

New Media is the New Organizing

Meeting the Public's Information Needs in Silicon Valley

By Raj Jayadev for the Knight Commission (September 8, 2008)

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I first off want to thank the commission on this community driven project, and allowing our Silicon Valley community to be a part of the conversation. One of the ironic obstacles we have here is that our reputation of being the high tech capital of the world sometimes leads people to think that we have somehow surpassed the basic needs of information, inclusion and accountability that other regions struggle with. In some regards, our advances for the world has actually left many in the shadows here in Silicon Valley – disconnected and underserved. From the inside looking out, Silicon Valley is a place of contradictions. In a region that boasts one of the highest median incomes in the nation, a disproportionate amount of people cannot afford to live here. We comprise one of the most ethnically diverse collections of cities in the country, yet we are plagued with disproportionately high numbers of people of color filling our jails, juvenile halls, and dropping out of school. These issues are directly linked to the lack of inclusion and representation of our communities in the decision-making of the region. Our agent of change, I believe, will be based on an inclusive media landscape.

I come from an organization named Silicon Valley De-Bug that serves as a media and organizing outlet for this population. We started as low-wage assembly workers who wanted to create a platform to be heard, the ones who were physically creating the technology that brought the region and world into the high tech era. We now consist of young adults who exist on the underside of Silicon Valley – low-wage workers, the homeless, formerly incarcerated, the undocumented. Together, these once invisible communities have created a platform to carve out their own space in the public sphere by producing a bi-monthly magazine, a weekly radio show on a listener sponsored station, a weekly television program on community access television, a multi-media website, and help other youth organizations do the same. The media work has invariably also led us to conduct community campaigns for social justice issues in our communities.

Indeed, media has been the vehicle for our unheard populations to have needed conversations with one another, include ourselves in the larger civic discourse, and advocate for ourselves. And we are not alone. The evolution of community in itself in the Valley ultimately leads to media vehicles, whether that be a magazine like De-Bug, or the ethnic media, such as the number of Spanish weeklies, the Punjabi or Vietnamese radio shows, or the Filipino television shows. Part of the reason why ethnic media is quickly replacing traditional media as the news of choice is because there is a trust there, while there is a growing sense of skepticism in the traditional media, and what may seem like front page news to one community, may not even make the paper in the larger news disseminator. And, by the way, merely going in language does not make a news outlet an “ethnic” media. We learned that lesson here when the Mercury News tried publishing a Spanish language and Vietnamese language paper that mirrored much of the content from the English paper. Those efforts, while appreciated, could not do what the actual existing

ethnic news were already doing, informing their community on the issues that matter most to them.

Again, in a place that is very determined to put out a particular public image, the only real way marginalized communities have been able to find a reflective representation of themselves is to make it themselves. In today's Silicon Valley, being a receiver of information is not enough, you must become a communicator, it is the only way to ensure inclusion.

Young people who are not from the dot-com fast-track, having either not seen themselves in the traditional media, or only saw themselves portrayed as criminals, drop-outs, or detractors to the community, have taken this work to another level through an embrace of newer technologies. One can become a media mogul (blogger, video blogger, internet radio producer and so on) with very little resources, and no resume is required. It is an equalized tool, and through it the polarized Valley seems more flat. For the most part, young people in Silicon Valley have used the new technologies to communicate to each other. A consequence of not being included in the news world is an abandonment of it all together, and an impulse to simply have your own. The attraction to online social networks such as Myspace and Facebook is a foreshadowing of how the next generation will relate to news and information. One, it allows people to define themselves in their own terms -- interests, identity and community (which for this new generation can often time be multi-layered, like Latino/Rock/Skater, or Desi/hiphop musician); and secondly, it facilitates what young people want information to become -- grounds for a conversation.

Let me offer two examples of how young people used news information to organize and advocate for themselves in Silicon Valley.

The first is the mass immigrant rights marches that started in 2005. We had hundreds of thousands of people in the streets in San Jose in multiple actions, marching for the rights of undocumented immigrants. Many were young people, marching to protect their mothers and fathers. The same day of the marches were student walk outs in colleges, high schools and junior highs. These walk outs, and the youth participation at the marches were self-organized through Myspace and text messaging. They organized, taught, debated and reacted, in real time, by using the technologies once perceived as simply teenage diversions from the real world. In doing so, they were highly responsible for the largest public demonstrations in the history of Silicon Valley.

The second example was much more localized. Earlier this year, there was a proposal to City Council to create a permitting process for event promoters in San Jose. While the issue hardly hit the mainstream news, it was a major issue in younger cultural circles. The proposal, which original was going to charge over \$1,000 for anyone throwing an event, would be regulated through the police department, and create a bureaucratic obstacle course for promoters. Younger communities saw the proposal as a direct attack on them, a strategic move to remove them from the downtown scene, in the City's effort to make downtown for an older, more affluent crowd. When word leaked out, again through the

vehicles of Facebook, Myspace, and cultural websites, young people, who otherwise saw themselves as very different from one another, rockers and rappers alike, assembled in a sort of emergency response type format. The only common denominator was that they had all previously opted out of political engagement. They researched the proposal, similar ordinances in other cities, met with elected officials, and found out what legal recourses they had. The result was a new civically engaged generation, many who had before never stepped foot in City Hall, active in advocating for their well-being. They eventually achieved a comprised ordinance with the city, but the longer-term effect is young people who now know the power of their own inclusion in civic life.

For Silicon Valley's youth, media has become synonymous with community organizing. Their impulse is to post an online bulletin rather than paint a placard.

And all this is not to say that Facebook can ever replace the value of face to face. Til this day, this most important thing we do at De-Bug is have an open meeting every week for any community member to come and share their thoughts with one another. For certain, the website allows us to communicate to the outside world, and even the memory of history. For example, because of the accessibility to become media producers to everyday people in Silicon Valley, if one types in "young temp workers" in Google, they will read stories from actual temp workers. Before history was dictated by the powerful, but not anymore. We can all speak to future generations, and record our rightful place. But while online allows us to cast out far and wide, it is our local magazine that allows us to build community. We can hand out a magazine at a bus stop, and ask the reader to come to a meeting. The magazine is an organizing tool. The face to face work is ultimately how relationships are built, which on the ground level, is the cornerstone of democratic process. One practical challenge that we will face in this process of using local media to help strengthen democracy is the transient nature communities are forced to deal with given the economic pressures. The truth is much of Silicon Valley community now lives in the Central Valley, and just works in Silicon Valley. If media is the glue for a community, we need to find ways for communities to be more stable, or find more elastic adhesives.

And the other question is how to make the newer technologies accessible to all, and that there is a spirit of inclusiveness in the media world. That any community member, the mother in the gang populated neighborhood, the Ethiopian downtown cab driver, the young man in the under-resourced school, are our embedded reporters on the Silicon Valley they know. By giving them the license and tools to be communicators, our information landscape, and our democratic space in Silicon Valley will change dramatically.