourse, as it would set men up as objects to be looked at. Instead, self-branding becomes a realm on which men can compete in a purportedly meritocratic field: intelligence.

*The Four Hour Work Week* and *Crush It* teach an ideal of neoliberalism and thus function as technologies of subjectivity. Identity, as expressed through social media, becomes the linchpin for financial success. As shown by my ethnographic work, an identity formulated for business purposes requires hard work to maintain. In the next section, I delve deeper into the idea of self-branding as a labor practice.

### The Edited Self: Self-Branding, Emotional Labor, and Social Media Technologies

The form of self-branding described in this chapter would be impossible without social media. The internet's ability to distribute content globally, instantaneously, and cheaply sets it apart from other forms of mass media like



television and newspapers. Social media technologies allow people to self-consciously construct images of themselves that neatly map to an imagined business self—the young executive, the lauded entrepreneur, or the glamorous television host. But the collaborative, networked audience of social media requires people to engage in unpaid emotional and immaterial labor to keep their brand image “pure.” As Glenda Bautista noted, “People are in marketing here, whether they like it or not.”

There are two points of view that can be taken with regard to this issue. Either social media intrinsically encourages a neoliberal self-presentation, or social media enables a neoliberal self-presentation strategy that some people choose. The first perspective requires there to be some inherent property of contemporary social media technologies that promote a neoliberal view of the self. This view is technologically determinist, in that it ignores social context; it is also empirically false, since early social media like IRC, MUDs, and Usenet did not encourage neoliberal self-presentation. Instead, as documented in many early internet ethnographies, a sense of play and identity experimentation abounded in pre-Web internet spaces, something that is entirely absent from sites like Facebook and strongly discouraged by self-branding ideology.

Thus, my perspective is closer to the second. Since neoliberal self-presentation encourages the use of advertising and marketing strategies to sell the self, and since internet media is accessible in a way that television or radio advertising is not, social media allows for a level of neoliberal identity

construction that would be otherwise impossible. It is also well-documented that there are technologies—like Facebook—which systematically discourage identity play by linking a single, presumably authentic self to a body of verifiable personal information: the persistent identity. Reputation, trustworthiness, and authenticity play such an important role in self-branding theory that technologies like Twitter, which *can* be used for all types of self-presentation, end up as one aspect of a single constructed identity leveraged across multiple media types. Bringing this back to the culture of Web 2.0, which, as discussed in the previous chapter, encourages self-promotion and viewing oneself as a product (whether as a brand or as a celebrity), and I think it is safe to say that *the culture of Web 2.0 encourages a neoliberal view of the self and neoliberal identity construction and presentation strategies*. This self is “authentic” (in that it is not openly false), marketable (in that it fits safely into current business culture), and in line with the values of enterprise culture: entrepreneurial, positive, information-rich and self-motivated.

Social media allows for strategic identity construction which is deeply rooted in the idea of entrepreneurialism and self-help, involving constant self-improvement and hard work to achieve success (McGee 2005). This constitutes a particular neoliberal ideology of the self which advocates technology for identity creation and presentation. Owen Thomas said in our interview:

Our identities are digital and, therefore, valuable. And that with social media, we have a sense of the tools to craft those identities. It's almost like; you know when previous programmers had to write in assembly language. Like that's what it used to be like in

terms of certain identities. And now we got like what they claim, you know, we got Visual Basic for... constructing identities.

In social media, identity is something that can be constructed, managed, and changed. The technologies afford strategic self-presentation, whether picking what bands are listed on a Facebook profile or re-tweeting favored celebrities or role models (Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs 2006; Liu 2007). People choose who or what they want to be, an imagined self or imagined life, and use social media technologies to bring this self into being. Want to be a cookbook author? Julia Child attended Le Cordon Bleu culinary school in Paris, taught students from her homes in France and Washington DC, and spent years testing recipes before attempting to write a book. *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* was rejected by Houghton Mifflin for being too long, and Child took several years to edit and revise the manuscript before submitting it to Knopf. Promotion did not begin until the book was finished (Child and Prud'homme 2009). Today, the most important thing you can do is promotion, not cooking: write a cooking blog, make videos of yourself cooking and post them to YouTube, correspond with other cooking experts on Twitter, write newspaper and magazine articles, appear on television, and sign a book contract to write a cookbook. Schwabel writes that people get “discovered” every day on social media; this is echoed by Gary Vaynerchuk who claims that the “best” expert in any field will be recognized and legitimated by mainstream media. Not only is this self the self that will be most easily marketed, it is a strategic, edited self.

The idea of “fan labor” was first developed in fan studies to discuss the myriad of extra-textual activities undertaken by fans of shows like *Star Trek*; everything from discussing episodes online to organizing conventions and producing feature-length films (Jenkins 1992; Baym 2000; Andrejevic 2008; Gregg 2009; Milner 2009). These theories of fan labor extended active audience theory to show that the types of productive activities that fans engage in are financially and culturally beneficial to the creators of the texts. Mark Andrejevic analyzed how the bulletin board *Television Without Pity* is read by showrunners and cast members and can even influence the narrative of the text (2008). R.M. Milner showed that discussion of the video game *Fallout* by fans was framed as “helping” the game developers and an integral part of the game’s success (2009).

Following fan labor, digital labor has been framed as *immaterial labor* by Marxist-influenced cultural historians. Maurizio Lazzarato coined the term “immaterial labor” to refer to “the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms and... public opinion” (1996). For instance, tagging Facebook photographs, posting status updates on Twitter, or contributing to Wikipedia are all acts of labor. The term *affective labor* is used to describe the positive benefits that people derive from these acts within a community, whether increased social status, intimacy, reputation, prestige, or self-satisfaction (Gregg 2009). Recently, theorists have begun to frame participation in Web 2.0 frameworks, particularly commercial frameworks, as labor: it is through participation that the value of these sites is

created and extracted, in the form of user data, viewings of advertisements, or click-throughs (Terranova 2000; Andrejevic 2008; Milner 2009; Van Dijck 2009). Many scholars see this as an uneven exchange and view “user-generated content” or “participatory culture” as a form of exploitation of users by the social software and culture industries (Galloway and Alsina 2007; Jarrett 2008; Petersen 2008; Scholz 2008).

While free labor has become a mainstay of digital communities, it is important to look at how this manifests in social software as *emotional labor*. In her book *The Managed Heart*, Arlie Hochschild defined emotional labor as that which “requires one to induce or suppress feelings in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others” (1983, 7).

Emotional labor is thus a type of performance where care or attention to others is integrated into the nature of the job itself. For example, a hostess at a gourmet restaurant must embody the overall image of the chef and the food as well as extending seemingly genuine care to her customers. This type of forced inculcation of desired emotional affect also applies in varying degrees down the service food chain, as Deborah Cameron describes in her study of call center workers, who are required to evoke “smiling,” sincerity and confidence while on the telephone with customers (2000, 332).

What I call *immaterial emotional labor* describes the practices that Web 2.0 enthusiasts engage in to boost popularity. Their labor requires revealing personal information, sometimes to the point of extreme discomfort or

vulnerability, feigning and successfully performing interpersonal interactions, and creating a particular sense of self that is simultaneously authentic and carefully edited. This is *immaterial* in that it is digital and not direct labor (Terranova 2000), and it is *emotional* in that it involves self-presentation and interaction which has real emotional affects. Self-branding, for instance, requires the careful construction of an edited yet authentic self, which demands ongoing self-monitoring, a thick skin, and an ongoing awareness and evaluation of the audience.

Many informants identified negative emotional costs of self-branding, including anxiety, information overload, lack of time, and hurt feelings due to audience comments and interactions. Constantly monitoring one's actions and maintaining a "dual gaze" was often exhausting and time consuming. First, keeping up with the sheer amount of work that self-branding requires is difficult and requires neglecting other aspects of life. I asked Derek Overby how he managed information overload:

Not very well. I do what I can do... I used to be so worried about it that I didn't get back to people. There're still people that I haven't contacted since I got back from South By. And I feel really bad about that but I still have a job that I have to do and my side projects. I have to put my priorities in line. I have a family. I have two young children. So I have to do what I do. I spend a lot of nights up until midnight or 1:00 in the morning. So I don't get a lot of sleep. But I try to do as much as I can and then at the end of the day, you just have to hope that people understand that you're only one person.

Sarah Lacy admitted that she worked all the time, which differentiated her from other reporters. "For me, this is my entire life and I am fine with it being my

entire life. I don't have any balance and there are just very few people who are willing to do that." Tara Hunt agreed:

One [requirement for success] is a super-drive. Focus on that thing and focus on that thing only. You can't be all over the place. You are focused and obsessed with that one thing. You start up your idea so you can work 14 hours a day. You deny yourself sleep and a social life, and all that stuff. And you just focus on it.

These comments reflect a neoliberal subjectivity through which people organize themselves and their lives according to market principles, specifically viewing work as a priority. This is second nature to most Web 2.0 people, demonstrating the inculcation of neoliberal ways of thinking.

Second, several informants confessed that negative comments or e-mail "flames" from audience members had upset them or even made them cry. Even people who claimed that negative comments didn't affect them had developed coping mechanisms. Adam Jackson said:

I announced after that I'm going to start tagging negative comments and I'm going to turn it into a blog one day. So I did a hash tag, "#Dick". So from now on, when I get just a really asinine comment I'll re-tweet it and hash tag it "#Dick". So now when someone says, "why are you so bitter over twitter?" I'll just send them that to that hash tag and they can see all of that negative crap I get.

Ariel Waldman turned to her friends who had gone through similar things to ask for help. "[Sex blogger Violet Blue] just goes through a lot of shit online and so she's become kind of this veteran of... whenever I'm going through, I guess, drama online of any sort, I kind of look up to her because she's somehow weathered it." Third, people found ongoing self-surveillance to be anxiety

provoking, as they were engaged in a continuous loop of measuring themselves against an audience. As Glenda Bautista said, “A lot of my own anxieties have been developed by online judgments.”

Authenticity, as it is described in self-branding culture, is something absolute that can be found through self-examination, or perhaps through filling out workbook exercises. Authenticity is viewed as real, unqualified, and biological or even genetic. Vaynerchuk says: “Your DNA dictates your passion—whatever it is that you were born to do; being authentic, and being perceived as such by your audience, relies on your ability to ensure that every decision you make when it comes to your business is rooted in being true to yourself” (2009, 85). This statement suggests that each person has an intrinsic value based on their possession of a singular, intrinsic *marketable* skill; it also implies that success is wrapped up in a sense of the “authentic self” which, as I have discussed in previous chapters, is a social construct. This suggests that what is truthful or authentic is what is *good for business*—an excellent demonstration of how neoliberalism is taught. These are not values that are somehow inherent in internet technologies; rather, they are market values being mapped over a particular use case of social media.

Similarly, some social technologies demonstrate normative use patterns that involve expected disclosure and honest interaction with others (Marwick and boyd 2010). But these concepts of authenticity are problematic since the authentic is just as much a localized, temporally situated construct as identity, self, gender,



and the like (Cheng 2004; Grazian 2003). What we think of as “authentic” is entirely contextual and frequently changes. Despite this, the “authentic” is a popular concept with a great social resonance. As Grazian writes,

Although it remains a figment of our collective imagination, we still continue to employ the concept of authenticity as an organizing principle for evaluating our experiences in everyday life, and that makes it significantly meaningful and, in many ways, *real*. In this manner, authenticity shares a similar place in our hearts as love or beauty; it is an old wives tale we tell ourselves over and over again until we believe it to be true, and as a result it gains a certain kind of power over us (2003, 16).

This means that the self-branding participant or the Twitter user is constantly trying to *perform* authenticity in a way that meets the needs of the audience.

The myth that the personal brand represents the authentic is belied by the need for constant monitoring. There are many anecdotes involving people who have been fired from their jobs for actions they broadcast through social media which are certainly authentic—drinking alcohol, doing drugs, talking about politics, having sex—but do not fit the image of a *businesslike* self. In fact, personal branding books simultaneously tell people to “be themselves” while setting up a framework in which self-presentation is regulated and surveilled. For instance, Julia Allison advised her seminar audience “if your brand doesn’t match up with who you really are, people will smell it;” as mentioned in the last chapter, she feels that she must disclose her use of hair extensions and plastic surgery or her audience will criticize her for being “fake.” At the same time, Allison bemoans that other people were able to define her as an “oversharer” and a “famewhore” because she did not *define herself* well enough. Even while

trumpeting authenticity, the idea that one should self-censor online is widely accepted.

Thus self-branding contains a paradox: the ability to have absolute control over self-perception while remaining true to an authentic self assumes that people never do anything that would be considered un-businesslike, illegal, or controversial in any way. Tantek Çelik summarizes:

For so long, there's been this conservative assumption of authority. In other words, if you have authority or are in authority, you must be socially conservative, which is like, it's a total assumption, like there's no reason about this all be true. It's just that we all think it. It's merely a consensual assumption. There is no actual reason for it to be true at all...We all take it so much for granted that it affects our behaviors... So I think what's happening more and more is people are starting to realize, okay, well how much can I be like open about my hip and cool side. Uh, even among the people that I would want to look at me as an authority. The more that we push that barrier, the more kind of allows for just a more, you know, socially open, socially liberal behavior in a broader set of contexts.

While I will discuss the public/private divide and the presumed benefits of living publically in the next chapter, for many, living publically is not possible, or at least not profitable. Self-branding is not about living publically. It is about constructing a strategic self-image to appeal to a particular audience and furthering that image through every online and offline action. On one hand, maintaining this type of sanitized self requires a great deal of time and energy; on the other, it requires a cognitive dissonance. Clearly, there are few occasions when the “authentic” self will be entirely acceptable as a business self; this is because we still have clear distinctions between acceptable behavior in social life and acceptable behavior in the workplace. If the Web 2.0 self is one that must be

both entirely transparent and entirely business-oriented, that self cannot logically exist. Furthermore, this elimination of long-standing divisions between corporate life and social or home life is a myth with an ideological function. It functions to discourage non-businesslike behavior in order to minimize the amount of intrigue or labor that is required by the neoliberal subject. The attempt, however, to maintain this forced authenticity to appeal to an audience and present a “passionate” self-brand is a form of emotional labor that requires a great deal of time, effort, and affective output as previously mentioned.

I observed two other serious drawbacks to self-branding and online promotion. The first was the risk of being fired by a more traditional company for engaging in self-branding. Although self-branding practitioners maintain that everyone will need to engage in self-branding in the future, at many companies the interests of the entrepreneurial self do *not* line up with the interests of the enterprise. One acquaintance was fired for doing freelance work on the side, which her company considered “spreading herself too thin.” Ariel Waldman left a job after the organization asked her to stop talking about personal things in her Twitter stream, which she also used to promote company business. Recently, entrepreneur Jason Calacanis posted a diatribe against hiring “job-hoppers,” who exemplify the freelance, self-interested worker. He instead argued that startups should hire people willing to work for low salaries and long hours with the promise of equity. This makes it very hard to draw clear bright lines between neoliberal business philosophies and self-branding and self-promotion. Instead, it

points to the potential clash between self-branding elements and traditional corporate culture. The economic downturn has made it difficult to drum up loyalty for companies willing to engage in mass firings. Thus, to a certain extent, there is an instability between personal branding philosophies and corporate America. The ideal of independent actors without ties to larger corporations is a mythic element of neoliberalism rather than a reality.

The second danger is coming off as too self-promotional and therefore narcissistic or uninterested in others. As I've written before, there is a sense, especially with regard to technologies like Twitter, that the proper use for the technology is to share personal information with others. Using the channel as a one-to-many broadcast advertising stream is viewed as bad form and an indicator of low-status (Marwick and boyd 2010). As mentioned in chapter 4, while tech insiders may look down on people using Twitter to unashamedly spread content, the ability to amass huge numbers of followers does open doors (or at least it did at the time of our interview). Additionally, many people enthusiastically follow the teachings of Vaynerchuk, Ferriss, and their ilk, and support each other in achieving their goals. To those people, having large follower accounts and successfully self-promoting is a goal to aspire to. But to high-status members of the tech community, blatant self-promotion is *déclassé* and very uncool.

## Conclusion

Many contemporary critiques of neoliberalism stem from Marxist beliefs in the alienation inherent in industrial labor models. The worker is alienated from the products of her labor, and the work itself is lacking a “sense of meaning” (Du Gay 1996, 11). But according to Marxist traditions, what defines humanity is the “*capacity for creative labor*” (Du Gay 1996, 12). Although the neoliberal, freelance model of the independent agent has its drawbacks—lack of job security, benefits, and stability—it also provides many with a sense of agency and creativity in their own work. Although self-branding ideology oversells the ability for most people to *engage* in this type of work, it is a mistake to presume that this model of work *never* provides self-realization or self-actualization.

In this chapter, I examined how the discourse of the “personal brand” is taken up by a specific community, and how it manifests in a series of practices. Although the social media scene is highly capitalist and, as previously discussed, involves immense blurring of the lines between work and self, the community’s adherence to self-branding mechanisms is not a wholesale acceptance of status quo economics. Rather, the valorization of independence and entrepreneurialism documented by Hearn and Lair et al. in self-branding literature is used by my informants *not* to embrace life as entrepreneurs *within* the enterprise, but to reject the enterprise in favor of freelance, consulting, or startup work cultures.

Indeed, much of this self-production of the neoliberal subject is pleasurable for the subject (it would not be so widespread if it wasn’t). During the dot-com era, Michael Goldfarb gave a speech at a Harvard conference on

digital economies, where he stated “having attention means having recognition, identity, and meaning in the eyes of those around you. It provides sustenance to spirit, mind and body, in just about any form” (1997). The pleasure involved in pursuing self-branding strategies comes partially from having people pay attention: having readers, getting @replies and blogrolls have real affective benefits, particularly when considering a networked audience. Second, there is the exhilarating pursuit of self-realization, the American Dream of independence from a boss or an office. The emphasis on creative workplaces in the dot-com era, although partially rhetorical and a strategic marketing move to justify long hours and low benefits, still created physical workplaces and workers that differed from the top-down management strategies of the 1960s. In the social media scene, working for any large company, even an “enlightened” one like Google, was lower status than self-employment; the ideal neoliberal subject is de-coupled from multi-national corporations. For many of my informants, the freelance lifestyle did create real satisfaction (and financial success), particularly when it came to ownership of a small business. It is a mistake to see a critique of self-branding as a value or moral judgment placed on capitalism overall.

But my informants were perhaps the people most positioned to take advantage of neoliberalism and find it as pleasurable. In fact, the entrepreneurs of Web 2.0 are *proof of concept that neoliberalism can work*. But the techniques advocated by self-branding gurus are inapplicable to factory workers, people in service positions, or simply people without access to technical skills and

sophisticated personal networks. While Ferriss, Schawbel, Roffer and Vaynerchuk claim their techniques can be used by anybody, they are deeply rooted in white-collar professional culture. At Julia Allison's personal branding seminar, I received the following card from a fashionably dressed woman:

Makeup with MELANIE  
Everybody has STAR Power!  
Melanie L. Swanson  
Design YOUR Best Face!!!  
ALL over Town...  
TV, Film, Print, Stage, Brides & Private.  
www.melinthecity@tumblr.com: BLOG [~~@~~ crossed out]  
www.makeupwithmelanie.biz  
[e-mail address, crossed out]  
Text: [phone number]

Melanie had clearly followed the instructions in personal branding books to the letter: she had a Tumblr blog, advocated by many self-branding gurus since it is free and simple to use, but she had printed an incorrect URL and e-mail address. Despite her attempt to use social media as directed, this card made Melanie seem like an amateur. At the same time that personal branding is being posited as a solution to economic woes, it puts the onus of responsibility on the worker for stability, financial success, and advancement. A person who does not achieve these things can be blamed for not adhering to the techniques, not "wanting it enough," or not working hard enough. But as previously described, the actual work that self-branding entails is considerable. More than a 40-hour a week job, it is a strategy that spills over into all parts of life. And the anxiety, distress, and uncertainty felt by many of my informants do not appear in the self-branding literature.

In this chapter, I have argued that the use of social media to create a branded self is an example of enterprise self-regulation, or a “technology of subjectivity” (Ong 2006). While Web 2.0 ideology advocates self-branding as a way to find personal fulfillment and economic success, the “edited self” reveals the contradictions between authenticity and transparency when placed in the context of the workplace. The edited self requires immaterial emotional labor to maintain a business-friendly self-presentation while feigning an “authentic” self. I do not think it is productive to criticize self-branding’s emphasis on commodification just because it feels distasteful. As Adam Arvidsson writes in the preface to his book *Brands*, “to be critical of brands per se is about as fruitful as it is to be critical of factories or bureaucracies” (2006, vii). The problem is that self-branding, as a practical technique, is limited and will only be successful for a slim sliver of the population, yet it is being advocated as a universal solution to the economic downturn that can be adopted by anyone. Although my informants often found freelance project-based culture to be creatively fulfilling, the stress of continuous self-monitoring shows the inherent contradictions between neoliberal ideals of identity and the reality of day-to-day life.

## CHAPTER VI

### WE LIVE IN PUBLIC: LIFE-STREAMING, PUBLICITY, AND THE NETWORKED AUDIENCE



## Introduction

Awesomesauce is on tap for today: Venice casa hunting, Doomies (omfg!!), Jumbo's (hello ladies), Coraline (ArcLight I <3 u)

At Seed for the second day in a row, repeating a southwest burger. So good.

I dont want to jinx it but me and @seanbonner are 85% getting the most amazing place right on the beach in Venice #goaheadbejealoussuckas

Doomies was deelish. I hope he can raise \$\$ to re-open in a good location

Off to ArcLight for Coraline. Jealous of everyone at the Grammy's!

Coraline was excellent. Moar 3D movies please!

(Partial Twitter lifestream from Tara Brown, 2/8/09)

Lifestreaming is the ongoing sharing of personal information to a networked audience, creating a digital portrait of one's actions and thoughts. People who lifestream use software like Twitter, Facebook, and Foursquare to track information about themselves and make it available to others. By *networked audience*, I mean the real and potential audience for digital content, made up of people who are connected both to the user and each other (Marwick and boyd 2010). When lifestreaming is common in a community, as it is in the tech scene, the continuous provision of personal data creates an extra layer of social information, since many people reading the lifestream also contribute to it. This sense of co-presence can provide great affective benefits to the participants, but it can also give rise to interpersonal conflict. Lifestreaming demonstrates the tension between Web 2.0 ideals of publicity, openness, and transparency and the reality of

online information disclosure, which requires surveillance of the self and others for impression management.

Lifestreaming is made possible by social media sites that encourage people to share a great deal of personal information with each other. The immense popularity of sites like Facebook, particularly with teenagers, has given rise to claims that young people don't care about privacy, implying that the use of social media to reveal personal information is a matter of generational shifts (Moscardelli and Liston-Heyes 2004; Kornblum 2007; Nussbaum 2007). Others argue that disclosing information online is not synonymous with a lack of interest in privacy, pointing out that young people frequently engage in privacy-protecting behaviors such as changing default privacy settings and editing online information (Hoofnagle et al. 2010; Madden and Smith 2010; Marwick, Murgia-Diaz, and Palfrey 2010; Raynes-Goldie 2010). This debate leaves out several important points which I address in this chapter. First, as I observed, members of the tech scene receive significant affective benefits from sharing information online, like status, intimacy, and a sense of belonging, as the networked audience creates a sense of co-presence. It is likely that members of similarly technically-saturated social contexts get similar benefits. Second, it is not only teenagers and twenty-somethings who engage in these practices. People in the technology scene expect that their peers will employ social media for many uses, including creating and broadcasting digital pictures, current location, information about friends, media consumption, travel plans, and even diet, weight and exercise. Third, the

dichotomy of “public” and “private” ignores the difference between the *public* and the *audience*. Rather than thinking about making information public, livestreamers tend to frame it in terms of openness to an audience. Similarly, the strategic reveal of information to boost social status is a form of *publicity*, and makes more sense when viewed in this context.

In this chapter, I define livestreaming as a self-presentation strategy formulated against the constant backdrop of a networked audience. Livestreaming reflects the ideals of Web 2.0 as applied to the self, emphasizing participation and information-sharing through tracking and broadcasting personal information. It is deeply ingrained in the social life of the technology scene and expected of members. In my observations, livestreaming was primarily accomplished using Twitter, along with other social media tools like Facebook, Dodgeball, Foursquare, FriendFeed, Last.fm, blogs, Flickr and Dopplr. Twitter is often dismissed with the idea “why would I want to know what my friends have for breakfast,” but it has many different models of use. While I was conducting fieldwork, it was used by my informants to share information about their daily lives and personal activities, interesting media, opinions, and commentary on news, technology, and community happenings. Using interviews, ethnographic data, and tweets, I look at the benefits and drawbacks of livestreaming and how they relate to concepts of *openness*, *publicity* and *audience* that fall outside the public/private dichotomy. Livestreaming strengthens interpersonal relationships, boosts public profiles (necessary for both micro-celebrity and self-branding), and

increases social status, reputation, and attention. But it also reframes surveillance and monitoring, of the self and others, from a social context of penalization and confinement to one of self-expression and social connection. Lifestreamers must constantly see themselves through the gaze of others, altering their behavior to maintain their desired self-representation. This constant monitoring, against the backdrop of a networked audience, creates anxiety, status-jockeying, and stress while bringing forth new forms of social information.

### What is Lifestreaming?

The term “lifestream” was coined by David Gelernter, a computer science professor at Yale. In a 1994 *Washington Post* article suggesting possible future uses for the “information superhighway,” he wrote:

Your "lifestream" captures your whole life, in terms of chunks of information: letters, documents, bills, bank statements, video footage of your son's first birthday party, a database, anything. Imagine a queue of documents laid out neatly on (say) the living room floor — only the queue might be tens of thousands of documents long, and it exists only as chunks floating in the void (Gelernter 1994).

A few years later, one of Gelernter’s graduate students, Eric T. Freeman, developed software that would organize files along chronological lines, creating a “time-ordered stream of documents” (Freeman 1996; Freeman 1997). Gelernter and Freeman envisioned a private, personal filing system that would help people organize their lives and memories.

Gelernter's vision of organized receipts and work documents has been realized in part, but contemporary lifestreaming is more expansive. Everyone who uses the internet has a detailed, persistent "digital footprint," created knowingly or unknowingly, actively or passively. Posting video footage of a child's birthday party to YouTube is *active*, while Google *passively* tracks the sites its users visit without any user input (Madden et al. 2007). Lifestreaming is the aggregate result of two processes, actively or passively tracking personal information and broadcasting it to an audience. Many social media sites are designed to facilitate both aspects. Niche sites like Last.fm (music), Dopplr (travel), and GoodReads (books) encourage users to share data in several ways. Users can place widgets or plug-ins on their SNS profile, homepage, or blog, send RSS feeds to Twitter or Facebook, or use the site's API to combine their data with other applications (all these methods drive traffic back to the originating site). Last.fm users, for instance, can install a desktop plug-in which automatically tracks every song played on the computer, creating charts of the top tracks and artists that can be automatically sent to Tumblr, Twitter, or personal blogs. More general sites like Twitter, blogs, and social network sites encourage people to share a broad spectrum of personal information. Services like Friendfeed, Facebook's News Feed, Google Buzz and Cliqset aggregate many digital information sources into a continuous stream. Wordspy, a blog which monitors new words, defines lifestream as "an online record of a person's daily activities, either via direct video

feed or via aggregating the person's online content such as blog posts, social network updates, and online photos” (McFedries 2008).

The tracking aspect of lifestreaming is also called self-quantification or “personal informatics.” Self-tracking junkies monitor every aspect of their lives, from moods to sex life to temperature, often (but not always) using online tools like HappyFactor.com, Bedpost.com, and Curetogether.com, or customizable aggregators like Daytum and Mycrocosm to track and analyze personal data (Brophy-Warren 2008; Hesse 2008; Bielski 2009). The Quantified Self blog collects information about this movement and holds meet-ups in New York, San Francisco, and Boston. Many personal informatics enthusiasts are devoted to the idea of optimizing themselves and their environments for maximum happiness, health, or efficiency, similar to the principles of lifehacking.<sup>44</sup> Personal informatics facilitates self-experimentation, popularized by the research psychologist Seth Roberts, who tracks his own weight, sleep, and mood to formulate theories on weight loss and depression (Roberts 2004). Digital media can also be used to create a personal archive, such as taking a self-portrait or writing in a journal every day. These projects echo the work of artists like Eleanor Antin, whose 1972 *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* displays four photos a day of her 36-day weight loss, and Linda Montano, whose “living art” works can last up to seven years.

Tracking personal information about oneself is not a new concept. Diarist Samuel Pepys recorded details of his daily life for ten years. Samuel Johnson and

Benjamin Franklin were both compulsive self-trackers: Franklin kept a chart chronicling his daily adherence to 13 self-identified virtues such as frugality, chastity, and humility (Rubin 2009). Keeping a diary, even a very detailed one, is a fairly common practice today. Senator Bob Graham, for instance, keeps color-coded daily logs of his activities that are so meticulous that they were admissible as evidence in government investigations (Mullen 2010). And tracking food and exercise, or simply counting calories, is a common precept of weight-loss programs.

It is making this information widely readable via the internet that differentiates the lifestream from its paper predecessors.<sup>45</sup> Contemporary social media applications are predated by late 1990s online journaling services such as Diaryland, Xanga, and LiveJournal, which made it possible for people to chronicle their lives online. While Van Dijck argues that these “lifelogs” share many similarities with paper journals, the internet makes them accessible to far more people than any (unpublished) paper journal could reach (2004). Also in the late 1990s, web-connected cameras made it possible to broadcast continuous stills of real life to the internet, giving rise to the phenomenon of “camgirls, women who broadcast themselves over the Web for the general public, while trying to cultivate a measure of celebrity in the process” (Senft 2008, 1). The first camgirl, Jennifer Ringley, began broadcasting JenniCam in 1996, showing an uncensored live stream of images from her dorm room; at the height of her popularity in 1998, JenniCam received 100 million hits *per week* (Senft 2008, 15-16). Most camgirls

used online diaries, Usenet groups, and IRC channels to further communicate with viewers and fans, giving greater glimpses into their lives than were possible with the stuttering images of early web video (Senft 2008, 21). Camgirls like Jenny and Ana Voog are the ancestors of today's "social cyborgs" who "lifecast" real-time video streams of their activities (these cyborgs are primarily young men, although the earliest users of web video were primarily women). The advent of easy-to-use blogging software in the mid-2000s created a sort of nation of virtual memorists, with glimpses into the lives of others becoming a mainstay of online content. Lifestreaming aggregates all these types of content, and adds to them feeds of passively-generated data.

Lifestreaming is the sum of a person's digital parts, aggregated together and monitored by others. The "digital self" that results is composed of certain types of information; it is a funhouse mirror, casting certain aspects of life into sharp relief but obscuring others. Lifestreamers can attempt to manage this self to create particular impressions, but the presence of a networked audience makes this challenging. The lifestream is not a direct reflection of a person, but a strategic, edited simulacrum of such, specifically configured to be viewed by an audience.

The *audience* is a crucial element of lifestreaming, as lifestreaming without an audience is simply self-tracking. Lifestreaming involves broadcasting personal data to other people, whether anyone with an internet connection or a subgroup defined by a privacy filter. Self-trackers claim accountability to



themselves and others, the ability to amass an ongoing archive or documentary of their lives, and greater self-knowledge. In a social group of many lifestreamers, people place themselves as part of a *networked audience* in which participants are both sender and receiver by transmitting this information to others (Marwick and boyd 2010). Looking at the collective lifestreams of a group shows that players constantly reference each other, revealing a coherent picture of social actions and connections within a community. Furthermore, almost all members of the tech scene contribute their own lifestream. These lifestreams comprise the Twitter stream of people one follows, or the Facebook News Feed of one's friends. Thus, as each person lifestreams a piece of content, they are simultaneously reading the content of others, commenting on it, and adding it to their personal conception of the scene. Audience members monitor each other by consuming their content, and by doing so formulate a view of what is normal, accepted, or unaccepted in the community. This understanding of audience creates an internalized gaze. Members of the tech scene imagine how the audience will view their own lifestreamed self-presentation, and alter it accordingly. Monitoring of themselves and others becomes an expected and normative part of social interaction.

Proponents say this type of networked lifestreaming facilitates connections to others, deepens relationships, and creates a source of real-time information. Sharing information through services like Twitter creates "ambient awareness" of others, a sense of what friends and acquaintances are doing or thinking that builds up over a long period of time (Thompson 2008). This is akin to a sense of co-

presence, even if the participants are not geographically proximate. At the same time, networked lifestreaming often creates anxieties about performing identity in front of an audience, and the extra layers of social information can result in intense social problems colloquially referred to as “drama” (boyd 2006; Fono and Raynes-Goldie 2006). Inferences and implications made visible by social media can reveal connections and actions that are usually kept tucked away from each other. These difficulties have given rise to a variety of different ways of conceptualizing the “public” and the “private” and of managing how information flows between different entities, websites, and users. This is exacerbated in a community where virtually everyone lifestreams.

### Lifestreaming in the Tech Scene

Lifestreaming is a very normal part of the technology scene. People expect their friends to be familiar with the latest social media applications, connect to each other, and engage in public conversations using blogs, Twitter, and Facebook. As Auren Hoffman, CEO of the reputation management firm RapLeaf, stated in an interview:

If you were an employer, and someone applied and they didn't have any activity on social networks and that person was 23 years old, you'd think they were the Unabomber. You would be really scared to meet this person without even a bodyguard. I don't even know if that person exists.

To people like Hoffman who are intimately familiar with Web 2.0 technology, not using social media marked unsophistication and backwardness. It also made it

difficult to participate in social and technological conversations. As a result, members of the tech scene were avid users of Web 2.0 tools, many of which produced the digital traces that, in aggregate, make up lifestreams.

While I met people in the technology scene who were personal informatics enthusiasts (e.g. used social media to track personal data for self-improvement), they were a minority. Most people used microblogging technologies, such as Facebook, Pownce, Twitter, and Friendfeed, to lifestream media consumption, location, digital pictures and videos, and the flotsam and jetsam of everyday life. The availability of these streams varied by individual and service, from entirely accessible Twitter accounts to password-protected digital files. Lifestreaming ranged from piecemeal aggregation like FriendFeed, a trendy piece of software which pulled in dozens of data streams to create a semi-comprehensive picture of what friends were doing across the internet, to personal blogs that dynamically aggregated day-to-day doings.<sup>46</sup> Many people used Twitter and Facebook as a catch-all for information published elsewhere, such as Foursquare checkins, Flickr pictures, or blog entries.

Overwhelmingly, the most popular service was Twitter. This was immediately obvious to me as I began fieldwork: Twitter was omnipresent. I began to miss out on social events and gossip because I wasn't checking Twitter. The service was discussed at conferences, at dinner, and in almost every conversation I had, about technology or otherwise. Interviews were peppered with references to Twitter: how it was used, its benefits and drawbacks, how people

thought it should be used, and where people believed it would go in the future. When I asked interview subjects what technology they thought was hot, virtually everyone answered “Twitter.” Not only was Twitter a San Francisco company whose early adopters were members of the tech scene, its founders, Evan Williams and Jack Dorsey, were held up as model entrepreneurs because the site had achieved rapid success and stayed independent (and presumably would make the founders very wealthy). As a result, Twitter provided an overlay of important social information that informed all my interactions with the scene. After attending an event, I went home and read all the tweets *about* that event. One evening early in my fieldwork, I was at a big tech party waiting at the bar for a drink and heard a man introduce himself to one of my friends: “Did you post a tweet about Hollywood being so over? I recognized you from your Twitter picture.” People wrote their Twitter handles on conference nametags. It permeated the social, technical, and business life of the scene. Twitter was a piece of software, a social practice, something that facilitated meta-discussions of events, and an overall discourse about information-sharing and status.

Twitter is usually categorized as a microblogging technology, as it allows users to post 140-character updates from virtually any internet-connected device including smartphones, tablets, and laptops. Twitter’s tidbits of information are dismissed by critics as “pointless babble” (CNBC 2009), but their constancy creates real-time data streams of how people spend their time and what the community values. Users discuss their day, share articles and web pages, identify

friends and coworkers, identify their location and broadcast hundreds of other tiny status updates that comprised a revealing torrent of personal data.<sup>47</sup> Twitter is also the primary source of community lifestreaming, allowing people to immerse themselves in the current concerns of the tech scene. People followed real-life friends and acquaintances, as well as high-status tech people and celebrities. Individual tweets are typically viewed within a Twitter stream comprised of other people's tweets, forming an aggregate social context. This context is rich with social information about relationships, mores, customs, and trends, and therefore provides more information than the sum of its parts. For instance, looking at how the tech scene defined acceptable Twitter use reveals the key role that Twitter followers play in determining status in the community.

### Twitter, Norms and Status

While virtually everyone I met in the tech scene used Twitter, a set of norms governed how information was shared and the service was used. These were not universal to all Twitter users (since Twitter is open-ended, its norms vary greatly between user groups; among fan groups, for example, there is a lot of direct tweeting to celebrities). Neither were the norms implicit. People had very particular ideas about how Twitter should be used, which were debated in person, on Twitter, at conferences, and on blogs. Sites like the Twitctionary and the Twittonary attempted to formalize the emerging rules of the medium, but norms were often reinforced through micro-interaction. For example:

kazaroth: @Rhipadmore ooh, why have you protected your updates? Dont do that! See this:  
<http://tinyurl.com/5fwbvvy> 02/03/09 03:21pm

Kazaroth tells rhipadmore that she should not protect her updates and links to an article called “The Ten Commandments of Twitter” by James Dickey. Dickey’s article advises new users on the “best” use of Twitter. He writes:

Now for the most controversial option – locking your Tweets. Unless you’re a minor (in which case I’m not sure you should be on Twitter at all), DON’T. It’s the Twitter equivalent of walking into a room and asking everyone else who’s already there to put on earplugs while you talk to the 3 people you like the most. Mostly it just makes you look like you don’t understand Twitter. If someone’s a bore, or a spammer, or a creep, block them. Assume everyone else is just another nice person like yourself looking for a new outlet to reach whatever goal they selected (Dickey 2008).

While Dickey’s blog post contains many normative statements (e.g. this is the way that Twitter should be used), people often disagreed on norms. Some people argued vociferously that Twitter users should follow everyone who followed them, implying that people like Kevin Rose with very high follower counts were “twitter snobs” who were misusing the service (Ives 2009). Others thought it was impossible to really follow more than a few hundred people. Tim Ferriss weighed in:

I follow mostly close friends and celebrities, both of whom are unlikely to send me many direct messages, as the former knows I prefer phone and the latter doesn’t know I exist. The other approach, which bruises fewer egos, is to follow friends and strangers alike but make it clear that you don’t read any DMs, a la Gary Vaynerchuk. Based on attempts to do the latter on Facebook and LinkedIn, I’ve concluded that most of the world doesn’t read directions or alerts, so I opted for the friend and celeb option (Ferriss 2009b).

Ferriss discusses two competing norms and explains why he chose one of them. It is through these types of public discussions and micro-interactions that the norms of an emerging technology are worked out within a community. Eventually, some controversies were settled by the technology; the emerging practice of re-tweeting was incorporated into Twitter's software and people no longer argued that it was an illegitimate use of the site.

There were certain normative uses of Twitter that had solidified among the tech scene. First, people had to *be interesting* on Twitter. In interviews, many people talked about dropping boring Twitter users by unfollowing them. They mentioned people who talked constantly about their pets or kids, tweeted too much, or provided repetitive information. In contrast, interesting tweets were funny, witty, or informative.

This need to be interesting was reinforced by the potential act of unfollowing. Thor Muller told me:

People can do whatever the hell they want. For instance, there is a guy who I know who has decided that he wants to be a philosopher king and he is kind of isolated. He just moved into town. And now he just emits this constant stream of philosophy aphorisms that he's coined, many of which are half-baked, the way that I think he speaks is mostly self important, self-importance. But, you know, I don't have to follow him. And he actually, on his own, noted that "nobody is really responding, replying to my philosophy tweets. So maybe I should not do these as much." So silence in a space does eventually communicate to somebody about whether their thought is working, that was really interesting. Then I know other people who would tweet many times in a row. They would have one long thought that would be a good blog post and break it into 140 character pieces. And people told them, "You know what? That's not what Twitter is for." Right? So there is some self-direction in there.

Muller's observation that "silence in a space does eventually communicate to somebody about whether their thought is *working*," indicates the importance of Twitter as a communicative medium. Not receiving replies to a tweet or, at worst, being unfollowed, signals to a user that they are not using Twitter *correctly*. This is fully understood by users, who track how many people follow them and alter their tweets accordingly. For example, Annalee Newitz told me, "I have to moderate it sometimes because people will like...I notice if I do too many tweets people leave, stop following me." Like many members of the scene, Newitz actively monitors her follower count and notices if people unfollow her. Adam Jackson, who I talked about in chapter 4, had established an "algorithm" of frequency and interestingness which he used to maximize his follower count.

Secondly, Twitter was presumed to be reciprocal, a true technology of the networked audience rather than a broadcast mechanism. As a result, it was considered proper to include someone in an @reply if they were in attendance at an event or part of an ongoing conversation. Re-tweets were a way to give credit; re-broadcasting someone's tweet without crediting them was akin to plagiarism. People who constantly tweeted without acknowledging anyone else, responding to @replies, or re-tweeting their friends were derided. Adrian Chan called these constant references to others a way to delineate a tribe, a form of "social inclusion."



In their discussion of Twitter conversations, Honeycutt and Herring refer to the practice of using @replies to get someone's attention as "addressivity"

(2009). For example:

Kevinrose: @tjsimmons I'm getting a kindle 2, I'll let you know how it is (2/9/09)

brianhart22: @garyvee listening to a keynote speaker he is talking ab working brand while at wk but not to forget your brand at home-Thought u would like (6/21/10)

Boyd et al. point out that "the function of such messages is also attention-seeking; it is specifically intended to alert the mentioned person that they are being talked about" (boyd, Golder, and Lotan 2010, 2). Similarly, using @replies to indicate a close relationship with others is a way to demonstrate one's status:

ArielWaldman: @samovartea with @cjmartin @verbiee @laurensays @lauraglu @timoni (12/21/08)

Leahculver: Just left @alembicbar. Delicious dinner with @arielwaldman and friends. (2/1/09)

Aubs: At the Rev3 Holiday party with @veronica lamenting that @ryanblock & @kevinrose are nerdily playing chess. Getting shots now. (12/17/08)

In these tweets, @replies are used to notify others that the people referenced are geographically proximate. This had two functions. First, since being mentioned frequently on Twitter was a status symbol, referring to a friend in a tweet is an act of politeness due to its status implications. This is particularly true if the friend is high status; as Garrett Camp, founder of StumbleUpon, explained, "Sometimes [I search for] my own nickname because I see this huge spike in followers. And I'm like, "Why is this happening?" Then I realize Guy Kawasaki retweeted me. Then it's like, "Oh!" Being mentioned by a highly-followed person can increase

followers, the most important status metric on Twitter. Second, referencing high-status people like @kevinrose or @ryanblock demonstrated connectedness to people admired by the community, reinforcing the high value that was placed on access. Megan McCarthy dismissed this:

It's sort of like if you're sending out like "I'm with this person, this person, this person." Right. It's more of like the display thing that I was talking about before, a whole bunch of peacocks running around and fluffing their feathers and broadcasting it to the world.

@replies are a performance of connectedness and access that boost the status of the tweet's originator. This is particularly true when they demonstrate co-presence, showing that a relationship extends beyond the virtual. This implies that face-to-face interactions are a greater indication of social ties than online discussions.

Twitter is often used to cement overall reputation and status within the technology scene. Not only is participation on Twitter an important part of community involvement, people enjoy acquiring new followers, talking to an audience, and discussing the technology with friends and acquaintances.

Lifestreams provide a set of social information that help to deepen friendships and contextualize interactions with the scene.

In chapter 3, I discussed the prominence of the follower count as a status affordance. Because the follower count is such a crucial display of status on Twitter, unfollowing someone becomes the ultimate act of protest, sending a message about the acceptability of a behavior:

Adactio: Concurring with @briansuda. I think I may trim the number of people I'm following on Twitter by dropping anybody who retweets.

Adactio is so incensed over re-tweeting that he invokes the nuclear option of unfollowing, somewhat similar to un-friending on Facebook or LiveJournal, which signals intense social disapproval or dislike (Fono and Raynes-Goldie 2006). Because a low follower number implied that the user was not “good at” Twitter, people could immediately judge whether or not they were being successful. Active attention to Twitter’s status metric thus affects how people livestream, framing themselves in particular ways to attract attention.

### The Benefits of Lifestreaming

Jessica Mullen experimented with lifestreaming for her MFA thesis, culminating in “The Lifestreamer’s Manifesto: A Life Design Methodology,” which reads:

Utopian lifestreaming embraces living life in public. Utopian lifestreaming fills your needs by creating a life support system to guide the daily decisions that add up to form your life.

1. I will document my daily activities to work towards my goals, even when I fail to meet them.
2. I will gauge my health and resources with online tools instead of burying my head in the sand.
3. I will share my experiences with my community for feedback and accountability. I will observe the experiences of others and help where I can.
4. As my lifestream grows, my reputation and confidence will do the same.
5. I will find the invisible patterns and systems holding me back and publicly eliminate them from my life. I will profitably share my hard earned knowledge (2010, 54).

Mullen's Manifesto frames self-regulation as entirely positive, while in other social contexts it might be viewed as overbearing, rigid, or strange. Lifestreaming is an example of the application of engineering practices to everyday life, much like lifehacking. Self-monitoring and regulating accordingly is viewed as conducive to self-improvement. It forms a feedback loop that functions as a technology of subjectivity, much like the self-branding strategies discussed in chapter 5.

This Manifesto focuses more on the benefits of self-tracking than the public aspects of living, but Mullen identifies two key points. *As my lifestream grows, my reputation will do the same.* Lifestreaming contributes significantly to status. *I will profitably share my hard earned knowledge* points to the material and immaterial benefits of the lifestream. While some people have managed to profit directly from online self-presentation through advertising, sponsors, or sales, others use lifestreaming to build up the identifiable online persona that is a crucial part of micro-celebrity and self-branding. But lifestreamers identify many other benefits that are largely due to the involvement of the networked audience.

One of the most important is *ambient awareness* of others, or the development of "digital intimacy" (Thompson 2008). While Twitter is frequently characterized as a chattering stream of irrelevant pieces of information, these pieces of information, like gossip, small talk, and trivia, serve to create and maintain emotional connections between members of the community, who make

up the networked audience. Kate Crawford, in her valuable piece on Twitter and intimacy, writes:

The communicative modes of Twitter, and others like it, operate as *disclosing spaces*. The “confidences” relayed in these spaces create relationships with an audience of friends and strangers, irrespective of their veracity. They build camaraderie over distance through the dynamic and ongoing practice of disclosing the everyday (2009, 252).

Crawford argues that it is the “small details and daily events” that give “a sense of the rhythms and flows of another’s life” (2009, 259). Regardless of whether the details given are significant or even truthful, Twitter streams give a sense of listening to a voice. Crawford conceptualizes Twitter as space where people listen to others’ disclosures, creating a space of intimacy (2009, 262). While most Twitter messages are not substantive in and of themselves, Vincent Miller argues that they serve as *phatic* communication with the explicit purpose of “expressing sociability and maintaining connections or bonds” (2008, 394). My informants told me that Twitter enabled them to stay in touch with far-away friends, as well as deepening relational bonds with acquaintances and people they knew in real life. Individual pieces of the lifestream, such as what music someone is listening to or what they are eating, probably have little or no intrinsic value to the audience. But each tidbit aggregates with other pieces of personal information to form a larger picture and serve a social bond. This was almost unanimously echoed by informants and was the most frequently-cited benefit of Twitter. Kevin Cheng explained:

Do you ever talk to someone you haven't talked to a long time and say, "What's new?" Say you give the update on your job. You give the update on your marital status. You give the update on whether you've moved or things like that. And that's it. And then conversation kind of stalls for a while. And that seems counterintuitive to the fact that the person you see everyday, you can carry on with conversations with everyday for an hour or hours at a time. And the reason, I think, is because the minutia, you've been gone so long that you feel like the events that are worth discussing have to be of significance. You're not going to say like, "My God I haven't seen you in year. What's new?" "Well, I saw [the film] 'Forgetting Sarah Marshall' yesterday." Like it doesn't compute. And so, what lifestreaming is giving us is that ability to keep up with the minutia.

Cheng<sup>48</sup> identifies one of the difficulties of living in an environment where people expect to stay in touch. Social network sites like Facebook have created a semi-permanent address book of former co-workers, high school friends, ex-boyfriends and girlfriends, distant family members, and others who users may rarely see. Twitter allows people to have an ongoing connection by sharing small pieces of information about the day-to-day which provide conversation starters and closeness. Andrew Mager told me that Twitter enabled more personalized interactions with one of his firm's executives, who he could ask about golfing and movies.

In addition to connections to far-away friends and acquaintances, lifestreaming helped people in the scene feel closer to each other and the community. By scrolling through the day's Twitter updates or Friendfeed lists, people could see what others were doing. Twitter made it easier for members of the community to learn what was important to each other, stay up to date on popular blogs, music, or movies, and observe who was spending time with who or

dating someone new, without communicating directly. Veronica Belmont, a self-described homebody, said “I feel very connected to the community still because I know the minutiae of their lives through Twitter, through FriendFeed and Facebook. So you still have that sense of familiarity every time you run into them.” Others said they became better friends with acquaintances after following them on Twitter. The virtual discussions and short messages reinforced in-person friendships. This was especially important for shy people who found online socializing easier, or were intimidated by the bustling social life of the technology community. Lifestreaming made it easy for people to mediate their friendships through the computer.

Lifestreaming services like Twitter and Facebook were often used as a source of support. Social media was used to announce major life events, such as marriage, divorce, pregnancy, job changes, or family trouble. During my fieldwork, two couples in the scene announced their engagement on Twitter, and a pregnant single mother expressed deep gratitude for the positive responses from her Twitter followers. Because people were generally taken seriously on Twitter, this could backfire.

Nick Starr is a young man with bleached-blond hair, a constant presence at technology events who always has the latest Apple product. He is also one of the few out gay men in the scene, and is notorious for his blog entries and tweets about sex and plastic surgery. Starr spent a year living on the streets to save up money for liposuction, and discusses his ongoing weight loss and frequent

hookups in detail online. Nick was an early adopter of Twitter, and moved from Florida to San Francisco to work in the tech scene. His penchant for drama, however, had earned him a somewhat dicey reputation, and I often heard him referred to as a “drama queen,” “oversharer” or “attention whore.”<sup>49</sup> One informant told me “he wants it [internet celebrity] bad.” During fieldwork, Starr had a large audience: about two thousand followers, both people he knew in “real-life” and online friends.

Starr announced one night in October 2008 that he was going to kill himself by jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge. His tweets and Facebook status updates frightened many of his friends:

Nick Starr. Signing off. Goodbye cruel world.

I've been in and out of "counseling" and mental wards since 2nd grade. There is no help this world can offer.

I don't even have \$3 to my name..life isn't worth livign annd I should of been aborted by my mother who doesn't even love me.

ever7one says "i'm here if u eneed anythng" i have liteally \$3 to my name... i need money and friendns....wher are u now?

im' on the f-line headed to embarcarddo then do th egolden gate bridge. i h ave no one wh o loves me...hwat reason is there ot live?

Thanks for everything. Don't expect to hear from me ever again or at least for a long while. I hope u know that u meant something to me.

(Nick Starr's tweets, October 10-11, 2008)



Nick immediately received an outpouring of support from friends and acquaintances on both forums. While there were scoffs and detractors on Twitter, on Facebook, people were overwhelmingly compassionate (Figure 7):<sup>50</sup>



Figure 7: Responses to Nick Starr on Facebook

It turned out that Starr had not committed suicide; in fact, this was not even the first time he had used Twitter to threaten suicide. In 2007, when Starr was living in Florida, he told his Twitter followers that he planned to jump off a bridge. His followers alerted the police, and he was found sleeping in his car the next day. His was labeled the “first Twitter suicide attempt” and appeared in a *New York Times* article on the social properties of the new medium (Cohen 2007).

Starr's frequent tweets about depression, drinking, and unprotected sex finally frustrated Tara Hunt, who tweeted "@nickstarr I like u as a person, but I can't deal with reading ur self-destructive behaviour and subsequent cries 4 attention on twitter." She offered help, which Starr refused.

The response to Starr's suicide attempts demonstrates the connectedness engendered by livestreaming. Even after multiple incidents, Starr is mostly treated sympathetically by his Twitter followers when he complains about depression. (Others, though, do make fun of him; the Facebook screenshot above was taken from a public forum where people were attempting to determine whether Starr had successfully committed suicide.) Twitter and Facebook provide Starr with a mostly-supportive context to talk about mental health problems.

There is a lengthy history of the emotional bonds that virtual communities build between users (Baym 2000; Rheingold 2000; Kendall 2002). Theresa Senft calls the set of obligations that people within connected networks have to each other *tele-ethicality*: "a commitment to engage, rather than forestall action in our mediated communities, despite the potential for trickery and fraud" (2008, 116). In contrast to the *Law and Order* fantasy of the chat room denizens who egg on the suicidal teenager,<sup>51</sup> I overwhelmingly witnessed earnest community concern on Twitter. While notorious users like Starr who have repeatedly cried wolf do elicit some snark, people in the technology scene took each other seriously, for the most part. This may in part be attributable to their real-world connections, since most people in the tech scene have met each other, often spending

significant amounts of time together. It may also be explicable by the use of real names rather than online pseudonyms. But it could also be explained by the affective bonds that form through ongoing sharing of personal information.

People also used lifestreams to learn important information, from national news to personal revelations. Twitter's ability to spread news quickly has been well-documented (Burns and Eltham 2009; Hughes and Palen 2009).<sup>52</sup> In the tech scene, Twitter word-of-mouth replaced blogs, online newspapers or cable television as the primary notifier of real-time news. People also used Twitter to debate and discuss technologies, business news and politics. The sudden influx of brands to Twitter in 2009-2010 made it useful for customer service. I managed to solve a knotty banking problem by complaining about in on Twitter; Bank of America's Twitter representative contacted me immediately. Of course, not all branding on Twitter was positive or welcome: people tended to view Twitter as an "authentic" space where overt advertising was inappropriate (Marwick and boyd 2010). (Since Twitter users only see tweets from people they explicitly follow, unwanted marketing or spam is less common than on websites or blogs.)

While the constantly updated flood of information could become overwhelming, people in the tech scene saw Twitter as a useful tool. Some adopted techniques for managing the overload, such as sampling a little at a time. Dale Larson explained, "There's too much good stuff to read out there. But if I just plug in to the noise for a little bit, dip my toe in it and get back out, I'll have a good sense for what's going on at high level. And I'll know if there's something I

want to actively go after.” In the scene, staying on top of current issues is a mark of status. Events like gadget launches, tech controversies, breaking news stories and funny memes spread quickly through the networked audience, and people used Twitter to announce and discuss them. By reading a small sample of his tweets, Larson believed he could stay up on issues that were being talked about and thus maintain status and connection to the scene.

Lifestreaming was used by some to create accountability. Personal informatics enthusiasts used technology to record and monitor personal data, often using the internet to broadcast weight loss or health progress. For many, knowing people were watching their data streams created a sense of obligation to an audience, as Weight Watchers or Alcoholics Anonymous rely on peer accountability to maintain desired behaviors. Similar principles applied to social obligations. Actions like wishing people “happy birthday” and attending events were done in view of others, encouraging people to hew to social norms. When significant violations of social rules took place, people could be taken to task on Twitter. In October 2008, Nick Starr and Tara Brown engaged in a public argument over allegedly stolen iPhones. This incident demonstrates how social media and the audience can act as reinforcements, judges, or arbiters in interpersonal relationships.

The incident was so charged with drama that it is hard to tell exactly what happened; not only have the principle players written contradictory accounts, these are augmented by blog posts, Facebook status updates, and Twitter

messages. Tara Brown, a former program manager at Microsoft and TopSpin media, is well-known in the scene. She got engaged on Twitter to Sean Bonner, founder of Metblogs and a well-known LA technologist; they have since married and had a son, whose baby shower was livestreamed. One evening, Tara used a Facebook invite to organize a Rock Band party at her house.<sup>53</sup> Nick Starr came to the party with a date, Ben. The next morning, Tara realized her iPhone was missing, and asked people on Twitter if they had seen it.

And my day gets even better...my iPhone is nowhere to be found since last night 1:12 PM Oct 17th

Calling AT&T to report my phone stolen. I'm so sad to think it was stolen from my house. :( 2:33 PM Oct 17th

Nick Starr also tweeted that he had lost his phone at the party:

Crap I think I left my iPhone at that Rock Band party @ekai or @msmelodi can you get me the number of whose place it was? 10:24 AM Oct 17th

Nick called Tara and found that her phone was missing as well, at which point he posted:

WTF I thought I left my iPhone at @tarabrown 's place but she said it wasn't there and her iPhone is gone too...wtf??? 1:15 PM Oct 17th

Well it is official, my iPhone is gone, stolen, and/or missing. That effen sucks b/c I really don't want to spend the money for a new one. 2:15 PM Oct 17th

At this point the two stories diverge. After several e-mails, Facebook messages and phone calls, Tara accused Nick's date Ben of stealing the phones, which Nick denied. She then accused Nick of stealing the phones. The conflict turned into a vocal back-and-forth taking place online. Both parties posted long blog posts

telling their side of the story and called each other names on Twitter. In her personal blog, Tara wrote:

So in my mind I was thinking about 3 possible scenarios: 1) Ben took it and Nick knew about it. 2) Nick took it 3) Ben took it and Nick didn't know. Either way, Nick brought this guy into my house and I as far as I'm concerned, needs to get my phone back or pay to replace it. A lot of other emails, IMs, tweets, etc. occurred throughout the day. I spoke to my Dad who is a Private Investigator and he said that the first email that Nick sent me was very suspicious. I went to the Mission Police Department to report this crime and they said the same thing (Brown 2008).

Tara's friends began posting messages on Twitter accusing Nick of theft:

Jpdefillippo: @nickstarr you are a stupid little shit who needs the snot beat out of you and next time I see you I will ablige. Bet on it.

DieLaughing: @NickStarr Actually it's time to move out of San Francisco. Saying 'Fuck @tarabrown' was the last straw. You are not local. Leave soon."

Nick responded with an equally long post responding to these tweets and refuting each of Brown's points (calling her a "lying cunt" and a "manipulative liar") and concluded:

I'm done...this whole mess is just too much...and guess what...IT'S ALL OVER A GOD DAMN PHONE! Tara lost her phone...so did I. Not one person seems to remember that my phone is gone too. I don't care what other people are going to say...I know the truth and the truth is that I'm as much a victim as Tara Brown is. If you have my phone, please return it. Thank you (Starr 2008).

Tara's phone was returned after a complicated series of events, while Nick claimed that his was still missing.

When the dust cleared, both players were criticized by people in the scene for handling the situation publicly, with some calling the situation a "mob

mentality” or “like high school.” While Nick was not a particularly popular member of the community, some believed that Tara had abused the power of her audience (she had 1,205 followers, which was a large number at the time). One informant told me:

I said, I made a cheesy Spiderman quote. And was like, “With great power comes great responsibility” and like when you have that much power online with the number of followers and things like that, you have to be...you should be very responsible of what you...what accusations you make in public, right? That’s like going on a loud speaker. It’s a gigantic loud speaker especially with Sean, as well, combined. And then not only to do that, but to make physical threats, um, yeah.

Both Brown and Starr portrayed the incident and their involvement in it in such a way as to gain the maximum sympathy from friends, followers, and people in the scene. Having over a thousand Twitter followers amplified Tara’s accusations, bringing other people into the drama, but Nick had more than two thousand followers. It is likely that some of Tara and Nick’s followers overlapped, but this is the nature of the networked audience. The networked audience is intrinsically involved in any event publicized over social media, and are able to use their own Twitter accounts, blog comments, or Facebook walls to add their opinion, becoming an ever-present member of the conversation. Unlike the broadcast audience, the networked audience is connected through the lifestream, allowing for active participation beyond simply reading digital messages. The incident was debated both online and in-person, and the amplification ability of social media created a wider set of stakeholders in its outcome. The conflict is dramatized as it plays out in public and serves as entertainment for the audience. While audience

involvement can be seen as promoting accountability in the scene, social media amplifies the amount of drama and conflict as other people besides the original two players become involved in the argument. This is similar to gossip blog readers weighing in on the latest celebrity divorce or feud.

### Negative Consequences of Lifestreaming

While social media's advantages have been chronicled extensively, so have claims of negative consequences. Social media has been linked to narcissism, rewarding shallow social connections, vanity, and self-promotion (Buffardi and Campbell 2008; LaPorta 2009).<sup>54</sup> Others state that social media creates information overload and Attention Deficit Disorder-like symptoms that diminish long-term concentration (Carr 2008; Richtel 2010). Neither linkage has been proven, but they are frequently mentioned in scare stories about technology.

While both of these negative effects were mentioned by informants, the most frequently discussed downsides to social media use were those relating to the extra layer of social information that the lifestream provides. Before the internet, people would learn about parties or romantic relationships by gossiping or asking friends. This type of knowledge was not secret, but it was not available to everyone and was rarely written down. Today, any member of the networked audience can peruse a Facebook invite to see who was or wasn't invited, or look at Foursquare check-ins (mobile software which broadcasts a person's location) to see who is spending time together. Social information is digitized and aggregated



through the lifestream to create a layer of relational data that lays over the social graph. While this information facilitated bonding and personal connection, it also magnified gossip, suspicion, and uncertainty. A friend, “Jill,” suspected that her boyfriend was having drinks with “Jane,” who she strongly disliked. Jill made this assumption based on her boyfriend’s Twitter feed, which had been silent for several hours, Jane’s check-in to a bar on his street and subsequent tweet of a photo of the bar. Jill interpreted this information to mean that the two were together, and was convinced that Jane intended her to know about it. Combining information from both people’s lifestreams created a larger social picture which was interpreted through a lens of suspicion. In retaliation, my friend tweeted a message about trustworthiness without naming either party. This anecdote illustrates three things. First, that the lifestream and networked audience creates and publicizes social information that, when combined, is more revealing than the sum of its parts. Second, that intimacy and conflict are often performed for an audience, or to elicit reactions from others. And third, that the context of constant self-monitoring often instigates paranoia and surveillance.

The clunkiness of sociable media (what danah boyd calls “autistic social software”) has continually created social problems, as sites provide “crude approximations” of subtle social interactions (boyd 2005). For instance, social network sites label all connections as “friends,” lumping together entirely different relationships. But lifestreaming’s aggregation of personal information transcends any particular website, providing a vast web of socially-useful data

that is parsed and interpreted by the networked audience. It is very complicated to manage self-impressions and relationships with others when faced with this phenomenon. People in the scene discussed these complexities and shared strategies on how to handle them. For example, two members of the scene, Aubrey Sabala and Joe Stump, proposed a panel at South by Southwest called “Is the internet killing your [dating] game?” which described three issues with the lifestream that affected relationships. First, digital pictures posted on Twitter, Facebook, or Flickr were open to interpretation, meaning that someone who wasn’t present when the picture was taken could jump to the wrong conclusion. Second, “radio silence,” “dropping off the Twittiverse” for a day, was noticeable and questionable. Third, the “right hand vs. left hand problem,” described situations where “not everyone knows not to Twitter something out.” This occurs when a group of people have different information boundaries, and someone lifestreams something that other group members want to keep private. These practices reveal intensive attention to detail and monitoring of other people’s lifestreams; from my observation, this was common amongst members of the scene.

Lifestreaming has provided an emergent layer of social information that has been difficult to adapt to. In the absence of face-to-face cues, people will extrapolate identity and relational information from any available digital information. For example, Gibbs et al. found that online personal ads were constructed with a hyper-aware self-consciousness, as users knew that

misspellings, cultural references, and even time stamps were likely to be scrutinized by potential suitors (Gibbs, Ellison, and Heino 2006). Similarly, in textual sociable media like IRC or MUDs, people would infer identity information from e-mail addresses, nicknames, signatures, spelling, and grammar (Bechar-Israeli 1996; Donath 1999; Reid 1999). Digital traces and nuances are often interpreted incorrectly, but the act of interpreting becomes normal. Obviously, social cues in non-digital contexts are also subject to interpretation. When I was a pre-teen, for example, every interaction with a crush would be subject to intense scrutiny. In face-to-face communication, people can draw from accent, appearance, gesture, and many other aspects of self-presentation to discern meaning, but there is also the ability to ask for clarification in direct interaction such as telephone conversations. Digital technologies make it possible to monitor and track the actions of many more people than is possible in-person, including people one does not actually know.

This makes people anxious. Since it was possible to keep close tabs on virtually anyone with a lifestream, people in my study spoke of trying, and failing, to resist the temptation to monitor ex-boyfriends and girlfriends, rivals, or partners. Some people installed browser software that blocked them from looking at specific Facebook profiles or Twitter feeds so that they would not be tempted to “cyber-stalk” exes or their new partners. But nothing was foolproof. If someone they wished to avoid was connected to the networked audience, their username or picture would pop up in retweets, @replies, and other people’s Facebook

messages. This created endless social conflicts, and I frequently saw someone get upset because they saw a picture of their ex in their Flickr stream, or noticed when a trusted friend checked in with a sworn enemy. Because the networked audience includes indirect connections (e.g. someone connected to a friend or friend-of-friend), it makes visible interactions that one could otherwise avoid.

Location-based social software like Dodgeball, Foursquare, and BrightKite was especially anxiety-provoking. People use these applications to “check in” to a place and broadcast their location to friends. Thus, one can see where friends and acquaintances are at all times. If ten friends checked into a bar, the eleventh friend would wonder why they weren’t invited. Megan McCarthy explained:

I mean, there are people that I care about that I'm really interested to know what they're up to. There have been situations where I've seen people that are going out and doing stuff and it's like "Hey, they're right in my neighborhood. Let's go hang out," so I like that. Do I see it as like a status thing? I guess. When you see a lot of people who are all like "Hey, I'm at this party. Hey, I'm at this party" and you're not, it's like "Why am I not at her party?"

Services like Dodgeball were developed with the ideal of facilitating spontaneous connections with friends (Humphreys 2008, 2010). While this did happen, and many tech scenesters told me they loved that aspect of location-based social software, its popularity in the scene created a set of expectations and social pressure. Kevin Cheng told me that Dodgeball, an SMS-based predecessor to Foursquare, had inspired him to go out so much that he wasn’t getting his work, or laundry, done. Cheng turned Dodgeball off to avoid the feeling that he was

missing out on something. Location-based social software sits at the intersection of online and face-to-face socializing, and shows the importance of in-person interactions to cementing one's status in the scene. Notably, social software is explicitly designed for this type of socializing; as Williams and Dourish write, "Dodgeball.com assumes discretionary mobility and leisure time. The service expects users to be able to switch locations effortlessly to socialize with friends, who are, naturally, available to socialize at about the same time" (2006, 40). The popularity of mobile social software in the scene demonstrates the geographic proximity of people connected through always-on internet services.

Lifestreaming created other anxieties. People worried about their status in the community and whether they were participating appropriately. They fretted over what information should be revealed and what should be concealed. They regretted certain remarks they had made over social media and debated the appropriateness of others. And others found the concept of an audience paralyzing in itself. Adrian Chan, an intense, cerebral consultant (now a Gawker writer) said, "I'm hypersensitive, [I'm] unable to write or post tweets because I'm afraid they'll sound stupid, or people will read into their possible meaning, read things into it." While some people enjoyed performing for an audience, the potential public eyes made it hard for Adrian to engage at all.

The information overload aspect of Twitter was echoed by several informants. Andrew Mager, who seemed comfortable with the San Francisco hyper-tech culture, told me:

I almost say that the people are futuristic. They're from the future. They're like, "Oh, did you just, did you Twitter that? Did you Twitter this?" They just seem so up to date. Twitter is a phenomenon inside itself, but people are just so up to date. It's almost intimidating. Even for me, when I first started here, it was very intimidating. Now, I kind of feel like I've caught up. But, for someone new jumping in, they would be totally bombarded and overwhelmed with it.

Plenty of people told me they blocked Twitter during the day to boost their productivity. Others only checked it at certain times, or installed add-ons that helped them use the service more "efficiently." For informants with several hundred friends, Twitter would update every few seconds, creating a constant distraction. While the long-term effects of internet access on attention span are being heatedly debated in the media (Carr 2008; Carr 2010; Pinker 2010; Richtel 2010), I did find anecdotal evidence that the always-on, constantly updated nature of Twitter was both distracting and addictive. However, it is impossible to conclude from this whether Twitter, let alone the internet as a whole, causes behavioral or emotional changes. My informants consumed huge amounts of information from many different on and offline sources, including television, books, and papers.

Lifestreaming inculcated a normative comfort with surveillance and monitoring of self and others. People expected that their friends would read their Twitter stream and watch their Foursquare check-ins. One night I found myself left out of a conversation as three women debated whether a fourth should purchase a dress she had posted on Tumblr. I was not reading the site, and so had no idea what they were talking about. The expectation of monitoring also

engendered strategic posturing and performing for the readers of the lifestream, both through self-presentation and demonstrating social ties with others.

Although monitoring was framed positively, as a way for people to build social ties with others and remain connected to the network, it also engendered anxiety and suspicion. In the next section, I look at the privacy implications of the lifestream.

### Publicity and Privacy in Lifestreaming

In her book *Privacy in Context*, Helen Nissenbaum identifies three privacy issues pertinent to social network sites. While she specifically mentions Facebook and MySpace, these principles are applicable to general social media. First, problems arise when people post information about themselves online. This might include being fired for making a negative remark about an employer on a blog, or getting expelled from school for posting a picture of oneself drinking alcohol. Second, people may post content that reveals information about their friends, such as tagged Facebook photographs. Third, social media applications collect, aggregate, and sell user information to large commercial databases, marketers, and creators of “digital dossiers” (Nissenbaum 2009a, 59-62). While the latter problem is of personal interest, it is outside the scope of this chapter. Instead, I focus on the first two problems, posting information about oneself and others, to show how social media illuminates a set of issues that my informants tried very hard to manage, but often failed.

The issue here is not that social media makes information public that used to be private. As Nissenbaum and many others have shown, the frequently-drawn dichotomy between “public” and “private” is more complex than is often assumed, and is not useful as a basis for privacy discussions. Not only do the meanings of *public* and *private* vary from context to context, the dichotomy can be taken to represent differences between actors (government vs. private), spaces (public vs. domestic, or commercial vs. noncommercial), or information (public vs. personal) (Nissenbaum 2009a, 102). Instead, my concern is twofold. First, social media encourages people to reveal or publicize information within a context that may *feel* social (e.g. performing for a networked audience made up of friends and acquaintances), but in reality is accessible to anyone. Twitter gives users the choice of making all tweets readable by anyone with an internet connection, or available only to a user-defined group of friends. Most people in the tech scene (and the vast majority of Twitter users) choose the first option. But because Twitter has such a wide user base, the technology is an example of “context collapse” where readers from differing social contexts co-exist. Social media technologies are analogous to the telephone; they are conduits for many different types of social interactions rather than a distinct sphere (Nissenbaum 2009a, 223-224). Twitter users might imagine their audience as the most visible members of the network, or people they know in “real-life,” while the actual readers may be quite different, both of which are impossible to determine (Marwick and boyd 2010). Others might assume that only their social circle will



read their tweets, much as most blogs have very few readers (Shirky 2007).

Regardless, lifestreaming does not give users the ability to vary their self-presentation: vast amounts of personal data are aggregated into a single stream.

Second, the combination of digital information from many disparate sources into the lifestream results in emergent social information that is more than the sum of its parts. Nissenbaum writes that the value of aggregation is in extracting “descriptive and predictive meanings from information that goes well beyond its literal boundaries” (2009a, 42). Social media users are practiced in the extraction of nuance through ongoing analysis of the lifestream. While each piece of information *by itself* may not mean much, it creates a larger picture when combined with others. For example, knowing that Julie visited a local bar on Tuesday night is not, in isolation, particularly interesting. The bar is publicly accessible, Julie can expect to be seen there, and she will probably tell her friends where she is. If she tracks, codifies, and broadcasts this information using social media, however, the information can undergo a transformation. If analysis of the lifestream reveals that Julie’s best friend’s ex-boyfriend was also at the bar, and this is the third night in a row that they have been in the same place, a new picture emerges. The accessibility and persistence of personal information tracked and broadcast through social media creates an extra layer of relational data that is not easily explained by the dichotomy of “public” or “private.”

Finally, the ideal of *openness* encourages the codification of personal information. The fact that Jim had cornflakes for breakfast is an ephemeral piece

of information. Once Jim digitizes this information by tweeting about it, posting a picture of his cereal bowl, or carefully tracking his caloric intake, this information is “written into being.” Online, openness requires the *digital instantiation* of previously ephemeral social information. Creating a digital trace of someone’s meal is clearly not equivalent to the meal itself. But the digital trace is replicable and can be publicized or combined with other information using RSS or open APIs. Similarly, defining a relationship as “it’s complicated” on Facebook labels, categorizes, and codifies what may be a complex interpersonal interaction. The act of classification is political and ideological (Bowker and Star 2000). The *social digitization* encouraged by social media converts all sorts of nuanced interactions into cut-and-dried bits and bytes.

Moreover, people frequently reveal information about others, deliberately or inadvertently, through the lifestream. Someone without a Twitter account can be referenced in a tweet. A person who chooses not to “check-in” from a bar can be photographed by another patron. Even if two users are not directly connected on a social media site, they may appear in each other’s streams through mutual friends. The previously mentioned problem of “right hand left hand,” where people at an event have different informational norms, can create conflicts. For example, John may not want Mike to know that he is having dinner with Mike’s rival, Chris. But if Chris tweets or blogs about his dinner with John, Mike may see it. John can ask Chris to keep the dinner secret, but ultimately he cannot control this information.

Lifestreaming thus requires thinking through issues of privacy in a complex way. The potential audience for even banal personal information is amplified by the use of social media. And the aggregation of different streams of social media information creates a more comprehensive picture than would be available otherwise. Rather than using the public/private dichotomy to think through these concerns, I suggest that we use a discourse of *publicity*.

#### Public vs. Publicity, Public vs. Audience

Discourses of the *public* imply democracy, freedom, participation, and inclusion, while discourses of publicity imply openness, visibility, attention, status, and spectacle (Dean 2002, 2). As I have shown, people are motivated to share personal information online by the desire for status, visibility, and attention, while the ideals of Web 2.0 often idealize democratization and inclusivity. In danah boyd's 2010 keynote at South by Southwest, she distinguished information that is publicly available from information that is publicized (boyd 2010b). Information that is *public* can, in theory, be accessed by virtually anyone, but in practice will probably only be seen by a few. Information that is *publicized* is strategically made visible to a greater audience through three dimensions: the effort it takes to find information, the ease of locating that information (e.g. searchability), and the interest in that information. Imagine that the records of an acrimonious celebrity divorce are made public. To read them, one must drive to a California courthouse, find the court records department, request them from an

archivist, and wait for the records to be found. The person may be able to make a photocopy to take home. These steps constitute significant barriers to obtaining the information, constituting what law scholars call “practical obscurity” (Davis 2003; Bepko 2004). But once a tabloid reporter goes through this process, scans the documents, puts them on the tabloid website, and adds an enormous headline, the records are *publicized*, or “hyper-disseminated” (Nissenbaum 2009b).

Publicizing information is thus an effort to make it more interesting (by placing it on a tabloid site with a large headline), easier to find (through Google or other indexes), and easier to obtain (once it is online).<sup>55</sup>

The status element of livestreaming, namely that people share personal information with others in exchange for inclusion and intimacy within the technology scene, encourages publicity. Publicity is a crucial element of micro-celebrity and self-branding strategies. It is the strategic promotion of self-provided information. In *PR: A Social History of Spin*, Stuart Ewen writes, “the ability to publicize—self, product, concept, issue, or institution—is a basic survival skill in contemporary life, and field-tested publicity strategies are everywhere to be found” (1996, 27). These public relations strategies are drawn from celebrity culture and product marketing, and applied to social media, which incorporates status metrics that encourages people to publicize themselves to gain status, visibility, and audience.

I use the term *audience* rather than the *public* when describing viewers of a piece of digital content. The term “audience” can refer to the imagined

audience, the actual audience or the potential audience for content, the latter resembling the vernacular sense of “public.” While “the public” implies every potential reader and is therefore infinite, I use audience to mean the *actual* audience, the people *interested* in a piece of information who actually view it. Just as media professionals do not use the term *public* for people watching a movie or TV show, we should not use it for digital content. The use of audience also implies performance, as much of digital content is created with impression-management in mind. While it is never possible to determine who exactly has or has not viewed something online (the actual audience may be very different from what a creator imagines), thinking about publicity done for an audience rather than making information public helps us to understand some of the social dynamics described in this chapter.

The networked audience is distinct from the broadcast audience in that the networked audience is connected (Marwick and boyd 2010). The tech scene is a superlative example of the networked audience, because the social graph is articulated both on and offline. Unlike many online communities where a small percentage of people create most of the content, people in the tech scene act as both content producers and consumers in order to maintain status and intimate ties with the community. Lifestreamers read others’ lifestreams and create content with their audience in mind. Their online and offline lives are intrinsically interwoven, meaning that non-participation has real, negative social costs.

The networked audience is distinct from the *networked public*, which boyd defines as the social space created by technologies like social network sites, and the imagined community which thrives in this space (boyd 2010a). While it is possible to describe Twitter as a networked public (although I would not do so), I think that the networked audience is more appropriate for lifestreaming. First, the networked public implies a set of people communicating through a single technology (MySpace, Usenet, etc.) while the networked audience moves across sites. Second, the concept of *audience* as explained above implies a specific set of people interested enough to view digital content rather than an amorphous mass of potential readers.

While many people have looked at the problems created by shifting notions of private and public on social networks, there is little work on the impact of publicity, openness, and audience on communities that constitute networked audiences. That these issues create problems are widely acknowledged but there is no agreement on how to handle them. First, I will identify three different ways that members of the “scene” viewed broadcasting or disclosing personal information. Second, I will look at some of the ways that they managed these problems.

### Different Perspectives on “Public” Living

Since revealing personal information online has both benefits and drawbacks, choosing how much to share and with whom is approached differently. Within the scene there are numerous degrees of public-ness, from

people who graphically document their sex lives to those who adhere to a strictly professional self-presentation. On one end of the spectrum, Nick Starr tweets about sexual activities, homelessness, his HIV status, and plastic surgery. On the other, Julia Allison, who is *considered* very public, does not livestream meetings with potential clients or famous friends so as not to compromise her business dealings. Still others choose not to speak publicly about their children or their relationships, but carefully dole out other pieces of personal information to appear authentic to their audiences (Marwick and boyd 2011). These choices are affected by the software that people use, their motivations, and complex webs of obligations to others. But even people who reveal a great deal of personal information online do this thoughtfully. While I documented several distinct groups of attitudes about information disclosure, no-one I met dismissed the need for privacy.

### Publicity as Freedom

First, for many people I talked to, living a “public life” was a physical instantiation of the open, transparent, and participatory ideals of Web 2.0. In Web 2.0 discourse, transparency is highly valued for its contribution to accountability, freedom, and participation. For instance, WikiLeaks, a website which hosts leaked documents that implicate corporations and governments in various shady activities, claims that transparency is a check on power and injustice:

We believe that transparency in government activities leads to reduced corruption, better government and stronger democracies.

All governments can benefit from increased scrutiny by the world community, as well as their own people. We believe this scrutiny requires information. Historically that information has been costly - in terms of human life and human rights. But with technological advances - the internet, and cryptography - the risks of conveying important information can be lowered... Today, with authoritarian governments in power around much of the world, increasing authoritarian tendencies in democratic governments, and increasing amounts of power vested in unaccountable corporations, the need for openness and transparency is greater than ever (Wikileaks contributors 2010).

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) makes most U.S. government documents available by request, reinforcing the idea that the people have a “right to know.” The internet creates new opportunities for transparency by facilitating cheap and easy document publishing, widespread feedback, and increased communication between governments and constituents or corporations and customers. Yochai Benkler writes in *The Wealth of Networks* that increased transparency in corporate decisions (such as Google linking to the Chilling Effects website to explain why search results for “Scientology” have been removed) invites reflection about the meaning of culture and thus encourages “writable,” or participatory, culture (Benkler 2006, 292-293).<sup>56</sup> Similarly, in *Code 2.0*, Lawrence Lessig argues that “open code is a foundation to an open society” and compares open code to public lawmaking (Lessig 2006, 153). In chapter 2, I discussed how ideals of openness and transparency were realized in the organizational structure of activist groups and the licenses of free and open-source software. Similarly, self-disclosure is framed as a way to positively live the principle of openness in everyday life.<sup>57</sup>



When the ideals of openness and transparency are extended to personal life, they may involve disclosing drug use, sexual habits, or emotional vulnerabilities via the internet. This type of “public living” was heralded by some as signifying a new era of greater freedom, where people can be authentic without judgment or prosecution. This mindset holds that society is inevitably moving towards greater transparency, as demonstrated by the increased visibility of previously hidden subcultures and increased respect for minority rights.<sup>58</sup> Until this happens, people must be courageously pioneer the principles of openness. If everyone reveals personal information, nobody can be discriminated against and culture will change for the better. Dale Larson stated:

At the point where critical mass is reached of everybody exposing enough private information, it becomes too honest for anybody to pay attention to it all and try to discriminate on it. At the point where everybody really is out there with whatever their little weird thing is, that’s the point at which you stop, when you say, “Oh, you know what, a fact with humanity, is that all of us have some weird freaky thing we fantasize about, or some weird freaky thing that we’re afraid of, or some weird freaky thing that, I don’t know, that’s what’s normal!” There’s no such thing as a weird freaky thing. But until that critical mass happens, it’s an act of courage to put that picture up on your Facebook.... and it’s an act of courage that, you know, very much comes with some tradeoffs.

According to this viewpoint, weathering the drama caused by publicizing formerly-private acts is the downside of living one’s life truthfully and authentically. Larson acknowledges the possible negative consequences and that “public living” requires emotional effort and bravery, but believes that the eventual social benefits are more important. He also suggests a version of

“authenticity” that implies the full disclosure of what may be very personal habits.

Authenticity is thus defined not just as lack of artifice, but of *publicity*.

Tantek Çelik further claimed that “living in public” exemplifies Western ideals of democracy and freedom for the rest of the world:

And, you know, if that means I sacrifice some amount of opportunities whatever, then I think that’s good because it opens the door for more people to feel free to do that. And the more people do that, it’s like eventually the flood gates break open. And maybe it is a West Coast only thing, maybe it is a technology only thing for now. It will totally spread. It’s unstoppable... if you want to talk about making a difference in the world, I think that’s one of the things that is probably one of the most important things any of us can be doing. Like okay, we have the privilege of a free society, how come we’re not using it. Well, this is one example of using it, in my opinion. As opposed to like, you know, a lot of like theocracies, it’s like they don’t have that choice, right? So, the more of the world that you can...the more you can set a better example for people in the world as a whole and sort of like even if you make them jealous, like that you have an open, free society and want... to change.

This position follows conservative political ideologies which position American society as a global model of freedom and democracy. The libertarian political tradition of Silicon Valley celebrates capitalism and government non-interference and idealizes SV as a model for the rest of the world.<sup>59</sup> Çelik expressed frustration with what he saw as the status quo notion that authority figures are expected to live conservative lives. He believes that he can combat this viewpoint and challenge authority by simultaneously being a leader in the technology community and living in public. Thus, openness online becomes a political act.<sup>60</sup>

Idealizing openness implies that there *should* be no difference in self-presentation regardless of circumstance. This is a particular definition of

authenticity which suggests that an honest and forthright person will be who they 'really are' regardless of who is listening. Of course, this does not reflect the realities of how people present themselves to manage impressions (Goffman 1959; Leary and Kowalski 1990; Banaji and Prentice 1994). People present themselves differently based on characteristics of the audience, such as friendships (Tice et al. 1995), status differentials (Leary and Kowalski 1990, 38), and racial differences (Fleming and Rudman 1993). Even in difficult circumstances, people are skilled at using gesture, language, and tone to manage impressions face-to-face (Banaji and Prentice 1994). The idea of a single, "authentic" self, although it carries a great deal of currency in contemporary American culture, is a social construction, and at odds with actual social practice.

Promoting transparency also implies that privacy is only necessary for people who have "something to hide." Eric Schmidt, CEO of Google, told CNBC that "If you have something that you don't want anyone to know, maybe you shouldn't be doing it in the first place" (Schneier 2009). The idea that privacy is only necessary for those engaging in illegal activities is, unfortunately, widespread in the general United States population; however, it does not hold up under scrutiny. Virtually everyone who advocates openness in their personal lives is talking about selective revealing rather than making everything about themselves available: I do not believe Schmidt would want his credit card number or a naked photo of himself appearing in the *New York Times*. (This presumption was tested when tech news outlet C|Net Googled Schmidt and posted personal

information about him online. Schmidt did not talk to the technology news outlet for several months afterwards in retaliation.)<sup>61</sup> Daniel Solove, Priscilla Regan, and Helen Nissenbaum all argue that conceptualizing privacy as secrecy ignores the myriad of other reasons that privacy is necessary (Regan 1995; Solove 2007; Nissenbaum 2009a). Solove writes:

Even surveillance of legal activities can inhibit people from engaging in them. The value of protecting against chilling effects is not measured simply by focusing on the particular individuals who are deterred from exercising their rights. Chilling effects harm society because, among other things, they reduce the range of viewpoints expressed and the degree of freedom with which to engage in political activity (2007, 765).

Allowing absolute electronic surveillance limits government and corporate accountability, creates an imbalance of power, and, overall, compromises social freedom. When Çelik or Larson idealize living in public, they are not talking about *complete* disclosure of personal information, but openness along specific lines, namely drug use and sexuality. The belief that these aspects of life should be publicized, however, has an ideological function.

This viewpoint operates ideologically in two ways. First, promoting absolute openness disregards the privilege of most people in the tech scene. It is one thing for a wealthy, white male programmer to admit that he sometimes smokes pot. It is another for an undocumented worker to publicize his immigration status, or for a woman escaping a domestic violence situation to reveal her home address. Advocating “openness” ignores the very circumstances that may make transparency dangerous. Second, upholding personal transparency

as an ideal supports the business models of social software, which profit from information disclosure. Mark Zuckerberg, the creator of Facebook, said in a 2010 interview:

And then in the last 5 or 6 years, blogging has taken off in a huge way and all these different services that have people sharing all this information. People have really gotten comfortable not only sharing more information and different kinds, but more openly and with more people. That social norm is just something that has evolved over time... We view it as our role in the system to constantly be innovating and be updating what our system is to reflect what the current social norms are (Kirkpatrick 2010).

Zuckerberg echoes the belief that society is becoming more open, claiming that Facebook is changing their privacy settings to reflect this. But Facebook has a huge vested interest in encouraging people to publicize personal information, since they make money by selling user data and “eyeballs” to marketing firms, data aggregators, and advertisers. This interpretation of this discourse does not cover *corporate* openness—Facebook and Apple, for instance, are notoriously tight-lipped—but *personal* openness. While people like Larson and Çelik are well-intentioned, selectively revealing information to a targeted audience is not the same as, say, coming out as gay in Iraq. Pundits and entrepreneurs frame openness as socially beneficial, but the discourse of Web 2.0 promotes a particular kind of openness and transparency because it drives profit to Web 2.0 companies, not to further freedom and democracy. To believe otherwise is disingenuous.

Privacy through Disclosure

I also encountered the belief that strategically publicizing personal information was a way to maintain privacy. Melissa Gira Grant told me:

In terms of the public/private divide, I think people think I have no private life. Because I talk about a lot of very intimate things but I use that strategically. Because there are a lot of private things that I would never even think to talk about and people don't even know; they can't even conceive. They think that because I'm talking about sexuality or activism or things I'm very passionate about that they must know everything about me, which is a marvelous way to have a private life. Because people already think they already know your dirty secrets.

Grant is a sex blogger, author, and sex work activist, who was romantically involved with former Valleywag blogger Nick Douglas during the period of my fieldwork (the two had a tumultuous relationship with a visible online component). She posted a lot of personal information online, including nude pictures, stories about her sex life, and arguments with her partners. I found Grant to be intelligent and thoughtful, with clearly-defined boundaries around personal information sharing. She believed that sharing more than most people online (e.g. passionate writing about sexuality) allowed the rest of her private life to fly under the radar. This idea of privacy through “oversharing” has precedents. Angelina Jolie once claimed that selling pictures of her family to *People* magazine allowed her to keep private what was truly important. But while Grant reveals more online than many people do—she is contemplating a project that would document her sexual encounters—she is playing a character, the feminist performance artist known for her forthrightness, rather than living her entire life in public. It is

precisely through revealing that she attempts to conceal; she is still presenting an edited self.

Grant's position also reveals the extent to which "public living" is necessary for a successful member of the tech scene. For Grant to maintain her freelance career, she needed to maintain a visible public persona. Much of her work advised non-profits on her use of social media, so it was important for her to demonstrate proficiency with the technologies. And as a sex writer and activist, she was expected to blog and tweet about sex, relationships, and intimacy. Her strategy to reveal the very personal was not only a way for her to keep some topics to herself, it enabled her to attract an audience and interest freelance clients. She was able to use this audience to build her career further; in 2010, she and a partner used Kickstarter, a "crowdfunding" site which solicited donations for creative projects, to raise more than \$17,000 to print an anthology of sex writing.

### Publicity as Strategy

The third viewpoint that I encountered had to do with the necessity of revealing information to maintain the personal brand or boost micro-celebrity. In both situations, people reveal personal information to advance their career or promote themselves. For instance, extensive use of social media is necessary for many technological careers, although this can create conflicts with employers, as Ariel Waldman explained:

It really bothered [the company] that there was any entity online where it was me, meaning all of me and not divided. Like they didn't want to have my title associated with stuff I did personally. And I'm like, "but—", and they're like, "Can't you create a different account, to like separate them?" I'm like "this is my name." Like it's my...like they didn't understand like, "Well can't you keep your account more personal?" I'm like, "It *is* personal," like it's *my name* meaning anything I come into, you know, interaction with is under me. ...they were saying things to me like, "The way you live your life online is an obvious detriment for your career," and like and I was like, "No, it's not," and they got really pissed. They didn't...it was, it was two different languages because they couldn't understand that I wouldn't have a career if I didn't live my life online the way I was.

In Waldman's point of view, livestreaming was necessary to cement her reputation as a social media expert. She maintained that any account under her name needed to be "all of me and not divided," with anything she did being fair game for Twitter. Rather than keeping her accounts highly edited, Waldman aimed to build a strong brand that would transcend a single client. This reveals the intrinsic conflict between self-branding and corporate employment, as what may be best for the company is not always in the self-brander's self-interest. To Waldman, showing facility with social media was more important than the needs of one client. And because authenticity is so highly valued in the technology community, talking about both personal and professional topics on social media helps build ties with an audience and deepen intimacy, strengthening the brand or increasing micro-celebrity status (Marwick and boyd 2010). But although Waldman used pieces of personal information to build emotional ties with her audience, she withheld many things from social media. While disclosing personal details is



valued as a marker of authenticity, strategic self-presenters tactically manage and limit self-disclosure.

In the technology scene, few people chose not to reveal personal information online, for three reasons. First, participation in any social media site requires self-disclosure. Second, in the scene, the ambient stream of information created connections between people and deepened relationships. Third, demonstrating success at social media, particularly through high follower numbers, was a status symbol. But since lifestreaming could have significant negative impacts, people adopted a variety of strategies to direct their self-disclosure.

### Managing the Lifestream

Because lifestreaming has emotional and personal drawbacks, people employ many creative strategies to manage online presence and impressions. An enormous amount of work goes into maintaining “the edited self,” which I call *immaterial emotional labor* (see chapter 5). Immaterial emotional labor consists of digital actions that require a performance of intimacy to create and maintain connection to others, such as revealing personal information or interacting with audience members. Deciding what information should be private and which should be public is part of this labor. Tara Hunt explains the drawbacks of “open living:”

So I think that's the only sort of drawback is that I can't cuss, purely or literally let my hair down in a certain way anymore privately, that it's because everything I do has to reflect the public

image that I need to keep up. That's the irony of openness, because it's not so open, right? It's a manufactured openness in that way, that it's always filtered. If you were truly open... It's kind of like open source; you think about open source in the same way. It's open source, anybody can take the code and mess around with it but there's a very structured way of doing it. And you check in and you check out and you sign your name to it. And you have to go through certain meritocratic levels to work on the kernel. It's not like people can just take the code and just fly with it and so very much like open living is the same way. It's ironic because it's ultimately less open, in a lot of ways, personally, that's my experience.

Hunt is very open about many aspects of her life. Recently, she tweeted that her son had run up a \$1,051 phone bill texting his friends in the United States, and asked for advice on how to manage the problem. While she does not talk about relationships or dating, she posts workout diaries to her blog. Hunt has defined a set of acceptable boundaries for information disclosure and strictly manages her self-presentation. But this requires self-monitoring, seeing herself through the gaze of others and altering her actions accordingly. As a result, Hunt is constantly engaged in labor to produce her desired image.

Others decrease their involvement in social media to reduce anxiety or drama. People in the scene often cycled through phases of Twitter use from intense to mild. Glenda Bautista told me that people often scaled back their information disclosure after a particular incident. In her case, Bautista began the difficult process of “locking down” her online presence after a recruiter referred to her personal blog and boyfriend in a job interview.

Because the lifestream exists among a networked social graph, people must monitor both their own information disclosure and that of their friends.

Bautista recognized that her desire to be less public online was a losing battle:

I remember once, just to keep my name out of Google, or just to not have anything track back to me, I tried to redo my last name, so that it wouldn't be attributed to me. That didn't go well, because some people... It's not that they have big mouths, it's just that they don't know where my line is... That was sort of... some people literally do not have the boundaries. And it takes too much policing, too much energy to literally be like, "Take that down, put that up..." I mean, it's exhausting.

On Facebook, for instance, users can add tags to identify people in photos, which link back to their profiles. Facebook does let people untag themselves; in a recent Pew Internet study on reputation, 41 percent of 18-29 year old social network site users, 24 percent of 30-49 year olds and 18 percent of 50-64 year olds had removed their label from a photo (Madden and Smith 2010). But it is not necessarily possible to manage all this information all the time, especially as other services, like Flickr, add tagging options. Andrew Mager elaborated:

It's almost like you're too transparent. I was sitting with the editor of ZDNet last night, Larry Dignan, and he writes about ten blog posts a day for ZDNet, he is all over TechMeme, he is like a top writer, and he is like, "I'm scared of Facebook, because all my middle school friends are going and scanning photos," and he is like "I don't want all that." Almost now we're at the point when we don't have control over what people publish about us.

Larry is presumably a professional who does not want his online reputation sullied by unflattering childhood photos. Even sans tags, online photos can be misinterpreted. A friend once asked me to remove a picture of him hugging a

female friend from my Flickr stream, because he did not want his notoriously jealous girlfriend to misinterpret it.

Besides photographs, there are many other ways that others can inadvertently reveal personal information, many of which are difficult to track and monitor. Anyone can @reply anyone else on Twitter, for instance. In Foursquare's mobile applications, venue pages include a list of everyone who has recently "checked in." (It is possible to disable this feature, but it is turned on by default). There are many ways that personal information can be accessed by non-friends on Facebook, including friend-of-friend options and applications. Blogs and message boards add another layer of complications. As Glenda Bautista said, monitoring can be "exhausting," a form of emotional labor. It may also be impossible, as new tools and sites are constantly developed.

### Conclusion

Contrary to the utopian theories of transparency and openness promoted in Web 2.0 discourse, lifestreaming is not simply an unvarnished digital stream of someone's online actions. Instead, it is a carefully edited, purposeful construction of self. Lifestreamers choose what to reveal and conceal; they monitor their own and other's actions, publicizing certain aspects of their lives while keeping other parts to themselves, even exaggerating or falsifying information to produce a desired effect. The resulting lifestream is an attempt to inculcate a particular version of themselves that appeals to others in the networked audience. This should not surprise anyone familiar with the intricacies of face-to-face

communication. People vary their self-presentation based on context and audience; we present ourselves differently in a job interview than we do in a bar with our friends. With the “context collapse” common to social media technologies, self-presentation cannot be varied, so it must instead be made appropriate for everyone. But there are flagrant contradictions between the ideals of transparent, public living and the realities of lifestreaming in a community where virtually every one lifestreams. Lifestreaming creates an emergent layer of social information, digitizing previously unrecorded things and forming, in the aggregate, a whole that reveals more than the sum of its parts, contributing to a digital mirror held up to the scene that often reveals more than the participants intended. The arguments, contradictions, and dramas that play out as a result of this emergent social information leads people to hold back, restrict, and manage their lifestream. The lifestream becomes a portrayal of a formal, edited self. Even those who pride themselves on their risqué or boundary-pushing public life make careful choices about how much to reveal or conceal. Unfortunately, self-presentation in the lifestream is not wholly self-dependent. The tagged photos, @reply references, and Foursquare check-ins provided by others can be monitored, but rarely changed.

Social media applications encourage people to provide personal information as part of their business model. The more people depend on Twitter, Foursquare, or Facebook to learn about their friends, the more money their parent companies make. Many people believe that putting personal information online

shows a lack of concern for privacy. But putting this information online has many benefits, including intimacy, friendship, and status. There are strong social pressures to participate in social media in the technology scene. Nonparticipation marks an outsider, a luddite, and limits how far someone can go in the community. Rather than expecting theories of private/public to explain these behaviors, information disclosure can be seen as *publicizing the self to a networked audience*. The value of visibility and access motivates people to share with each other, resulting in affective benefits. The inclusion of many members of the scene in the lifestream both enables these benefits and creates emotional and social drawbacks.

But what I found was that there is no correlation between how much someone cares about privacy and the amount of information they put online. For instance, Melissa Gira Grant reveals a great deal about her sex life, but is very protective of what she does not choose to share. Frequent tweeters are upset if a friend's tweet publicizes something they did not want disclosed. This is supported by other empirical studies which show that information disclosure does not imply a lack of concern for privacy (Tufekci 2008; Hoofnagle et al. 2010). People employ strategies including withholding certain pieces of information, monitoring their friends' use of social media, adopting varying definitions of privacy, and editing their own lifestream in order to maintain a level of privacy they are comfortable with. Due to the imprecision of these controls and the new levels of inference possible with aggregated social information, it is often impossible to

avoid drama. This chapter reveals some of the implications of involvement in a community where social life exists both on and offline, and information sharing is a normative behavior. Both self-branding and micro-celebrity require some degree of lifestreaming in order to perform successfully, and lifestreaming itself is effectively required to participate in the technology scene.

While Web 2.0 frames this sharing within a discourse of freedom and democracy, we must remember that the profit models of Web 2.0 depend on user-contributed information. Models of openness idealized by Web 2.0 both ignore the negative consequences of transparency and promote a particular type of transparency that privileges information-sharing benefitting corporations more than individuals.

## CONCLUSION

### Summary

The ideology of Web 2.0 as espoused by academics, technologists, and businesspeople holds that the participatory practices facilitated by social network sites, wikis, video-sharing services, and other web applications produce superior news, entertainment, and cultural commentary than traditional institutional structures (Surowiecki 2005; Anderson 2006; Godin 2008; Shirky 2008; Tapscott and Williams 2008; Weinberger 2008; Howe 2009). Thus, Wikipedia is seen as a superior alternative to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Twitter breaks news more quickly than CNN, blogging is a more engaging pastime than watching television, and YouTube enables creative mashups rather than passive consumption of popular culture. The sophisticated theories of scholars like Lawrence Lessig, Yochai Benkler, and Henry Jenkins have been diluted into a popular discourse that boldly and uncritically celebrates the companies that build applications like Facebook, Twitter, and Foursquare for their innovation and financial success. In this dissertation, I argue that this Web 2.0 discourse is rooted in both countercultural movements which critique large institutional structures, and Silicon Valley “Californian Ideology” which celebrates computer technologies as



both revolutionary and profitable. These intertwined roots produced a philosophy that submerges radical expressions of democratic change in a fervent adherence to market principles, collapsing dissimilar phenomena into a totalizing discourse.

This project critiques the discourse of social media, or Web 2.0, as entirely egalitarian, democratic, or participatory. Instead, I argue that Web 2.0 discourse as instantiated in software inculcates a neoliberal subjectivity which encourages people to see themselves as users, products, and packaged commodities. Social media teaches users to create an edited persona, whether based on a celebrity or a brand, and use it to boost social status by strategically appealing to viewers and sharing personal information. Status, a primary motivator for human action in all social contexts, is measured in these applications primarily by attention, visibility, and access to others; people are rewarded for engaging in behaviors that get them attention. These behaviors and methods of identity construction constitute emotional, immaterial labor, which is both creative and affective. This labor is exchanged for the relational and personal benefits provided by social media, such as support, intimacy, and connection. The labor value is converted into literal capital by social media companies like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, who profit from personal disclosure and the attraction of users to their products. This exchange commodifies identity, emotion, and relationships within a digital context. Social media, which teaches this way of thinking about the self, constitutes a technology of subjectivity. This subjectivity incorporates strategies of commodification and promotion drawn from advertising, marketing, and

celebrity culture and applies them to the self and its relationships to others. Web 2.0 therefore teaches a way of understanding oneself that supports a *neoliberal* culture in which market-based principles are used to evaluate success or failure in daily life. These principles in turn support the business models of social technologies, which depend on selling “eyeballs” to advertisers or personal information to data-mining firms (both which treat the user, or the user’s “digital dossier,” as a salable commodity).

There are many reasons why this process is problematic. This type of subjectivity invites a normalization of surveillance and monitoring that threatens agented behavior. When social technologies emerged, pundits and journalists hailed YouTube, Flickr, and Wikipedia as a way for individuals to fully participate in the creation and dissemination of culture and knowledge. But what is acceptable to create and disseminate is increasingly circumscribed by what is safe: that is, what is acceptable to be publicly judged, permanently recorded, and viewed by all manner of people, from one’s family to one’s future employer. Even in contexts that are largely permissive about acceptable behavior, thinking of oneself as a product means sharing strategically rather than honestly. The *edited self* is one constructed with a particular group of people in mind, and one for which scrutiny is expected.

Internet technologies originated from researchers and students in academic, non-profit contexts. Today, the psychic home of Web 2.0 is the San Francisco technology scene, a friendly, lively group of technology enthusiasts

who create and use a great deal of social media technologies. Although this scene supports creativity, entrepreneurship, and intelligence, I argue in this dissertation that people (and success) are evaluated by lopsided standards. For decades, the Northern California tech community has celebrated the white, male entrepreneur; the further one's "public" presentation drifts from this normative ideal, the more one is subject to public judgment. This powerful mythology competes with parallel discourses of equality, meritocracy, and collaboration that permeate the scene. Although it is normal, even socially necessary in the scene to create a visible presence online and participate fully in social media, members do this with a critical eye as to how their actions will be received. Since women in the scene are subject to scrutiny for their appearance, information-sharing and relationships in a way that men are not, this suggests a gender imbalance in the way user-created content is perceived and judged.<sup>62</sup>

Social technology, like other forms of mass media, teaches us about ourselves and how to be in the world. In *The Celluloid Closet*, a documentary about portrayals of gays and lesbians in film, narrator Lily Tomlin says that people learn gender and sexuality from watching reflections of femininity, masculinity, heterosexuality and homosexuality in the movies (Epstein and Friedman 1996). Modern Americans learn to be proper citizens not only from each other, but from reality television, self-help books, talk shows, novels, magazines, and films which teach viewers how their homes should look, how they should dress, how pets and kids should behave, and equally important, provide

models of inappropriate behavior. Although most social media technologies allow a broad range of self-presentation strategies, users look to friends and peers to learn appropriate use of these technologies, and alter their online identities accordingly. Blogs, comments, and gossip judge the legitimacy of online behavior. Not everyone is subject to the harsh scrutiny with which Reblogging Non-Society criticizes Julia Allison, but sites like Lamebook.com demonstrate the collective policing and judgment of online behavior. In Figure 8, Emily complains about her mother on Facebook. Her mother reads her status update and responds negatively. The exchange is screen-captured by an unknown member of either Emily or Polly's audience and sent to Lamebook.com, a blog which mocks inappropriate Facebook actions.



Figure 8: Family Conflict on Lamebook

Sites like Lamebook are only funny because of an unwritten etiquette of social network sites. Emily violated these social norms by presumably forgetting that her mother was one of her Facebook friends, a phenomenon referred to as “context collapse” (Marwick and boyd 2010). The familial conflict that results is due both

to context collapse and the digital instantiation of formerly ephemeral pieces of information; in the past, Emily might have complained to a friend in school or over the phone. Lamebook.com thus regulates normative behavior on Facebook and judges people who violate these norms. Readers, or even Emily herself, learn that self-monitoring and censorship to be mindful of the audience is a requirement for “successful” social media use.

In this dissertation, I have argued that social media encourages users to behave in ways that are influenced by the context and the audience of the Northern California technology scene. Although this scene incorporates many of the counter-cultural, radical presuppositions of activist movements—media consolidation limits diversity of opinions, government should be transparent, corporations should be responsible to their communities and customers and so forth—it does so in a way that de-prioritizes structural change over personal reforms. The famous slogan of the second wave feminist movement, “the personal is political,” emphasized that gender roles and discrimination played out in micro-interactions and personal choices, what Michel Foucault calls “capillaries of power” (2004). But when applied to the inward-focus and self-monitoring encouraged by social media, the personal is antithetical to the type of large-scale structural change that these activist groups originally advocated. This fits within a larger history of corporate discourse incorporating radical principles and diluting them in the process, from advertising executives using counterculture

individualism to sell soda to personal computer manufacturers parroting the idealism of hackers and phone phreaks (Pfaffenberger 1988; Frank 1998).

Instead, the values inculcated in social media are those of the enterprise business culture. While the top-down, hierarchical management style of 1950s and 1960s corporate culture was replaced in the dot-com era with one that emphasized the leveling of hierarchies, creative self-expression through labor, and independent workers, this has not significantly improved the lot of the individual worker (Neff 2001; Ross 2004). If anything, the free agent culture of enterprise labor justifies neoliberal policies which dismantle socio-economic protections like pension plans and employer-sponsored health insurance, providing less protection to workers and normalizing instability. This is not always experienced negatively. Many people in the tech scene love the independence and self-actualization that small business ownership or freelancing brings them, and the sense of bubbling creativity was palpable among technologists. Thus, the tech scene serves as a proof of concept that this model is viable, and business discourse holds up successful freelance developers and two-person startups as an ideal to which all others must aspire. But this business model is generally limited to white-collar creative professionals with advanced technology skills, high education, and self-motivation. This is a very small percentage of the working population. Not everyone can be an entrepreneur, but in neoliberal philosophy, everyone *should* be, as we see expressed in self-help books like Gary Vaynerchuk's *Crush It* and Tim Ferriss's *The Four Hour Work Week* (Ferriss 2009a; Vaynerchuk 2009).

Social media teaches the skills necessary to succeed in a high-risk, creatively-driven work culture, and neoliberal self-help suggests that if one doesn't find success, one isn't working hard enough.

Because the Northern California technology scene is immersed in social media, the split between online and offline interaction theorized during early internet communication (Coleman 2010b) is not really applicable. While many other contemporary ethnographies take this approach to investigating both computer-mediated and face-to-face interpersonal interactions (Kelty 2008; Senft 2008; Malaby 2009; Coleman 2010), other studies treat online interaction as a separate sphere. This complicates fieldwork; in the next section, I reflect on the methodology of studying a group that exists both through social media and in proximate space.

### Online and Offline

The internet is not a monolithic or placeless 'cyberspace'; rather, it is numerous new technologies, used by diverse people, in diverse real-world locations. (Miller and Slater 2000, 1).

In the technology scene, face-to-face interactions and online communication overlapped. "Did you see my tweet?" a friend would ask before launching into a story which presupposed I had. People began arguments on Facebook and resolved them at parties. SXSWi attendees wrote thousands of blog posts and tweets; speakers took questions from Twitter as they were posted. An informant uploaded a picture to Facebook a minute after it was taken; another scrutinized Flickr for evidence that her boyfriend was cheating on her. People

casually hung out, twittered about what they were doing, and used geolocation software to “check in” to bars and people’s houses. And people monitored their own personal data, applying the principles of engineering and software development to self-improvement.

In early internet scholarship, “online” and “offline” were conceptualized as separate spheres with different social patterns and practices (Coleman 2010b). In highly-mediated, proximate communities where this division is blurry and liminal, how should internet communication instead be theorized? Perhaps online interactions should be thought of first as communication, and second as internet communication. While there is certainly value in analyzing specific behavioral patterns afforded by social technologies—as I have done throughout this dissertation—I believe it is more fruitful to examine internet communication as part of overall relationships and interactions that exist in spaces and places that are not virtual. This does make it difficult to draw any sort of causal relationships between social media and specific behavior patterns, but it also shows internet use as socially and environmentally contextual.

Social norms around technology use are formed both online and in person. Twitter norms were solidifying at the time I was conducting fieldwork and informants would hotly debate the finer points of use on Twitter, on blogs, and over dinner, including whether re-tweets were acceptable and how often people should @reply. Twitter is an open-ended technology in which acceptable behavior varies greatly between user groups or contexts. But the environment and overall



use case of a specific user group must be examined to understand how norms develop in any social context. When Twitter launched, many users in the tech scene configured the application to deliver tweets directly to their mobile phones. This norm quickly changed as people began to use the site to send out all manner of minutia. At first people complained that such frequent tweets were overwhelming their mobile phones and that people should use Twitter for more important or urgent matters. As the norm and the technology evolved, most people turned off the direct deliver feature and instead read Twitter through a smartphone client (and the site became well-known for purportedly trivial messages). Similarly, people often altered their online information disclosure if they were criticized, stalked or misinterpreted “offline.” Offline behavior and configuration affected the formation of online social norms.

This is not to say that there is no *difference* between online and offline interaction, just that the line between them is blurry and shifting. In the scene, face-to-face interactions were generally given more weight than those online. For example, breaking up in person is more considerate than texting, tweeting, or Facebooking the same message, which is gauche. Within Twitter, @replies function as a performance of connectedness. This can be used to demonstrate co-presence, implying that a relationship extends beyond the virtual. For example, when Aubs tweets that she is hanging out with @KevinRose and @Veronica at a party, she demonstrates direct access to high-status people. This is quite different from a Web 2.0 fanboy @replying Kevin Rose to comment on his online show.

This implies that face-to-face interactions are a greater indication of social ties than online discussions.

In this group of technology users who lived in the same city and interacted face-to-face, social media was a part of the everyday rather than “virtual” or “online” life. This is becoming more common, as most young Americans use social media like Facebook and Twitter to talk to people they already know, rather than to make new friends or to talk with strangers (Boneva and Quinn 2006; Subrahmanyam and Greenfield 2008). Certainly, the internet is still used to meet new people, but generally, when people talk about social media, they are not talking about *virtual* communities so much as communities that exist simultaneously on and offline, and use a variety of tools such as e-mail, IM, telephony, social network sites, microblogging, etc. to stay in touch, reinforce social ties, and collectively produce understanding of the community.

### Major Contributions

This dissertation provides several contributions to internet, media, and cultural studies. First, I analyzed and explained three primary online status-seeking techniques, self-branding, micro-celebrity, and life-streaming. While other scholars have written about these practices, I link them to social media, expound on them in depth, and provide a myriad of real-world empirical examples. I look not only at how these status-seeking techniques function, but how they are practiced and experienced by individuals. I argue that such online

self-presentation strategies are directly linked to neoliberal capitalist, free-market philosophy by positioning the user as a commodity and relationships as instrumental paths to greater attention and visibility.

Second, I elaborate on the concept of the networked audience, the real or imagined viewers of digital content who are connected to the content creator and each other, first developed in an article with danah boyd (Marwick and boyd 2010). This concept allows researchers to examine social media as both a broadcast medium and an affordance for interpersonal interaction, since social media combines elements of both. The theory of the networked audience explains that online self-presentation is done both in front of and for the benefit of the audience. In the networked audience, content creators and audience members create and respond to content in a “many-to-many” model. The networked audience and context collapse explain why surveillance and monitoring have become normal and expected in highly-mediated communities. *Digital instantiation* and *social digitization* describe what happens when a group of friends or acquaintances constitute a networked audience for social media. Formerly ephemeral social information is codified, digitized, made persistent, and combined with other pieces of data. While this creates a rich context for interaction, it also causes conflict, anxiety, and “drama.” The edited self is the result of transparency, audience, intimacy, and authenticity motivating social media users to carefully construct “safe” online profiles. This online self reflects

the prevalence of context collapse and simultaneously takes into account the prevalence of monitoring and surveillance among highly mediated groups.

A final insight from this project involves the role of consumption in status. As chronicled in the previous chapters, while conspicuous consumption is generally assumed to require face-to-face interaction (e.g. unless I can see your fancy purse, I'm not impressed by it), I argue that such consumption also exists online. Online consumption is a broad process which includes buying items through e-commerce sites, discussing gadgets, reviewing products, sharing music and movies, posting pictures of desired items, and many other activities. I argue that attention and visibility function as *conspicuous* status symbols, inspired by celebrity culture, tabloid magazines and entertainment shows. *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* or *Cribs* serve up the possessions of celebrities to be coveted and emulated, as magazines and fashion blogs teach young girls how to “get the look” of the latest starlet. But distinct from the original concept of conspicuous consumption theorized by Veblen (1899), today, people covet the attention paid to celebrities just as much as their possessions. This desire has spurred two forms of *aspirational production*, media which is created to increase the creator's status. First, traditional celebrity media is created about the micro-famous, such as paparazzi photos, party photographers, gossip blogs, and red carpet photos. Second, aspiring micro-celebrities produce content which positions them as celebrity subjects, demonstrating style, beauty, wit, or other characteristics in digital photographs, videos, and blog posts.

This exemplifies my argument that social media facilitates many types of content production that are not necessarily “democratic” or “egalitarian.” The status affordances and metrics built into virtually every social media application encourage competition for attention and feedback. Whether it is the myriad of awards that YouTube affixes to the most-watched videos, or sites which rank Twitter users by number of followers, these status affordances encourage people to tailor their content to their presumed audience. Some people adopt the characteristics of celebrities, others of brands, and still others of constant news channels.

### Future Research

In this project, I have suggested that the strategies and tactics observed among members of the technology scene will most likely “trickle down” to other social contexts. Certainly, researchers have chronicled micro-celebrity practice among different groups of young people; the word was coined by Theresa Senft in a study of camgirls, not technology professionals (Senft 2008). This study would be complemented by projects that identify these strategies elsewhere. How do micro-celebrity, life-streaming, and self-branding exist in other social contexts, such as high school students, “mommy bloggers,” or in other countries? How do different kinds of people experience them? Do the neoliberal values that I have identified persist when these practices are taken up by other groups of people?

I also look forward to more research on gender, race, class, sexuality and other forms of bias in the technology scene. The sexism I observed took me by

surprise, and these problems have recently received new scrutiny as a result of groups like New York City's Change the Ratio and the National Center for Women and Information Technology (Miller 2010). Similarly, the percentages of African-Americans and Latinos in technology development in the United States are abysmal and there is little research on the impact of class and sexuality. Through systematically excluding certain groups and populations from the creation of technology, the perspectives expressed in internet media are limited. Just as there are serious issues with the demographics of traditional media directors, producers, show runners, and so forth and their affect on representation in television and film, the limited demographics of the technology industry is problematic. This is precisely because this industry is influential not only in business, but with the development of social media practices more widely.

Finally, I believe social status is a rich analytical lens that can be applied to anthropological and cultural projects in addition to economics and sociology. Throughout this work, I have found status to be immensely valuable in understanding the values and workings of one specific social context. Examining status has enabled me to reveal some of the hollowness of Web 2.0's sweeping claims of equality and the life altering aspects of participation.

### In Closing

My original impetus behind this project was to look realistically at the implication of profit-driven business models on the use and development of social media applications. I wanted to provide a counterbalance to the notion that social

media promoted some sort of ideal, egalitarian society. I knew from my years of working in dot-com companies that decisions about software were often based on what would make the most money, rather than what would be the most beneficial for the user or, even less realistically, what was more democratic or participatory. In my Master's thesis, I scrutinized one particular affordance: how internet users were encouraged to adopt persistent, presumably "authentic" identities rather than the playful pseudonymous culture that characterized the internet of the mid to late 1990s, linking this to the emergence of marketing and data-mining techniques which tracked people across websites (Marwick 2005). In the five years since, this process has only increased. Although social media has wrought many positive changes, it has also provided an income stream from collecting and selling the personal data of users that has come under criticism for its many privacy violations. To really understand these developments, I chose to live among the forward-thinking technologists who imagine and build this media.

It is worth noting here that I really enjoyed my time in the Northern California technology scene, as most people I met were open, friendly, intelligent, creative, and generous with their time and energy. Even the egregious sexism I observed was not done maliciously, but thoughtlessly. Still, although this scene is celebrated in the business press for its financial and technological influence, it is rarely contextualized or scrutinized critically. In this project, I have used status as a lens to examine the peculiarities of the technology scene with regard to social

hierarchy, values, and priorities, and show how this context affects the way norms develop around social media and Web 2.0 use.

I remain a social media enthusiast. I use Facebook, Foursquare, Twitter, LiveJournal, Metafilter, Last.fm, Tumblr, Flickr, and GoodReads on a daily basis. I have three blogs and an iPhone which connects me to these services as I move about the city. Social media is fun, entertaining, and provides real affective and emotional benefits. For me, knowing that I am connected to my friends at all times functions as a sort of protective cocoon against loneliness. I find it immensely frustrating when people claim that social media users “don’t care about privacy,” or question why anyone would ever use a Web 2.0 application. I understand very well, because I experience the positives of these technologies every single day.

The upsides of connecting with a networked audience, though, are balanced by downsides. While the networked audience provides external validation, emotional support, and a general feeling of “ambient awareness” for many users, it also consciously or unconsciously limits and circumscribes self presentation choices. Social media users must construct a self that can be presented simultaneously to parents, friends, and co-workers, or else wrestle with privacy settings or use nicknames, pseudonyms, or little-known sites to create ad-hoc “private” spaces where a particular facet of one’s complicated identity can be safely presented. Even within these spaces, the digitization and combination of formerly ephemeral, fleeting and discrete social information engenders drama and



interpersonal conflict. Self-monitoring is required, and users must acclimate to evaluating themselves through the eyes of others. This scrutiny can cause great anxiety, not to mention arguments, hurt feelings, and resentments. To examine social media, these emotional effects should be taken into account.

As I stated in the introduction, when this project began in July 2007, the economy was soaring and Web 2.0 was hyped not only as a *social* revolution but as a potential source for immense wealth. The former claim has been tempered by nuanced critiques of the culture, commerce, and impacts of social software (Silver and Massanari 2006; Lovink 2008; Nakamura 2008; Zimmer 2008; Hindman 2009); the latter somewhat by the economic downturn (at SXSWi, a friend and I kept track of how often the phrase “in these troubling economic times” was repeated during presentations). Although I conceived this project to critique an over-the-top rhetoric which has significantly diminished since I began my work, that does not discount my critique. The status-seeking techniques I found prevalent in the Northern California technology scene—lifestreaming, self-branding, and micro-celebrity—reflect many aspects of contemporary American culture: obsession with celebrity, fame, and publicity; fleeting job security; widespread belief in personal authenticity and the “American Dream”; and the increasing popularity of social media. Web 2.0 technologies represent a significant shift in how people record, track, and disseminate personal information, with potentially enormous impacts on status, hierarchy, privacy, and social life itself. They also further the infiltration of neoliberal, market-driven

values and ethics into day-to-day relationships with others and even how users think about themselves. Although social media has immense positive impacts, it cannot be evaluated without looking at the equally problematic patterns it engenders.

## NOTES

### CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

<sup>1</sup> Pew Internet also estimates that 93 percent of teens and young adults are online (Lenhart et al. 2010).

<sup>2</sup> The idea that there is a schism or dichotomy between the computer and “real life” is persistent. Think of how online/offline, wired/unplugged, or virtual/real are set up in opposition to each other. This often leads to studies of which is better or how a particular aspect differs from one to the other. In studying a group of people who were radically active in social media, I wanted to explore the disintegration of this barrier and how viewing the online as a separate sphere is not only no longer useful, but actually gets in the way of doing effective research. Although obviously communication technologies have different affordances from each other and face-to-face communication, there is no more a radical difference between online and offline communication than there is face-to-face and telephone conversations.

<sup>3</sup> A social graph is a publicly articulated social network for a particular person, or the web of digital connections around a single user. The term was coined by Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, and has been adopted by social network site researchers (Farber 2007; Fitzpatrick 2007).

<sup>4</sup> There is not a great deal of analysis about racial and ethnic status in Silicon Valley in this project. The most underrepresented groups in the tech scene are African-Americans and Latinos, who make up 1.5 percent and 4.7 percent of the Silicon Valley work force, respectively. These numbers are not only underrepresentative of the population as a whole, they are underrepresentative of the proportions of these groups in the national labor force of computer professionals. Not only that, the numbers of African-Americans and Latinos in Silicon Valley technology companies have actually declined in the last ten years (Swift 2010). Although Asians and South Asians are well-represented in Silicon Valley, these numbers suggest that the relationship between the technology scene and race is just as complicated as its relationship with gender. I focus on gender because it was frequently brought up by my informants and I observed overt gender discrimination, but I recognize the need for similar research on race and ethnicity.

<sup>5</sup> As stated in the introduction, “neoliberalism” has become an umbrella term for progressives, who often use it to characterize “virtually anything as long as it refers to normatively negative phenomena associated with free markets” (Boas

and Gans-Morse 2009, 152). Conservatives rarely use the term, favoring “globalization” or “free market economics.”

While I further explain my use of this term in my discussion of self-branding, it is important to remember that a word’s analytic imprecision does not lessen the reality of its impacts. The deregulation and privatization that has taken place in many countries has created tangible changes in working conditions which affect the lives of millions. Labor has become more precarious, with temporary and part-time jobs replacing stable employment in sectors including service, technology, and manufacturing (Harvey 2007; Ong 2006). For example, in education, tenure-track faculty positions are being eliminated in favor of poorly-paid adjunct positions without benefits or protections (Donoghue 2008). The recent worldwide economic crisis has resulted in massive unemployment and increased the rich-poor gap across the globe (McIntyre, Sauter, and Allen 2010; Reich 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Markham is paraphrasing Richard MacKinnon’s early work on Usenet (MacKinnon 1995).

<sup>7</sup> While I generally refrain from getting into arguments on the internet, I did have a “flame war” with a woman who was furious about a breakfast for women in tech targeted towards founders and entrepreneurs. She wrote, “Newsflash: You don’t work ‘in tech.’ You may have worked for companies that are part of the tech industry. If you do not code or engineer systems or hardware, you are not in tech, it’s just that simple.” This distinction clearly privileges particular skill sets that primarily belong to men as superior to the jobs in the tech industry that are primarily filled by women.

<sup>8</sup> This is a very complex question that has been investigated in depth in books such as *Unlocking the Clubhouse* (Margolis and Fisher 2003). There is clearly no single factor that contributes to the low percentages of women who study computer science on the collegiate level, but some of the contributing factors may be a belief that programmers should be single-minded and obsessive; the competitive culture of computer science departments; girls taking fewer science and math classes in high school than boys; lack of work/life balance in startups; lack of female mentors in computer science; lack of collegiality and support, and so forth.

<sup>9</sup> For instance, Evan Williams nicely told me he did not have time. Om Malik and Michael Arrington never returned my e-mails.

<sup>10</sup> The word “meetups” comes from Meetup.com, a site which facilitates meetings based on common events. Although people used other sites to organize events,

namely Facebook, Eventbrite, and Upcoming, the word is a general term used for interest-based gatherings. “Drinkups” are meetups held at a bar.

<sup>11</sup> Co-working is when two freelancers meet at a common location, like a library or coffee shop, to work side-by-side on their laptops on separate projects. Co-working spaces are set up to facilitate this and provide the camaraderie of the workplace that is missing from freelance life. Most will rent desks for a nominal fee, provide coffee, office supplies, phone lines, internet access, and a printer.

<sup>12</sup> Sadly, my highest rate of Twittering has been while writing this dissertation.

## CHAPTER TWO: HISTORY

<sup>13</sup> MUD can also stand for “Multi-User Dimensions.” There are several variations on the original MUD software, such as MOOs (Mud, Object-Oriented) and MUCKs (a play on MUDs, sometimes said to stand for “Multi-User Created Kingdom.” This paper uses the term MUD to represent all these variants.

<sup>14</sup> There is great controversy over the spelling of e-mail. Technologists primarily spell it “email.” I am adhering to the requirements of the Chicago Manual of Style.

<sup>15</sup> ARPANET was renamed DARPA NET in 1971. The Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) was a separate entity from the Department of Defense until the late 1960’s, when the DOD took over ARPA and all its administered projects. Therefore, ARPANET was renamed DARPA NET (Defense Advanced Research Projects Network). I use ARPANET consistently for simplification purposes until the mid-80’s (1984-1986), when the NSF took over DARPA NET and the network was expanded, re-architected and named the NSFNet. (Sheldon 2001; Galloway 2004, 5; Gillies and Cailliau 2000, 77-80)

<sup>16</sup> In many IRC channels, the actual channel content is only vaguely related to the title.

<sup>17</sup> MySpace is owned by FOX, YouTube is owned by Google, and Flickr and Delicious are owned by Yahoo!

<sup>18</sup> Saying that P2P content is “user-created” is disingenuous. The vast majority of P2P-shared content is produced and copyrighted by professional entertainment companies. While users may technically prepare this content for filesharing by digitizing it (e.g. “ripping”) or converting it into an easily-distributed format like ZIP or RAR, this is not the same as “creating” the content.

<sup>19</sup> Statistics from sites themselves are unreliable since websites have a vested interest in exaggerating their popularity. I use Nielsen-Netratings statistics whenever possible rather than relying on Google's YouTube statistics.

<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting that musical group OK Go, who rose to prominence with their music video set on treadmills, recently stated that it was easier for them to share viral content four years ago than in 2009 since their record labels have put many restrictions on them. They attribute their newfound popularity to sharing viral videos and see this decision as short-sighted (Kulash Jr. 2010).

<sup>21</sup> One could argue that "coolness" becomes a proxy for critique, but it did not, from my observations. A rank-and-file Google employee was not seen as "selling out" but just a drone, mostly because s/he could no longer get "fuck you rich." Early Googlers, who often did get fuck you rich, still had the ability to impress.

<sup>22</sup> Or, briefly during the 1990s cyber-obsession, a leather-clad Angelina Jolie playing video games.

<sup>23</sup> Hacking has different genealogies. Phone phreakers, for example, were less university-based and more underground than the MIT and Stanford hackers. See (Pfaffenberger 2003).

<sup>24</sup> Hence the origin of the term "indie rock."

<sup>25</sup> In actuality, most of the WTO protests were peaceful marches and rallies in which feminists, socialists, environmental activists, anti-racist activists, communists, union organizers, local politicians, anarchists, students, and their ilk built coalitions along subcultural lines to protest a common enemy. While a few black-clad students smashed the windows of Niketown and Starbucks, the police response—tear gassing the crowd, firing rubber bullets at protesters, and assaulting civilians—would set a brutal baseline for the treatment of people at future protests like the GTO Summit in Vancouver and the Republican Convention in New York City (Smith 2001; Kahn and Kellner 2004; Juris 2005).

<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, Indymedia coded the meaning of FOSS in far more radical terms than most FOSS developers. See (Coleman and Hill 2004)

<sup>27</sup> Other scholars have argued that while bloggers are more likely to link to and engage with like-minded bloggers, engagement does exist across ideological lines. The idea that the internet increases political isolation is similarly refuted (Hargittai, Gallo, and Kane 2008).

### CHAPTER THREE: STATUS

<sup>28</sup> Indymedia had other problems as well. Its success spurred hundreds of similar projects with the effect of fragmenting its user base. Indymedia constituted a large, global organization whose members never met, making it difficult to sustain.

<sup>29</sup> These stories were widely circulated in Silicon Valley after the economic downturn in 2008, serving as inspiration to hopeful CEOs attempting to move forward with their own companies as venture capital dried up.

<sup>30</sup> Although I did not directly interview any workers at Twitter or Flickr, my informants are part of a larger social graph that includes creators and employees.

<sup>31</sup> Note that this hierarchy does not have to be perceived the same way by all members of a group. While my informants roughly agreed on who was high and low status, there were significant degrees of disagreement. So to a certain extent, status is in the eye of the beholder. As one becomes more a part of a community, one's understanding of status will sharpen (this happened to me).

<sup>32</sup> This distinction should be complicated, as the ability to achieve certain things is often bounded by factors outside of one's control. For example, the likelihood of achieving a Harvard degree or a CEO position is largely dependent on wealth, family connections, social class, and so forth. Furthermore, the American narrative of meritocracy, which holds that achievements are available equally to all people with hard work, functions ideologically to justify socioeconomic inequality by linking it to achievement or deservedness.

<sup>33</sup> Williamson goes so far as to claim that computational approaches to emotional issues like trust are bad for human relationships, and suggests that they be studied primarily by sociologists and psychologists (1993).

<sup>34</sup> An organization which supported women in technology.

<sup>35</sup> To her credit, Culver herself was remarkably thick-skinned. She told me she was happy if she showed up on Valleywag because it helped promote her site and increased her visibility (as a model of a woman developer). At a Girls in Tech event, she said, "I'm not worse [at coding] than any dude. Calling me stupid, that really hurts. Petty, from dudes who never did anything. It wasn't about me being the best coder in the world. I took risks doing what I wanted to do and not caring if I failed. I don't care about failing. I don't care about comments on my appearance, about who I'm dating."

<sup>36</sup> Although Thailand often symbolizes the sex trade, that was not the reason behind its popularity; instead, informants often talked about scuba diving, rock-climbing, hiking to remote places, etc.

<sup>37</sup> I experienced this first-hand when I traded in my early-model smartphone, a Sidekick, for an iPhone in January 2009. While people constantly gave me flack about the Sidekick, the iPhone immediately made me feel “part of the group.” Despite the fact that the iPhone lacked functionality that the Sidekick had, and is actually a pretty lousy *phone*, it is a powerful symbol of inclusivity.

#### CHAPTER FOUR: MICRO-CELEBRITY

<sup>38</sup> Julia probably mentioned Wellesley because I told her earlier in the conversation it was my alma mater. Wellesley does not have a graduate program.

<sup>39</sup> Kristina Busse describes how being a BNF has become a goal, with fans discussing how to aspire to this status (2006, 222).

#### CHAPTER FIVE: SELF-BRANDING

<sup>40</sup> To criticize the vague popular use of “neoliberalism” is not to say that the market-based reforms characterized by progressives as neoliberal did not exist, or did not have wide and significant impact. American neoliberal foreign and economic policy in the George W. Bush era was wildly unpopular around the world; as Ong writes, “in the global popular imagination, American neoliberalism is viewed as a radicalized capitalism imperialism that is increasingly tied to lawlessness and military action” (2006, 1). In addition to government policy, neoliberalism is also linked to consumerism, commodification, branding, and other highly visible processes of capitalism.

<sup>41</sup> I met several “digital anthropologists” during my fieldwork, none of whom had PhDs in anthropology. Interestingly, a debate on the Association of Internet Researchers mailing list involved the ethics of people without formal anthropological training referring to themselves as “anthropologists.” While academics may get their hackles up, this was not questioned by anyone I talked to in the technology sphere.

<sup>42</sup> There is a lot of debate in the Twitter marketing world about whether one should use a “real” name or what is often referred to as an “avatar”, or internet nickname. (For more about internet nicknames, see Donath 1999 and Bechar-Israeli 1996.) Recently, some companies, notably Facebook, are deprecating internet nicknames in favor of “real names.” (Gaming company Blizzard’s attempt to require “real names” on their forums was overwhelmingly rejected by users, causing the company to reverse their position) (Shiels 2010). The popularity of Facebook Connect, which allows companies to use Facebook for identity authentication in lieu of their own logins, is hastening this transformation. I wrote about this shift in my Master’s thesis, linking it to the need for companies



to track individuals across website lines and monetize their interests and social networks (Marwick 2005).

<sup>43</sup> I e-mailed Gary to ask about sales figures for the book. I was curious as to whether he really did respond to every e-mail, and sales figures are very difficult to get. The next day, he forwarded my request to a project manager at his consulting firm, who forwarded my request to a contact at HarperCollins. She refused to give me the sales figures, but I was very impressed that Vaynerchuk took the time to respond to my request. While I am critical of Vaynerchuk's methods, his persona certainly does come off as "authentic" and concerned with his readers.

## CHAPTER SIX: LIFE-STREAMING

<sup>44</sup> Some of these habits come from communities around weight loss or health advocacy, where people share internet folk remedies and strategies. For example, the internet has spawned a variety of cult diets, such as the Hacker Diet, the 4-S Diet, and the Shangri-La Diet, which were first popularized through blogs and online communities and then extended to books and magazine articles.

<sup>45</sup> It is a fallacy to assume that printed diaries were always personal and intended to be private. Van Dijck argues that the diary is a communicative act that is always written for an audience, whether or not that audience ever reads the diary. She disregards the categorization of diaries into "public" and "private": all diaries are written to an addressee (Van Dijck 2004).

<sup>46</sup> See [busterben.com](http://busterben.com) and Julia Allison's lifecast on [Julia.nonsociety.com](http://Julia.nonsociety.com) for examples.

<sup>47</sup> Twitter's use varies greatly between groups of users; it is an open-ended technology, so is used in many different ways. In the year since I finished fieldwork, Twitter has changed, and so has its use by the technology scene has also changed. See the conclusion for more thoughts on this topic.

<sup>48</sup> Cheng now works at Twitter, but was working at a gaming startup called Raptr when I interviewed him.

<sup>49</sup> Nick and I attempted to schedule an interview several times, but I was ultimately unable to meet with him.

<sup>50</sup> This screenshot was found on a public forum where people were debating whether Nick Starr had successfully committed suicide; I did not take it myself.

<sup>51</sup> This episode was based on a real incident: a teenager in Florida overdosed on prescription drugs while live on Justin.tv (Madkour 2008). It is not that these types of events never happen, but when they do, they are sensationalized and publicized. In my experience in the tech scene, such attitudes are rare compared to the number of supportive and helpful responses to online cries for help. Of course, this is highly dependent on the community under study.

<sup>52</sup> Some of these claims are overblown. For example, see Evgeny Morozov's piece about how the US media overestimated the significance of Twitter in the 2009 Iranian elections (Morozov 2009).

<sup>53</sup> Rock Band is a popular video game.

<sup>54</sup> Much of this linkage is often sensationalized (see, for example, (Twenge and Campbell 2009). Buffardi and Campbell do not claim that social network site use promotes narcissism, but they do point out that the personality traits exhibited by narcissists are rewarded by social network sites, so narcissists may be overrepresented in SNS.

<sup>55</sup> I am indebted to conversations with Helen Nissenbaum, and her "Online Court Records, Privacy, and Contextual Integrity" project with Amanda Conley, for this example and the vocabulary used.

<sup>56</sup> Google's actions could also be considered a public relations strategy to appeal to an audience that values transparency.

<sup>57</sup> Helen Nissenbaum distinguishes between openness and transparency: openness is making all information available, while transparency is a normative concept of making useful and relevant information available (Nissenbaum 2010). For example, when asked for climatology statistics, an environmental agency might make hundreds of thousands of pages of raw data available. This is neither useful nor readable, but a top-level summary document is both. The former is openness, whereas the latter is transparency. Similarly, true openness in one's personal life is not selective, allowing everything to "hang out," whereas transparency provides useful and meaningful information. I think this distinction is less useful for personal information than governmental information, as what is "meaningful" is also a normative judgment and one that may vary widely among members of the audience. Thus, I do not use it in the discussion that follows.

<sup>58</sup> "Gay rights" were often offered as an example. During fieldwork, the debate over California's Proposition 8 was heated, and increased tolerance for gay, lesbian, transgender and bisexual people, particularly marriage equality, was frequently cited as an example of moving towards a more equal society. This

being San Francisco, other locally-prominent minorities such as polyamorous people, the leather/BDSM community, and drug users were also often discussed.

<sup>59</sup> For example, during the economic collapse of Fall 2008, many SV denizens bragged that the technology/computer companies of Silicon Valley did not need an economic bailout like the banking or auto industries. There was a sense of pride in the self-sufficiency of the technology industry and the belief that they do not take any kinds of government support.

<sup>60</sup> In contrast, Priscilla Regan draws from Hannah Arendt to argue that privacy is necessary for society to come together as a polis. In order for citizens to think of themselves as equal, differences must be obscured (Regan 1995).

<sup>61</sup> See Elinor Mills' series for CNET about this incident. She writes "We Googled some personal information about Schmidt and wrote about what we found. He didn't like it, and News.com was on the receiving end of a very stern corporate silent treatment from Google for nearly two months" (Mills 2005; Mills 2008).

## CONCLUSION

<sup>62</sup> Naturally, this differs in other social contexts; but it would surprise me if there are many online social contexts where normative judgments do not break down along traditional lines, whether sexuality, class, race, education or a host of other status markers and differentiating factors.

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