Becoming Elite:
Social Status in Web 2.0 Cultures

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Introduction

In the last few years, a class of social media technologies, more commonly known as “Web 2.0,” has become the darling of the business world. Boasting enormous valuations, social media applications like Facebook, YouTube and MySpace purportedly represent a new era of increased participation, democracy, and creativity (Benkler 2006, Jenkins 2006). Even the term “Web 2.0” suggests a major shift in online communication, positioning these dynamic, interactive applications as something completely new. However, like all new technologies, widespread adoption of social media needs critical evaluation, particularly in light of the current adulation by the financial industry. Cultural anxieties about online predators, privacy, marketing surveillance, and living life publicly are augmented by fears that these new technologies perpetuate race, gender, and class divisions. Indeed, studies of early, proto-social technologies showed that status hierarchies were significant parts of online communication, often based on gender or race (Herring 1999; Soukup 1999). In both media anthropology and science studies, one way of evaluating technologies is to examine the community that produces them (Latour 1987; Hannerz 2004). As one approach to critically evaluating Web 2.0, I propose an ethnographic examination of status hierarchies and practices among social media producers and the technologies they create in the San Francisco Bay Area.

There have been several excellent critical studies of the nearby Santa Clara County Silicon Valley technology culture, located in the cities of Palo Alto, Mountain View, Cupertino, Sunnyvale, and San Jose (Saxenian 1996, English-Lueck 2002). This area is synonymous with the names of technology companies located there: Apple, Google, Intel, Oracle, Sun, and Yahoo!, among others. It boasts a diverse population with many skilled immigrants, expensive

real estate, well-funded public schools, and a technology-saturated culture (English-Lueck 2002, 11). The political sensibility of Silicon Valley tends to be of a decidedly libertarian bent, espousing self-improvement, social mobility, and “work-life balance.” This 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 advertising men in the 1920s, Silicon Valley technology workers embodied modernity in the 1990s.

But the fast-paced yuppie image of the Valley belies another reality: that this 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). The complicated hierarchy of benefits accrued to contractors, temporary workers, perma-temps and “FTEs” (Full Time Employees) contradicts the American Dream rhetoric so prevalent in the Valley. Furthermore, even among the most privileged technology workers, gender, sexuality, race and class cut through the fantasy of techno-meritocratic entitlement. Andrew Ross, for example, has demonstrated how this discourse masks unfair labor practices even among privileged, creative class workers (2003). To critically examine centers of production like Silicon Valley—and technology production as a whole– we must also examine the making of social hierarchies, and how technology helps to create, enable, and possibly re-organize status structures.

The City of San Francisco is located in Alameda County, 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 sparkling social life of the city, rather than in 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 accruing lucrative pre-IPO stock options or a Google acquisition. 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" (2001, 37). These ideologies are espoused by the "producer/users" of internet culture, or, in this context, workers at San Francisco's social media startups. Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron call this mix of libertarian politics, countercultural aesthetics, and techno-utopianism inspired by the WELL, *Wired* and their contemporaries "the California Ideology" (1995).

The companies I am interested in are building *social media* applications, websites that combine social interaction with functions like bookmarking, video-sharing, and social networking. While the biggest Web 2.0 sites are owned by large tech companies, there are hundreds of others run by small, startup companies located all over the world.[1] I consider San Francisco to be the center of Web 2.0 culture for two reasons. First, the group of people who work on Web 2.0 technologies is large, yet tight-knit. Specifically, the South Park neighborhood, only four or five blocks square, is home to approximately twenty different Web 2.0 companies

[1] Flickr is owned by Yahoo, MySpace is owned by Fox Interactive, and YouTube is owned by Google.

and nonprofits including Wikipedia, JumpCut, Technorati, SixApart and Odeo. This close proximity has spawned a lively community of people who work in this industry: businesspeople, coders, designers, bloggers, and "net celebrities." They socialize at San Francisco parties, workplaces, events, and conferences, but also interact through Web 2.0 technologies, mobile devices, and e-mail. Secondly, the use of Web 2.0 technologies in San Francisco is very high, due to both the historical prominence of the technology industry and the city's high rates of internet use (English-Lueck 2002; Scarborough Research 2007). Like Silicon Valley workers of the 1990s, this group of wealthy, wired American technologists is a small number of people with a tremendous degree of influence on the production and use of technology.

Just as English-Lueck identified Silicon Valley's multi-cultural composition and obsession with technology as visible signs of larger cultural changes, Web 2.0 workers represent two social shifts in the use of communication technologies. First, in contrast to early studies of the internet, which generally assumed people would use the internet to talk to people they didn't know, making trust and role-playing significant issues in online communication (Rheingold 2000; Turkle 1995), social media is becoming a pervasive part of everyday life. For the most part, in the highly mobile networked culture that the Bay Area exemplifies, people communicate with people they know, as themselves. Using e-mail, Facebook, or Twitter is a communication choice like the telephone or "snail mail." Second, given this move, what status "means" in the 21st century is different from Thornstein Veblen's turn of the century model. Status markers among social media workers include working at a "hot" company, receiving favorable press coverage, having a Wikipedia entry, and getting invited to exclusive conferences like TED and O'Reilly Emerging Technology. But not all has changed entirely. Digital-era commodity goods, like the iPhone, are also status markers—what Thorstein Veblen would call "conspicuous

consumption," or *status symbols* (1899). Contemporary 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. Yet "conspicuous-ness" means something different in an online environment that has alternative mechanisms for "display." Studying this community will illuminate how status and consumption have remained the same and changed in a new, technology-saturated era.

Statement of Research Problem

To examine social media, I am looking at how *status* functions among Web 2.0 users and producers in the Bay Area. Status is always relative; the social psychology literature defines status as "rank-ordered relationships among people associated with prestige and deference behavior" (Huberman, Loch & Önçüler 2004, 103; Ridgeway & Walker 1995). This definition locates status pursuits within a particular social group or community of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991). While the sociological and economic models of status as rational and goal-oriented are contested (Twitchell 2002), I take from them the idea that status has meaning within a particular social space; in other words, status is always relative to the community under scrutiny. While there are some factors, like wealth or education, which would be high or low status in many different contexts, smaller groups will have very particular status markers and practices (knowledge about a television show, possession of a certain kitchen gadget). Therefore, small, bounded communities are an optimal site to use to examine the particularities of status. Moreover, status has been identified as an important motivator in online participation (Raymond 1998, Lampel & Bhalla 2007). I hope to understand status practices in both online and offline communication and how and what they contribute to participation and group membership.

In an influential essay on the state of the Internet, Rob Kling and Suzanne Iacono introduced the concept of "computerization." They refer to computerization as the belief that widespread adoption of computer technologies will lead to positive social change. As Bryan Pfaffenberger specifies:

> Like other social movements, computerization movements focus on changing an objectionable situation or improving the circumstances of a group that suffers a social disadvantage. The leaders of computerization movements develop and offer a utopian social vision, in which the impact of computerization leads to strongly beneficial results for the wider society in which computer systems are placed (1996, 366).

Kling and Iacono point out that viewing technologies as inherently beneficial ignores the fact that computerization is political, that technologies may reinforce or create new types of social inequities, and that implementation of new technologies creates winners and losers. For example, requiring students to maintain weblogs for a high school class privileges those with computer experience; encouraging people to participate in the democratic process by viewing or posting videos on YouTube leaves out users with slow connections, and ignores the often sexist and racist discourses found in YouTube comment threads (Marwick 2007).

Many popular and academic discussions of social media share an undercurrent of belief that these technologies are at the basis of positive social changes. This ideology states that social media will create positive, superior replacements for journalism, news media, and corporate entertainment, provide "digital publics" for people unable to interact in physical spaces, and provide checks on politicians through the dissemination of digital video. Notable examples include Cass Sunstein's *Infotopia* (2006), Henry Jenkins's *Convergence Culture* (2006), Yochai Benkler's *The Wealth of Networks* (2006), Don Tapscott and Anthony Williams' *Wikinomics* (2006), and *Time Magazine*'s 2006 year-end issue, which named "You," the active social media

contributor, "Person of the Year" (Grossman 2006).[2] These discourses exemplify how computerization is linked with positive social change in the public imagination (Pfaffenberger 1996). Furthermore, combined with the "California Ideology" of techno-meritocracy, the Web 2.0 industry espouses a hyperbolic discourse of beneficence that tends to mask broader issues of inequality in technology use. Claims that new technologies usher in democratic forms of participation are not entirely wrong; some of this work valuably documents important social shifts. But the extent of these effects is limited or tempered by the forms of status I am examining. It is not necessarily that these applications are inherently *un*democratic, but that sweeping claims of equality need to be re-examined through the angle of status. This will create a more realistic picture of the ways that these social media sites do or do not form the grounds for positive social change.

A 2007 report from the Pew Internet and American Life project found that only 8 percent of Americans were avid users of the newest "participatory web" and mobile application technologies. Social media creators primarily come from this group of enthusiasts; as the report states, "When the next popular user-generated fashion comes along, [members of this group] are likely to test drive it. One might even invent it" (Horrigan 2007, iii). The elite and exceptional status of this group is reflected in applications like Dopplr, a social network for frequent travelers popular with Web 2.0 creators. While social media workers do travel frequently, 17 percent of Americans have never been on an airplane, 80 percent do not have a passport, and the median income of domestic travelers is $70,000, about double the national average (Travel Industry Association 2006). In fact, Pew found that 49 percent of Americans used social media and

[2] These authors do not necessarily set up a causal position. Benkler, for instance, recognizes that although technology has the potential for positive social change, other factors are required for these changes to come about. Typically, potentially mitigating concerns are identified as copyright, oligopoly, access to information resources, and so forth.

mobile applications infrequently or never, and often had negative views of information technology (2007). This research demonstrates how social media applications are currently created by and for elites.

Social status is a key factor of participation in internet communities. Many studies investigating why people participate in online communities identify altruism and reciprocity, rather than status-seeking, as major factors for knowledge contribution and interaction (Bolton, Katok, & Ockenfels 2004; Giesler 2006). But more recently, Lampell and Bhalla position status as an ego reward or emotional benefit in itself, rather than a means to an end (2007). Similarly, social network analysis has long identified social capital as a key element of participation (Granovetter 1973). Social capital is a flexible concept that tends to differ disciplinarily, but can generally be summarized as "resources accumulated through the relationships among people" (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe 2007). This is a narrower concept than status (the difference between the two is explored in depth in the literature review) but its utility for internet research demonstrates the importance of social factors in online communication. I believe status to be a rich analytic lens for looking at the creation and maintenance of hierarchical inequality in online environments.

Preliminary investigation of social media reveals two categories of mechanisms for online status display. First, 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 1988), I use the term *status affordances* to describe software features explicitly created for status display. These include reputation systems (eBay feedback and Slashdot karma) and attribution (Digg's "first submitted" and "made popular" story appellations, Upcoming.org's "old school" badge for long-term users, or Yelp's "Elite" user designation). Second, users

display status through *emergent mechanisms* which arise from community practices, such as citation in a Frequently Asked Questions document or deference shown from others in computer-mediated interactions. Part of my project involves describing both types of mechanisms. Studies of online communities as diverse as Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (Malaby 2006), soap opera fans (Baym 2000), college students (Ellison et. al 2007), X-Files watchers (Bury 2005) and gay bodybuilders (Campbell 2004) found status markers and practices unique to each group. An early working hypothesis is that status mechanisms are so important to motivating interaction that they will emerge from any online group that uses software, even without status affordances.

One type of status practice involves consumption, as originally theorized by Thorstein Veblen in *Conspicuous Consumption* (1899). Cultural anthropologists have since positioned consumption as a social process that encompasses use and discourse in addition to the buying and selling of objects (de Certeau 1984, Chin 2001). These processes conceptualize commodity goods as status markers, and identification with goods as a key part of contemporary identity work (Veblen 1899; Weber 1958; Hall 1996, Klein 2000). Veblen theorized consumption as a highly visible process which vicariously demonstrated wealth through ritual display and use of consumer goods. His theory of conspicuous consumption has become central to contemporary understandings of consumption as a process. Furthermore, consumption is often linked to display (Baudrillard 1988). For instance, theorists of luxury goods emphasize the importance of the built environment of consumption, such as the four star hotel or brand-name store, in interpellating luxury subjects (Twitchell 2002, 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 1989).

Understanding consumption in late modernity requires thinking about how it operates in physical space.

Networked computer-mediated communication complicates consumption as "conspicuous" display. Individuals who communicate through computers are usually not co-present, making it difficult to read embodied identity markers while communicating with someone online. Others have deconstructed the disembodied virtual subject, and I have no interest in replicating that discourse. I am fully aware that internet communication involves *bodies* that are raced, gendered, and classed, and that these social processes are interwoven through online interaction. Indeed, the visual is absolutely necessary to understanding online communication, as online identity markers have historically been visual. In text-based technologies like chat rooms which limited interaction to typing, e-mail addresses, signature files, word choice, spelling, and adherence to community norms all functioned as identity signalers (Baym 2000, Bury 2005). In contemporary multi-modal online communication, personal homepages and social networking profiles encourage users to marshal visual elements and cues (like pictures, fonts, textures, videos, and songs) to create increasingly complex self-representations. What does conspicuous consumption mean in this virtual, but visually rich environment? Does a picture of a Dior bag on a MySpace profile constitute consumption? A physical Dior bag on display signals something different from the Dior-branded MySpace profile. How can consumption be re-theorized to exclude the physical display of branded or symbolic goods? Or, how can consumption theory be re-conceptualized to include cyberspace as a realm of identity creation through consumption? How are the processes the same? How are they different?

The first part of this project looks at the history of status affordances in social media technologies from the 1990s to the present, focusing on three textual communication applications: Internet Relay Chat (IRC), USENET, and Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs). The second part of this project investigates the influence of the culture of production on internet technologies, undertaking an ethnographic study of social status in the entrepreneurial startup culture of the San Francisco Bay Area to understand its impact on Web 2.0 technology. This ethnographic work will also allow me to examine two related processes: the interplay of online and offline interaction by a single community, and the way that online communication complicates consumption as a status marker. By examining specific Web 2.0 sites used by social media workers, I will identify potential status affordances and how social web technologies are used to inscribe or resist status structures.

In the first part, I am examining technologies popular during the late 1980s and early 1990s: Usenet, IRC, and MUDs. They are unimodal textual communication technologies which predate today's chat rooms, instant messenger, and virtual worlds, but share many of their features. Usenet is a series of discussion forums, called newsgroups, each devoted to a particular topic. Usenet posts are synchronous and persistent, and so many Usenet users develop long-term relationships with a particular newsgroup; status markers and symbols are highly variable by forum. In contrast, Internet Relay Chat, or IRC, is basically a series of textual rooms, or "channels," which are synchronous, but not persistent. In other words, people type back and forth to each other in real time, but the software does not automatically record their conversations; thus, membership is constantly changing as people join and leave the room. Finally, MUDs, or "Multi-User Dungeons," are multi-player textual games, typically fantasy or science-fiction oriented, with a distinct hierarchy of users. Users with higher status, called immortals, Wizards,

or Gods, have privileged access to particular commands, purportedly so they can maintain order and authority. Each of these technologies has different status affordances and different behaviors that are considered high-status. It is necessary to look at older technologies to view Web 2.0 as part of a continuum of computer-mediated communication technologies, rather than viewing it as much popular media does, as some sort of schism. Examining the features of 1990s social media applications may reveal commonalities and differences between older and newer technologies that allow for a comparative study of online status hierarchies. How have these changed? How are they similar to today?

After examining these older technologies, I move on to the popular social media of today. In the present, Web 2.0 technologies like Digg, YouTube, MySpace, Yelp, del.icio.us, and LiveJournal are built by real people in real geographic locations. The San Francisco Bay Area is a world-wide center of technology development. As noted, large software companies like Google, Apple, and Intel are headquartered in nearby Silicon Valley, and San Francisco has a thriving entrepreneurial start-up culture, with more than 275 small technology companies within its city limits. Unlike the dot com era of the late 1990s, which primarily involved e-commerce companies, much of San Francisco's current start-ups are social media sites. As previously discussed, many of the people who work in these startups interact frequently, within an interlocking social web that exists at coffee shops, parties, technology conferences, and workplaces.

It is tempting to call this social web a *community*, but I must qualify the term. The traditional definition of community could be paraphrased as "solitary groups of densely-knit neighbors located in a common geographical space" (see Wellman & Gulia 1997 for similar definitions). Howard Rheingold defines *virtual community* 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). A more inclusive conception of community that can apply to either online or offline communities is Barry Wellman's 2001 definition: "Networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging and social identity." Annalee Saxenian uses the term to describe Silicon Valley: "a prototypical high-tech community" (2002, 18). Given that I am looking at a group that exists in a fairly bounded physical space (the Bay Area), generally shares common cultural features, and communicates in somewhat discrete spaces online, the term would seem to fit. But does this group "provide sociability and support?" Also part of this group are far-flung entrepreneurs, academics, and venture capitalists who live all over the world, imagining themselves to be connected through technology and thus beyond place, but still grounded in the common culture of the Bay Area.

These features of the Web 2.0 world seem to suggest a model other than community. Bruno Latour describes the technoscience community as a *network*:

> If technoscience may be described as being so powerful and yet so small, so concentrated and so dilute, it means it has the characteristics of a network. The word network indicates that resources are concentrated in a few places- the knots and the nodes- which are connected with one another- the links and the mesh: these connections transform the scattered resources into a net that may seem to extend everywhere (1987, 180).

The "links and the mesh" can be mobile devices, internet sites, and electronic messages; the "knots and the nodes" are what Castells and Hall call "technopoles:" planned centers of technology development like Silicon Valley, San Francisco, Seattle, Boston, and Austin (1994). In contrast, Chris Kelty describes the geeks he studies as a *recursive public*, "a particular form of social imaginary through which this group imagines in common the means of their own association, the material forms this imagination takes, and what place it has in the contemporary

development of the Internet" (2005, 186). What is important here is how geeks conceptualize themselves, their relationships to others, and their work. Kelty points out that this imagination takes place as much through technical development as through traditional discourse; thus, the design and use of Web 2.0 applications embody this thinking as well. For now I am using the term "community" as shorthand, but I expect that my fieldwork will reveal more specifics of how Web 2.0 workers conceptualize themselves and their relationships to others, which will require more sophisticated conceptual models.

The Producer/User and the Consumer/User

As mentioned in the introduction, I am studying people who share a role as producer/users. Castells draws a distinction between these two groups:

> By producer/users I refer to those whose practice of the Internet feeds directly back into the technological system, while consumers/users are those recipients of applications and systems who do not interact directly with the development of the Internet, although their uses certainly have an aggregate effect on the evolution of the system (2001, 36).

This dichotomy is complicated somewhat because Web 2.0 applications allow users to create and publish content: for example, a YouTube user can upload a video, vote on other people's contributions, and post comments and replies, making her both a content producer and a website user. This producer-consumer user is often called a "prosumer," a term coined in the pre-Internet era by Alvin Toffler in his 1970 futurist bestseller *Future Shock.* Toffler used this word to describe what he predicted as a shift towards highly customizable, personalized goods designed in a mutual interaction between producer and consumer (facilitated in contemporary contexts by websites like CafePress and Lulu.com, which are basically instant vanity presses). In the Web 2.0 context, prosumer can also be used to describe a shift in media consumption to

"participatory culture," where formerly passive consumers actively engage with media, creating mash-ups, parodies, and satire (Jenkins 2006).[3] These activities are facilitated by internet sites like YouTube and MySpace which allow people to instantly disseminate their work to millions of others, bypassing traditional forms of media distribution such as network television and movie theaters (Benkler 2006). Like most buzzwords, prosumer has many alternate meanings (Wikipedia Contributors 2008). For instance, Don Tapscott and Anthony Williams' book *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything* (2006) introduced the word "prosumption" to refer either to the involvement of end users in the creation of products, such as a sneaker company hiring enthusiasts to participate in the design process, or consumers producing their own goods using raw material from a larger company, such as building robots out of Lego Mindstorms.

The increased opportunity for participation in Web 2.0 technologies is ultimately limited by commercial infrastructure. Only a Google employee can change the YouTube website beyond what every user is allowed to do. Non-profit sites like Wikipedia, which is governed by groups of veteran users, and open-source software like Songbird and Firefox, which are built by many contributors volunteering their time, may allow users to have more control over applications. But these groups still assume a level of engagement and expertise beyond visiting a website once or twice. For the average user, "participation" in most Web 2.0 sites is limited to a set of activities deemed acceptable by the parent company.

My study looks primarily at producer/users: people who work at social media startups who have direct influence over the development of new technologies. These people function as consumer/users in all other contexts. For instance, Louisa is a User Interface designer at Yahoo,

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[3] I would argue that "prosumer" is a problematic term for two reasons: first, it conflates "consumer" with "user" or "citizen," and second, in many ways it reproduces the consumer/producer binary (e.g. those who are not participating in this type of cultural production are solely consumers).

on the Flickr team. She is an avid user of Dodgeball (a Google property), Wikipedia (a non-profit organization), and Dopplr (a startup located in London). While she is a producer/user when using Flickr, she is a consumer/user when working with other social media.

In undertaking this research, I will be analyzing how San Francisco social media workers constitute a larger *design constituency* – the individuals and groups that participate in a technology's design (Pfaffenberger 1992, 283) – that influences the development of social media applications. In the Science and Technology Studies (STS) literature, understanding the values and social context of a technology's creators is considered one method for revealing embedded biases. For example, Batya Friedman and Helen Nissenbaum's taxonomy of bias in computer systems locates "pre-existing bias," bias that exists independently from and prior to the creation of a particular technology, in society at large, institutions, and technology creators (1996). Donald MacKenzie (1999) explains that when looking at the "social shaping" of technology, the "social" can be either a specific designer, or a set of social relations. Pfaffenberger writes, "To account fully for a technical design, one must examine the technical culture, social values, aesthetic ethos, and political agendas of the designers" (282). To analyze bias or embedded values in social media technologies, this study will look at two key groups. First, when possible, I will interview the specific designers and creators of social media technologies. This may be a single person, a group of people, or a large company. In some cases, I will be able to study both how a technology is used by social media workers and the company culture and intended use envisioned by its creators. Second, the culture and peer group of the creators constitutes a shared system of social relations. Therefore, identifying the larger, world-wide community of people who work in social media as a coherent design constituency allows analysis of other social media technologies whose creators I may not have access to. The ways in which social media creators

view, discuss, and use technology creates normative presumptions about technology and users that affect how many applications are designed, not just whatever they are working on at the time.

While examining a “design constituency” is one way to identify bias in technology, it is not the only method. Trevor Pinch and Wiebe Bijker, when describing the Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) approach to technology studies, advocate identifying “social groups” involved in technology development, and suggest that different groups ascribe different “meanings” to particular artifacts (1992, 29-30). In the development of the bicycle, for instance, competing interests—such as sports bicyclists, female bicyclists, and bicycle designers—viewed the “problems” and “solutions” of bicycles differently. Pinch and Bijker write that these differences demonstrate the “interpretive flexibility” (40) of any artifact. Similarly, Donald MacKenzie writes that “ the social shaping of technology is, in almost all the cases we know of, a process in which there is no single dominant shaping force” (1999, 16). A more extreme social constructionist might suggest that any technology can be interpreted in any way, making creators’ intent irrelevant. Since many people besides Web 2.0 workers use Web 2.0 technologies, this argument goes, it will be impossible to determine how “status affordances” are taken up by individuals who do not share this background.

However, flexibility and interpretation does not mean that a technology can be fully understood *without* understanding the creators. Bruno LaTour (1992) discusses how technology is an *actant* in society. Technical actors, which LaTour calls the “missing masses” (227), pick up the “social slack,” enforcing certain types of morality or behavior, which LaTour calls “displacing” or “delegating” (228-229). For instance, requiring a driver to put on her seatbelt before starting her car is a way to “delegate” the enforcement of seat belt laws to automotive

technology. In order to understand the ways in which social media technologies "displace" or "delegate" certain non-technically mediated social behaviors, the values of the designers *must* be identified. Therefore, as part of this ethnographic project, the specifics of Bay Area computer culture must be made distinct. While some of the social values of this group may be common to other technical workers (the "California Ideology," Castell's four layers of Internet culture), it will be important to be as specific as possible when describing *social media* workers' culture and values. For instance, the start-up culture is different from large Silicon Valley companies, and Web 2.0 workers tend to be young, social, creative individuals with non-technical interests like music and rock-climbing. Rather than attempting to claim a pure causal relationship between social media workers, the technologies they create, and the effects of these technologies, I wish to understand the pre-suppositions built into the technologies and how they express particular value systems.

Research Questions and Contribution

This study makes four primary contributions to interdisciplinary literature. First, examining this community will illuminate how status changes in technologically saturated milieus. I hypothesize that status markers, conspicuous consumption, and the meaning of status differ in highly technical contexts from status models that assume face-to-face display. To re-think ideas of conspicuous consumption, I will investigate the relationship of my ethnographic informants to status symbols in both face-to-face and mediated communication contexts. Second, previous ethnographies of internet communities presume an online/offline split that is nonexistent in many contemporary contexts, requiring a re-theorizing of this schism by examining a group with socially integrated online and offline environments. Third, isolating status as a variable will broaden current understanding of how software features contribute to the creation and

maintenance of hierarchical inequality, with particular emphasis on how status is affected by gender, expertise, linguistic competence, and so forth. Fourth, by examining the design constituency of contemporary social media, I aim to understand how the status hierarchies of this community affect the development and creation of social media applications. The socio-cultural context of media production and its influence on media content has been studied with regard to advertising (Davila 2001), news (Fishman 1980; Hannerz 2004), soap operas and entertainment programs (Skuse 1999), but there have been few studies of technology development that take this approach.

The project is driven by four primary concerns: first, to examine how the features of certain interactive internet applications, both past and present, affect how status is maintained, displayed, or resisted; second, to determine the relationship between status hierarchies in "online" and "offline" social spaces used by the same community; third, to understand how status hierarchies affect the development and creation of social media applications; and fourth, to examine how status markers, particularly consumption, function in internet environments. This involves the following specific objectives:

1. <u>How did the features of past social media applications contribute to status hierarchies?</u>

I will use historical methods to construct a history of older forms of social media, specifically Usenet, Internet Relay Chat (IRC), and Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs), using user accounts augmented with secondary sources like academic articles, books, documentary films, interviews, popular journalism, and so forth. In the secondary literature I will focus on identifying discursive constructions and rhetorics of technology, specific status hierarchies, and social practices. I will identify means of status display in each technology by analyzing software mechanisms, using

critical discourse analysis and semiotics to identify embedded discourses, embodied values, and normative concepts of the user, as well as status affordances.

2. What is the status hierarchy in the social media community?

This data will be collected through individual interviews with approximately 30 community members. Their self-reporting will be compared with my own observation of community interaction in events such as conferences, professional workshops, and the like, where I will identify high-status and low-status behaviors and map the status hierarchy of the group.

3. How do online and offline practices demonstrate, reinforce, or change this status hierarchy?

Status practices will be identified through participant observation in community activities, spaces like coffee shops, and events. I will pay particular attention to the use of technology and how this contributes to or resists the maintenance of status hierarchies. Relevant data collected through interviews will be compared to these observations. In follow-up interviews, I will ask informants to clarify practices I have identified as high or low status.

4. How does communication through social media affect a spatially bounded community that also exists in "real world" interactions?

Through observation, spatial analysis, and discourse analysis of five social media sites used by the community, I will compare the status hierarchy and communicative practices observed online with that observed offline. In interviews, informants will be asked about their communicative choices and practices. I will observe technology use in places like workplaces, coffee shops and parties to understand the nuances of social media use.

5. How does consumption, as a social process, change when it takes place in online applications without face-to-face display?

Critical marketing scholars Firat and Dholakia have a four-part scale for determining consumption processes in different contexts: "the social relationship entailed in consumption, the degree of the public nature of the act and the object consumed, the participation of the consumer in the development or production of the product, and the intensity of activity in consumption" (1988, 415). I will use this scale to understand consumption practices in both face-to-face communication and in the five social media sites used by the community identified in the fourth research question.

6. Does the status hierarchy of social media creators affect the types of applications that are developed, funded, and studied, and if so, in what ways?

The primary source of this data will be observing two social media workplaces for one week each during the fieldwork period. Interview data from application developers, as well as data collected in informal sessions, will augment these findings. Application funding will be determined through conversations with venture capitalists and research into the economy of the San Francisco technology community (local press, business sources, and so forth).

7. What is the relationship between status hierarchies in the social media community and the way that users are conceptualized?

While "embedded" in social media companies, I will observe how workers discuss users and what assumptions are made. I will also observe development meetings, read functional specifications and requirements documents, and interview developers and project managers.

Through this research, I also hope to contribute to scholarly work on online consumption. E-commerce has been extensively studied in the business literature, in terms of how-to guides, management, economics, consumer psychology, and marketing, but this work generally does not conceptualize consumption as more than the buying and selling of physical goods. I view online consumption as more than e-commerce. Cultural studies of consumerism, consumption, and luxury goods have, with a few notable exceptions, ignored online interactions. Consumption of media online has been extensively theorized particularly with regard to creative consumption and the breakdown of the consumer-producer binary (Jenkins 2006, Andrejevic 2008). However, since most of these concepts assume physical, face-to-face display, this needs to be re-theorized for mediated interactions. This project aims to contribute to a theory of status and consumption in cyberculture studies that takes into account the complicated interplay of online and offline interaction. Through ethnographic work, I hope to position modern social media communities as integrated with offline interactions, problematizing the traditional dichotomy of online and offline. I look at internet communication as lived experience that takes place in physical space, rather than something separate from everyday life.

Literature Review

Introduction

This project is multidisciplinary in nature and spans a wide literature in sociology, economics, anthropology, and social psychology, in addition to cultural theory, cyberculture

studies and communication. In order to somewhat limit the broad questions around status and social media, I have divided the literature into the following categories: sociological, economic, and anthropological literature on status; theories of status display through commodity goods, also known as conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1899); online status, including social capital, reputation systems, and motivation for online participation; and work on online consumption. This literature will allow me to accomplish three things: first, to understand general theories of status in society; second, to investigate the links between status and consumption; and third, to identify gaps in the literature around online social status. Since, however, these subjects are so broad, it is impossible to cover all that has been written on this subject. Research will continue as I proceed further with the dissertation.

There is considerable work on status and consumption in economics, business, and marketing. However, while cultural historians and theorists are actively engaged with interrogating consumer society (Cross 1993; Schor & Holt 2000; Cohen 2003; Berger 2005), social theorists typically dismiss the links between consumption and status as "materialism" and position this process as frivolous, wasteful, or immoral (Galbraith 1958; Schor 1999; Frank 2000). The counter-globalization, anti-corporate point of view tends to view luxury consumers at best as "cultural dupes" purchasing useless goods, and at worst as actively complicit in contributing to sweatshop labor, outsourcing of jobs to other countries, and so forth (Klein 2000; Ritzer 2001). This moralistic attitude toward luxury goods and the general pursuit of status has precluded serious study (Twitchell 2002).[4] While there is a difference between luxury consumption and conspicuous consumption (conspicuous consumption necessitates visibility

[4] Michael Schudson's 2002 essay "Delectable Materialism" critiques these "long-standing intellectual traditions of distrust of material goods" as bourgeois holdovers from Puritan, Quaker, and republican views of American life. He calls for an end to the "snickering, joking, and invariably hypocritical posturing of most criticism of consumer culture" in favor of less ambivalent theories of consumption.

rather than expense, and luxury consumption does not require visibility), the latter has been studied primarily by economists (Mason 1991; Bagwell & Bernheim 1996; Silver 2002). Likewise, there are a small number of contemporary ethnographic studies of consumption which view it as a broader process beyond the point of purchase (Chin 2001; Gregory 2006), and few which discuss luxury consumption specifically (Twitchell 2002; Sherman 2007). There is little work on online consumption outside of the business and marketing literature, and no large-scale studies of online consumption as a social process.

The word "status" comes from the Latin word for "standing" (Turner 1988, 2). Status is a commonly-used term (expressions like "status symbols," "high status," and so forth), and this contributes to a sense that it is analytically vague or even useless (1). Nevertheless, Bryan Turner, in his review of the sociological literature on status, defines it as "a position in society, conferring rights and obligations upon a person as a citizen within a political community" (2). I will explore the relationships between status and similar constructs, such as social capital and conspicuous consumption, later in this proposal. Before discussing the sociological literature in depth, it is necessary to briefly address class. Classical Marxism defines social class as determined by the relationship between work and labor or ownership of property and means of production. Weber's three-component theory of stratification complicates this, defining class as comprising wealth, prestige, and power. Power is further sub-divided into class power, social power, and political power. In a Weberian sense, social status would fall into the "social power" category. I will do more research during this project on sociological schema of social class.

Regardless, 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 (in contrast, European sociologists are more likely to theorize on the basis of class). They write:

> Taking a broadly Weberian position, we regard a class structure as one formed by the social relations of economic life or, more specifically, by relations in labour markets and production units. Thus, a primary level of differentiation of class positions is that which sets apart employers, self-employed workers and employees (3).

Thus, class is primarily economic in nature. Chan and Goldthorpe maintain that social class is not necessarily hierarchical and that the 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 (6).

The distinction between the two can be exemplified 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 a professor earning $80,000 a year is a higher status individual than a CEO with a GED earning a million dollars a year (2000). While this might imply universal status norms rather than those relative to particular groups, the valance of status is more complex. In many social groups, the CEO may be perceived as higher status than the professor; making generalizations difficult.

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. Cultural capital, such as a prestigious university education, builds on itself. Getting into Harvard, for example, requires working to obtain other forms of capital, like SAT

preparation to attain high standardized test scores, access to extracurricular activities, networking with Harvard alumni, and so forth. Understanding and knowing how to access these resources is typically learned from parents, peers, or school; it has to 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. Thus, social class formation is independent from accumulating income, but is dependent on cultural and social reproduction. Bourdieu concluded that the class system is reproduced through "symbolic domination" and the education system (1979).

While I need to undertake more research on my position with regard to a particular status or class schema, I am conceptualizing status as more specific and located than class. Regardless of an individual's class position, he or she will have different status in different communities. Status stratification exists within all communities irrespective of class. The highest status parent in the PTA will not necessarily be the wealthiest, and in a group where everyone's wealth is equal, there will still be differences in status. One way to avoid a class-based analysis is to locate status in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991). A community of practice is defined as a group of people sharing the pursuit of a particular enterprise. This means that the variables involved are community-specific, and that the focus is on the activities of the community, rather than the practice that they are working towards. Furthermore, objects and organizations can be imbued with status as well as people – a high-status car versus a low-status car, or a high-status college versus a low-status one. In the next section, I present an overview of general sociological research on status.

Status

I will begin by discussing status from a sociological perspective. As previously mentioned, status is defined as a person (place, object, organization)'s perceived position in society. This can be dependent on a wide variety of variables, including social class, gender, race, education, income, place of residence, hobbies, and so forth. Sociologists make several important distinctions between types of status. First, there is a difference between "ascribed status" – attributes like race, gender, and age, which a person has no control over—and "achieved status," attributes like education or job title which are dependent on individual achievement.[5] Second, status can be conceptualized either as a lifestyle, or as a set of political-legal entitlements (e.g. your citizenship status or marriage status); I am using the former definition. Third, there is a difference between status groups, who all roughly share the same status (e.g. a popular fraternity), and status within a group (the social hierarchy within the fraternity, of the president down to the pledges). Finally, sociologists distinguish between self-perceived status and externally defined status (Turner 1988, 3-5).

The sociological examination of status is primarily influenced by two perspectives, that of Marx and Weber. Whereas Marx held that social divisions, or the superstructure, are predicated upon economic inequality, or substructure, 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.

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[5] 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, has an ideological function.

I reject the economically determinist Marxist point of view in favor of what might be called a cultural or anthropological position. Rather than viewing culture as a strictly hierarchical set of striations ("high culture" versus "popular culture"), a model that was prevalent in the United States from the early 1900s to as recently as the 1970s (Crane 1992; DiMaggio 1992), I adhere to one in which multiple, overlapping "taste cultures" coexist simultaneously (Gans 1999). Therefore, rather than attempting to create a unified theory of social status, stratification, and class, I am more interested in investigating status on a micro-level, in terms of located communities of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991). This also moves away from sociological attempts to determine what determines an individual's status in society as a whole ("status crystallization" or "status consistency"; Lenski 1961), and instead looks at what might determine an individual's status within a particular taste culture or community of practice.

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" (294). For instance, Goffman mentions the nouveaux riche, who improperly use "costly symbols" (303). Goffman provides a taxonomy of checks on the "misrepresentation" of class status through symbols, such as high price or availability (298). Today, the idea of the "nouveaux riche" seems quaint, since status symbols like Humvees and Louis Vuitton bags are pursued by people in all walks of life, and counterfeit goods are widely viewed as morally acceptable (Thomas 2007). One useful idea is that status symbols carry both *categorical significance* (identify the social status of the person displaying it) and *expressive significance* (express the point of view, style, and values of person displaying it)

(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). I maintain that the two are not mutually exclusive, but we must think of "status" as a more flexible, mutable concept than modernists did.

So why do people pursue status? From a sociological perspective, status is usually seen as a means to an end: a way to gain resources, increase social capital, and therefore attain power (Lin 1990; Thye 2000; Huberman, Loch & Önçüler 2004). This is conceptualized similarly in economics, as is discussed in the next section. However, social psychology has identified status-seeking as emotionally satisfying. Huberman, Loch and Önçüler show that status is often pursued as an emotional end in and of itself and not as the means to something else (2004).

Bourdieu emphasizes distinction as a cultural practice, and taste as a learned set of culturally determined preferences linked to class origins (1979). Status can also be classified as a set of practices; Turner writes, "Social status involves practices which emphasize and exhibit cultural distinctions and differences which are a crucial feature of all social stratification" (1988, 66). Indeed, knowledge *of* practice that creates boundaries between insiders and outsiders is an important component of status. 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 2006). Similarly, Veblen's concept of conspicuous consumption describes elaborate and expensive rituals performed by the upper class to demonstrate an abundance of free time, signifying wealth (1899). Ritzer locates Veblen within 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).

Status and Consumption

Status encompasses many aspects besides conspicuous consumption. However, being as this project is partially focused on conceptualizing consumption as an online social process, a review of the pertinent literature is necessary. First, I note that status consumption is *not* the same thing as conspicuous consumption, although these two things are often conflated in the literature (O'Cass & McEwen 2004). O'Cass & McEwen define *status consumption* as "the behavioral tendency to value status and acquire and consume products that provide status to the individual," whereas *conspicuous consumption* is defined as "the tendency for individuals to enhance their image, through overt consumption of possessions, which communicates status to others" (34). Regardless, these terms are used interchangeably in much of the literature which follows, although I will attempt to make distinctions when possible.

Thorstein Veblen wrote *The Theory of the Leisure Class* in 1899 to challenge two doctrines: that the self-interest of the capitalist class necessarily equated to the interest of the larger community, and that economic progress was fueled by the competitive system (Wolfe 2001). Veblen's concept of "conspicuous consumption" theorized that consumption patterns of the upper class functioned as vicarious displays of wealth, and, by proxy, reputation, esteem, and status. This constituted a fundamental critique of the rational economic actor (and the Protestant work ethic). Veblen writes that "the wife, or chief wife, consumes for [the man] in conspicuous leisure, thereby putting in evidence his ability to sustain large pecuniary damage without impairing his superior opulence" (1899, 48). The richer the man, the more useless, frivolous, and conspicuous the consumption patterns of his household must be, manifesting in outrageous

outfits, elaborate dinner rituals, or ostentatious speech acts. Veblen notes that the "ceremonial" (65) role of the vicarious consumer extends to middle-class households, where women create comfortable or beautiful homes to show their husbands' "pecuniary strength" (62, 64). The subject of consumption is the man and the object is the woman; female agency within consumer culture is sublimated to that of her husband or father. Mary Louise Roberts writes, "For although, unlike a slave, she is allowed to consume, that consumption is always vicarious—for another, not for her. It marks her as a commodity herself, no less than the big house or fancy car. She provides tangible proof of her husband's wealth through her self-ornamentation and vicarious leisure" (1998, 819).

Contemporary sociologists and economists continue to analyze the use of visible marker possessions to connote social status (Featherstone 1991; Giddens 1991; Bagwell & Berhneim 1996). Featherstone discusses how the recent increase in luxury goods, as well as the 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). 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" (1). Ritzer emphasizes the expense aspect of status consumption, writing:

> .. Social standing or status is not intrinsic to the actual consumer object itself (Marx's use value), but from the expensiveness of the consumer object (exchange value). The qualities of the consumer object itself are superfluous; what is important is the wealth and status it signifies (2001, 210).

Similarly, Baudrillard deconstructs the relationship between objects and needs, claiming that they are, for the most part, interchangeable (1998). A consumer can convey sexiness through such disparate objects/practices as clothing, car, food, or gym membership. So, objects have both

value in terms of utility (a Jaguar convertible can take you to work or your kids to school) and as a sign (a Jaguar conveys sophistication, taste, wealth, and sexual prowess).

Roger Mason's *The Economics of Conspicuous Consumption* (1991) traces analysis of this process from the 1700s to the present. He maintains that economists have repeatedly ignored the study of conspicuous consumption, despite it being a major driver of consumer purchasing and marketing efforts. Mason isolates four reasons why this might be so: that economists see ostentation and emulation as morally repugnant; that conspicuous consumption seems irrational; that "truly ostentatious" display is presumed to be limited to small elite; and that such a subject seems more suited to social psychology or sociology than economics. While this may have been true fifteen years ago, Mason's call to action has since been answered, as there are more studies of conspicuous consumption in economics than any other subject. The literature is too broad to be comprehensively summarized, but I will attempt to outline the broad geographies of the subject.

Economists have elaborated on the theory of conspicuous consumption, also known as the "Veblen effect," meaning "when consumers exhibit a willingness to pay a higher price for a functionally equivalent good" (Bagwell & Bernheim 1996). This is similar to the discussion of use versus exchange value in cultural theory. Most of these studies are descriptive, but do provide a useful vocabulary. The signaling properties of a good refer to its ability to provide information to outside observers about the possessor's social status (Ireland 1992). Robert Frank makes a distinction between positional and non-positional goods, where the value of positional goods "depends relatively strongly on how they compare with things owned by others. Goods that depend relatively less strongly on such comparisons" are "non-positional" (1985, 101). Charles and Hurst et. al (2007) point out that commodities that represent "visible consumption"

must be obviously worth a certain amount, so that their value is self-evident, and *portable,* so that they can be observed across a variety of interactions. Corneo and Jeanne describe how conspicuous consumption varies depending on status incentives (1997). For instance, there is a difference between the "bandwagon effect" (a desire to avoid social ostracism) and the "snob effect" (the desire to be identified as prestigious by *not* doing what everyone else is doing). In the first instance, a family might get cable television because it is normative in their peer group and to go without it would be seen as odd; in the latter, a girl might not want a Coach purse because they are too common and, instead, want a more exclusive, and expensive, Botkier bag.

Economists have also examined motives for conspicuous consumption. While some sociologists have posited that status is a fundamentally human activity (Turner, 1988), many economists view status seeking as a means to an end. Hopkins and Kornienko summarize: "Many economists would be happier with the alternative possibility that agents can have an "instrumental" concern for status, that is, they do not value status itself but seek it because high status allows better consumption opportunities" (2004, 4). For instance, commodity goods can be used to signal marriageability through wealth. The idea that economists would be "happier" with such a goal-oriented approach is because the intrinsic self-satisfaction, pleasure, or enjoyment in conspicuous consumption or the purchase of luxury goods is almost never discussed in the economics literature. Instead, economists often position the consumption of luxury goods as de facto irrational or inefficient. For instance, Ireland (1994) writes:

> The importance of our topic and analysis is clear since it offers an explanation for otherwise bizarre behaviour. Examples are the high premia paid for designer labels on clothes, the replacement of clothes merely to follow fashion, and the high expenditure in some households on cars or holidays. Sometimes such expenditure leads to social problems and demands for interference with the principle of consumer sovereignty (92).

This provides some evidence for Mason's claim.

While these economic studies provide a useful vocabulary with which to interrogate the intricacies of conspicuous consumption, they are not particularly useful in understanding the *process* of conspicuous consumption. Neoclassical economics tends to assume a "maximalist rational utility" subject position where individuals make decisions based on what is "best" for them (Hopkins & Kornienko 2004). Economics also has a universalizing tendency whereby economic processes seemingly take place outside of history, and are assumed to be applicable to all individuals equally. This point of view has been critiqued by feminists as assuming an objective, emotion-less individual who is unaffected by social processes such as race, class, or gender; as using mathematical modeling to justify the status quo; and as ignoring ideology completely (Blank 1993; Ferber 1995). Since conspicuous consumption depends on signaling one's status relative to one's peers, contemporary economists have begun to look at context, variation and difference. For example, Charles, Hurst, and Roussanov (2007) compared conspicuous consumption among white, Black, and Hispanic families in a sensitive exploration of the racialization of economic difference. While this type of socioeconomic research shares many problematic discursive elements with neoclassical economics (representing people as information types, obsession with statistics and mathematical modeling, and so on), it is also likely to be fruitful for my work. I will continue to review the considerable economics literature for relevant scholarship.

The Anthropology of Consumption

Cultural anthropologists have expanded consumption to encompass social processes beyond the buying and selling of commodity goods. While consumption typically refers to buying consumer goods, it has been further theorized as an active process that encompasses use and discourse as well as non-goods like media and services (de Certeau 1984; Chin 2001). Arjun

Appadurai (1986), Igor Kopytoff (1986), and Margaret Radin (2001) have explicated the culturally and socially variable process of commoditization, or how objects move in and out of the commodity sphere. The social practices that constitute legitimate acts of consumption reveal cultural and ideological premises as markers of appropriateness, morality, and so forth (Kopytoff 1986), requiring located understanding of consumption within particular communities of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991).[6] "Consumer culture" thus refers to an array of social forces, objects, identities, and ideologies that constellate around mass media, advertising, and the buying and selling of goods in late modernity, whereas "consumerism," in contrast, is an ideological concept that postulates the purchasing of objects as the path to personal happiness.

Furthermore, the idea of the "commodity" is socially located. The Marxist idea of use value versus exchange value holds that an object's value can extend far beyond the actual economic or labor costs that go into its creation. For example, a diamond is neither rare nor difficult to procure, but still commands an extraordinary degree of social value (which is at least partially due to artificial restriction by the diamond industry). This value can also be explained by how diamonds have come to represent dominant values like heterosexual love and monogamy. The diamond thus illustrates how commodity goods, functioning as status markers, powerfully stand in for hegemonic social norms. Igor Kopykoff calls for understanding the "biography" of commodity objects, and shows how the commodification (and de-commodification) of certain objects is first, a fluctuating social process that is historically and socially located, and second, revealing of social assumptions (1986). Similarly, Elizabeth Radin's work on commodities argues that the removal of certain goods and services from the

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[6] Radin sees this process as inherently gendered. The non-commodified realm includes children, organs, and sexual practices, all of which can be socially located in female gendered spaces. The power differentials inherent in the criminalization of sex work are especially illuminating when set in the context of contemporary patriarchy.

commodity sphere, such as sexual acts, organs, and children, demonstrates particular social values rather than any inherent property of the non-commodity goods (2001).

Furthermore, Steven Silver's study of status through consumption, while primarily economic, quantitative, and focusing on creating a unified framework for studying status, shows the importance of environment in determining the status of certain activities (2002). As previously discussed in the economics literature, status activities are situated practices, and it is important to locate these status activities in order to understand them. Bourdieu's *Distinction* is primarily concerned with how taste is taught, normalized and thus essentialized; as previously discussed, good taste, rather than being a "natural" property of the upper-class, is a learned series of cultural codes, inherently historical, and correspondent to one's education and social background (1979). Bourdieu worked almost entirely in France, and there are clear differences in the American context, showing the importance of location. James Twitchell discusses how the finer points of luxury consumption are learned, so the ability to distinguish between a Cartier or Tiffany necklace clasp becomes a status symbol in and of itself (2002). Therefore, *like commodities,* status goods are primarily given meaning within communities of practice, and must be investigated as such. This meaning may be implicitly defined against other commodities who silently function as points of opposition.

Ethnographic work can reveal the tensions in consumerism and create more sophisticated conceptualizations of the process than simply condemning it. James Twitchell's study of luxury, *Living It Up*, criticizes the Juliet Schor and J.K. Galbraith critique of conspicuous consumption. Twitchell undertook a somewhat quixotic ethnographic study of luxury shopping, visiting exclusive boutiques in Manhattan, Beverly Hills, and Palm Springs. He allows that luxury consumption may have pleasurable aspects, as the goods themselves can be quite beautiful.

Furthermore, the experience of purchasing luxury goods in a store environment interpellates a particular subject position through deference displayed in service work (see also Cameron 2000) as well as the store environment itself. Rachel Sherman's study of luxury hotels, *Class Acts* (2007) deals explicitly with the tensions and challenges involved in normalizing elite consumption. While many of the hotels Sherman discusses are impressive, and the people who work in them proud of their customer service skills, she outlines how discourse makes service work invisible and naturalizes severe income inequality. The high-status subject within consumption is interpolated through environment and discursive construction. Crispin Thurlow and Adam Jaworski's critical discourse analysis of airline frequent flyer program websites and brochures demonstrates the construction of a *super-elite* subject position through personalization, hierarchy, and the use of metaphors that signal exclusivity and superiority (2006). These three studies show how high-status objects and practices are situated in particular places and expressed through discourse and environmental cues, and thus how status and consumption are complex processes.

<u>Status Online</u>

The first part of this project involves an in-depth historical study of how status functioned in early textual internet communication, used to provide context for contemporary applications. Most ethnographic studies of early online communities include partial discussions of status. Rhiannon Bury's study of X-Files fan communities on Usenet found that social status depended on social capital, language use, knowledge of the X-Files, and ability to engage in linguistic play. Misspellings, grammatical errors or breaches of the social codes of the community marked low-status behaviors (2005). Similarly, Michele Tepper's study of an urban legends discussion group describes how complicated jokes functioned as insider/outsider markers, serving to gate-keep the

boundaries of the forum, which was open to the public (1997). Nancy Baym's book on soap opera discussion groups named a number of status markers, including the number of messages posted and the years spent on the group (2002). While some of these studies do not specifically refer to status, the mechanisms of high status/low status display can be inferred.

Often, these markers are gendered or raced. A study of sports-related chat rooms by Charles Soukup found that traditionally masculine styles of interaction, such as confrontation, using sexual humor, and making profane or shocking comments, were highly valued. High status individuals possessed the ability to win verbal games and to maintain conversational dominance for long periods of time. Conversely, conversational tactics such as friendly chat, compromise, or valuing alternate points of view were seen as demonstrating weakness and were met with derision, labeled feminine, and considered low-status (1999). Other studies of chat rooms found widespread gender harassment, discouraging "feminine" communication styles (Herring 1999; Li 2005). Similarly, racial descriptors in online environments are often considered inappropriate or low-status when used to express personal identity (Kolko 2000; Nakamura 1999).

It is important to note that these works refer to ten or fifteen year old technologies, assume an early adopter user base, and involve purely textual environments. Current social media technologies have significant differences from these applications (multimodal methods of display, more diverse user base, increased interaction between online and offline social groups), necessitating further research.

Social Capital

One area in which contemporary internet technologies have been discussed with regard to status is the study of social capital. This term is frequently used in internet studies literature, whereas status is not, most likely due to the influence of social network theory on the discipline

in recent years. However, social capital and status are different concepts, the former referring to relationships between people and the value of this within social networks, a general property of community connectedness (Smith 2007). Pierre Bourdieu defines social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (1979, 249). Robert Putnam, who has popularized the study in recent years, writes:

> Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to the properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called “civic virtue.” The difference is that “social capital” calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a sense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital (2000, 19).

Social status, on the other hand, is far broader and can encompass dimensions such as economics, politics, health, and education (Caiazza & Putnam 2002). In other words, social capital may be one dimension of status within a particular community, but social capital is not synonymous with social status. A 1999 study by Edward Glaeser et. al of Harvard undergraduates found that higher status individuals were generally trusted more than lower status individuals. Social capital was thus ascribed to these individuals because of their status; they were not higher status *because* they had social capital. Instead, their status was based on variables like parent’s education and earning power (ascribed status), as well as factors like time spent volunteering (achieved status). While Glaeser’s study is not conclusive, it demonstrates the difference between social capital and status.

Many studies of social capital and internet use have proposed a causal relationship between internet use and decreased social capital (Kraut, Patterson & Lundmark 1996). These effects have been extensively studied, problematized, and largely discounted in the last decade

(Williams 2007). Quan-Haase and Wellman (2004)'s literature review of the relationship between the internet and social capital identifies three broad claims. First, the internet changes social capital (people find others online with similar interests, which diminishes "real-world" communities), second, the internet decreases social capital (people move away from existing real-world networks), and third, the internet augments social capital, combining status quo relationships with the formation of new ones.

Rather than attempting to posit a causal relationship between the internet and social capital gain or loss, I am more interested in studies which look at specific types of internet use and particular communication technologies. These studies have generally determined that while social media leads to increased social capital, this is not universal and is often quite located. For example, Cameron Marlow (2006) found that social bloggers generally had more personal and emotional investment in blogging than did "professional" bloggers, and that this investment correlated with social capital. Social bloggers used hypertext links, e-mail, and comments to form social ties with their readers, increasing social capital. This was in contrast to professional bloggers, who tended to form social ties through offline communication. Nicole Ellison, Cliff Lampe and Charles Steinfield's study of the social networking site Facebook found no correlate between general internet use and social capital, but strong evidence that Facebook helped college students to develop and bridge social ties, correlating with increased self-esteem and satisfaction with college life (2006). Both of these studies show that it is necessary to look at social capital within particular internet technologies rather than attempting to posit generalizations about internet use.

Studies of Reputation Systems

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). Reputation mechanisms could be considered a type of status affordance, with a few significant differences. First, reputation mechanisms intrinsically 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 interactions are emotional, and thus the mutual performance of trust or reputation is not always monitored, and failures are often forgiven rather than sanctioned (in Jøsang et al 2007). For instance, a person may trust someone despite a bad reputation, or may trust them despite past transgressions, based on an ineffable quality difficult to determine in a formula. 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. I concur with Williamson and believe that looking at status affordances as one part of a more complex status taxonomy will reveal the more nuanced, complex ways in which status functions. While reputation mechanisms are not displaying status, they are good examples of features designed to convey specific types of social information.

The best-known and most-studied reputation system is eBay's Feedback, which was designed to overcome the information asymmetry between buyer and seller (Jøsang et. al 2007). In the "real world," shoppers have developed a variety of ways to assess the reliability of retailers, like examining the items in person, the brand's reputation, the financial stability of the store as demonstrated through expensive marketing campaigns or retail success, and community accountability, particularly with mom-and-pop establishments, but increasingly with larger companies as well. These trust cues allow shoppers to feel comfortable about making a

purchase.[7] In contrast, shopping on eBay involves buying from strangers, whose quality of goods, honesty, and timeliness is difficult to assess. Furthermore, while the buyer has relatively little information about the seller or the quality of her goods, the seller only needs to know whether the buyer can pay (Resnick & Zeckhauser 2002). EBay's reputation system was an attempt to compensate for the lack of trust cues by creating a history for both buyers and sellers, with three overall goals: first, to allow buyers to distinguish trustworthy from non-trustworthy sellers, second, to encourage trustworthiness, and third, to discourage non-trustworthy people from participation on the site (Resnick & Zeckhauser 2002). The popularity of eBay's Feedback led to the development of similar mechanisms for reviews, content contribution, social networking sites and authorship (Sundarensen 2007). Many social media sites like Digg, Wikipedia, YouTube and Amazon.com use a type of reputation mechanism.

What interests me about reputation mechanisms is that they are both *prescriptive* and *descriptive*. They *describe* a person or their contributions in terms that make it easy to spot high or low "quality" contributions, requiring a codification of reputation in some sort of measurable way. Reputation mechanisms by design must operationalize "trustworthiness," creating a metric for trust that makes it clear what must be done to improve reputation. Thus, reputation mechanisms define, or *prescribe*, intended behavior. They also create a determination of "quality" for a site's users or contributions and determine what is appropriate or inappropriate behavior. For instance, Amazon's review system is highly ranked and ordered and encourages people to submit thousands of reviews. Shay David and Trevor Pinch used custom-built software to parse existing reviews and found that hundreds were exact duplicates, modified slightly for different products (2006). This would explain how top Amazon reviewers are credited with more

[7] Trust cues in non-auction 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. See Kunz & Osborne 2004.

than five thousand reviews, which naturally calls into question their quality. If quantity was *not* a reputational mechanism, this type of behavior might not happen. Thus, reputation mechanisms can create incentives to "game" the system.

Studies of Motivations for Internet Participation

Many researchers have wondered why people contribute to online communities. Most of these studies have examined communities of practice like open-source software production and Usenet, where there is an assumption that the users are freely contributing knowledge to a public good that could, instead, be charged for. Wang and Fesenmaier's study of online travel communities asks the following research questions, which exemplify this spirit:

> 1. Why would anyone be willing to give away important information and valuable advice?
> 2. What can explain the amount of cooperation that occurs in online communities? and
> 3. How can businesses get individuals to contribute to the provision of a public good despite the temptation to free ride? (2003, 34)

There is an underlying assumption that knowledge contribution either has no personal reward for the user, or has some sort of instrumental reward (improving software development skills to get a better job), and therefore that users are acting out of selfless, altruistic motivations. However, Wang and Fesenmaier conclude that social aspects are a major driver in contributing, and they advise system designers to create persistent identities and methods of keeping track of past actions. This suggests that status within a community is a more potent motivator than pure altruism.

Eric Raymond's 1998 piece "Homesteading the Noosphere" describes the open-source hacker culture as a gift economy, in which reputation is accrued by giving things away. (Raymond uses "reputation" synonymously with "status," "prestige," or "peer repute," a more

multi-faceted concept than assumed by the reputation mechanisms described previously.) He gives three reasons why social status is a strong motivational force: it is a primary reward, it encourages "attention and cooperation" from peers, and it may transfer to an exchange economy and thus translate to tangible goods. He maintains that status is more important to the hacker community than a "real-world" gift economy, since the contributions of hackers are sophisticated and can be judged accurately only by peers, and because there are no other ways to accrue status besides peer approval. (The fact that many free software developers contribute without recognition complicates Raymond's claim.) Wang and Fesenmaier argue that gift economies assume future reciprocity, whereas it is often unclear how many people use information goods in group situations (2003, 35). But Raymond's point still stands; he is assuming that status accrues from the peer group of people who make information goods, not the people who use the information goods. For example, Susan Bryant, Andrea Forte and Amy Bruckman's study of Wikipedia shows how users become socialized into the website as a community of practice. As they move from novice to full users, attention and recognition from other Wikipedians becomes an important motivating factor (2005). For instance, having an article chosen as a "Featured Article" is a status symbol. Thus, it is not the opinions of thousands of Wikipedia lurkers that matter; status is determined by the user's peer group, other content creators.

Tedjamulia et. al (2005) divide these factors into two categories: "intrinsic" and "extrinsic" motivations. Intrinsic, or altruistic, motivations include "community citizenship, generalized reciprocity, moral obligation, and pro-social behavior." Extrinsic motivations are "self-interest" or "self-benefit" (2), although they also mention that "epinions.com offers profit sharing, Slashdot.com offers feedback and recognition, and Coolsolutions.com offers T-shirts that symbolize that the wearer has made a meaningful contribution" (2). The authors refer to

studies that link extrinsic rewards to decreased community contribution, but feedback and recognition are fundamentally different from money or t-shirts, in that the former has meaning specifically within the community of practice. Thus, even though only a few studies specifically focus on status as a motivator for community participation, it appears to be a significant aspect of participation in studies of many different communities of practice.

Studies of Online Consumption

The majority of work on online consumption is in the business and marketing literature, and is limited in its usefulness for this project. For instance, Robert Kozinets's study of "e-tribalized marketing" looks at online communities devoted to brands or products. However, rather than delving into the social practices of site members or how this type of consumption interacts with purchasing, Kozinet details how companies can harness the energy of such communities for marketing purposes (1999). Similarly, publications like the *Journal of Organizational Computing & Electronic Commerce,* the *Journal of Internet Commerce* and *Internet Business News* are aimed at a professional audience who see the internet as a money-making tool. There are countless books on e-business, e-commerce, and internet marketing that take this instrumental point of view, which is tangential to the goals of this dissertation.

Mark Poster's essay "Consumption and Digital Commodities" provides a useful framework for analyzing consumption from a historical point of view. He identifies four variables by which consumption can differ based on context, taken from Firat and Dholakia's *Consuming People*: "the social relationship entailed in consumption, the degree of the public nature of the act and the object consumed, the participation of the consumer in the development or production of the product, and the intensity of activity in consumption" (1988, 415). Poster

uses this model primarily to analyze *digital* goods, music, movies, and e-books. He makes the oft-repeated claim that digital media causes "consumers [to] become producers as the functions of reproduction and distribution are structured in the Internet as automatic operations" (2004, 418). Consumption of media online has been extensively theorized, particularly with regard to creative consumption and the breakdown of the consumer-producer binary (Andrejevic 2008; Jenkins 2006). Earlier, I mentioned the theory that digital media facilitates new types of consumption practices, in terms of the democratic rhetoric that typically follows this claim– Poster, for instance, compares music filesharing to the "labor strikes of the 1930s" (419). But it is important to remember that online consumption refers to more than just the consumption of digital goods. May and Hearn use cellphones to demonstrate how "commodification penetrates new geographical spaces with existing products or innovations that enable the consumption process to be applied in new social, cultural or psychological spaces" (2005, 199). They describe new uses of mobile devices in social life, as cell phones are integrated with entertainment products, broadband internet, and personalization options. While the mobile phone is a physical object, it is deeply intertwined with digital objects and digital communication. My study will examine the myriad ways that consumption takes place online besides digital objects and e-commerce.

Methodology

Since the subject of my inquiry is both social (a particular community) and technical (the communicative tools used by this community), this project is multi-methodological by design, using four primary methods: the history of technology, ethnography, critical discourse analysis, and semiotics. My primary method is ethnography, influenced by the traditions of media

ethnography, "virtual" or "digital" ethnography, and the anthropology of technology. From media ethnography, I take the imperative to study media use as located practice. Ethnographic studies of the internet have primarily collected textual communicative data from online communities, like forums or chat rooms (Baym 2000, Kendall 2002, Campbell 2004, Bury 2005). While I will be collecting data online, my ethnographic work will take place in the San Francisco Bay Area, observing how people use technology, and how computer-mediated communication relates to face-to-face or co-present communication choices. Ethnographic data will be analyzed using critical discourse analysis and semiotics to identify common discursive elements. To examine social media websites, I will identify mechanisms and means of status display by analyzing the software mechanisms, using critical discourse analysis and semiotics to identify embedded discourses, embodied values, and normative concepts of the user, as well as status affordances. Historical methods will be used to understand status practices in three older forms of media: IRC, Usenet, and MUDs.

Historical Research

The first part of this project looks at the history of status affordances in social media technologies from the 1990s to the present, focusing on three textual communication applications: Internet Relay Chat (IRC), USENET, and Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs). This will allow me to accomplish two things: first, to position contemporary social media use within a web of social practice and larger cultural history, and second, to compare status affordances and emergent mechanisms in early applications with Web 2.0 sites. Primary sources include screenshots and legacy software applications; IRC still exists in the same form that it did 15 years ago, while Google has archived much of Usenet. However, much of this communication is non-persistent and, as such, is very difficult to preserve. As Roy Rosenzweig writes, "Even

relatively simple documents that appear to have direct print analogs turn out to be more complex…multimedia programs, which generally rely on complicated combinations of hardware and software, quickly become obsolete. Nor is there any good way to preserve interactive and experiential digital creations" (2003). Google's Usenet archive consists of thousands of individual communities, so while comprehensive work is prohibitive, I will be able to access a great deal of primary source material. Since IRC is still an active medium, current chats may also illuminate status pursuits; I will use older chat logs whenever possible..

I will also use secondary sources like histories and user-written accounts of participation in early internet communication. Some of this work is widely available on the web and other accounts exist in published internet histories, such as *Netizens* (Hauben & Hauben 1997). Academic studies of these communities often include conversational excerpts and ethnographic evidence which will prove very useful. Archival sources will be used as appropriate (see next section). Finally, I will use popular sources such as documentary films, interviews, business journalism, and so forth. This literature will be used to identify dominant technical discourses and possible interview subjects. While most of my interviews will be done as part of my ethnographic work, I will be in Northern California and key players in early technologies may be located in the Silicon Valley area. If so, I will construct primary source materials from interviews using an oral history approach. I am aware of the biases of oral history, due to the lack of material from those who do not wish to discuss their past, those who are not known to the interviewer, and those who are no longer alive (Lummis 1987), but I believe that this material will complement the rest of my source work.

Several archives appropriate for this project are online, such as the Center for History and New Media's History of Usenet project (2004), which archives surveys of users and accounts of

user behavior. There is also an online archive for the History of Usenet mailing list (Jones 1998). Research resources for IRC and MUDs are less formal, such as the website IRC.org (2005). The Charles Babbage Institute at the University of Minnesota's online archive includes a comprehensive oral history database, which may be useful for user or creator accounts of all three applications. Since I will be in close proximity to the Computer History Museum in Mountain View, California during my fieldwork, I expect that much of my archival or primary research will be conducted using their archives. This museum holds several key internet history archives, and provides 3 free hours of archival use to students. This research will augment my historical research on status hierarchies in older forms of social media.

Methodologically, I draw primarily from the History of Technology literature, which encourages deep historical research when contextualizing the development and popularization of particular technological objects or devices, emphasizing *history* rather than just *context*. This body of literature reveals the limitations of many popular assumptions about technology. First, technological determinism, or the idea that particular social changes come about solely as a result of technology, requires ignorance of concurrent political, economic, and social developments. The idea that the Gutenberg Bible caused the Protestant Reformation, for example, ignores the rise of anti-clericalism, the breakdown of feudalism, the rise of urbanism and the merchant class, the Renaissance, and so forth (Howell & Prevenier 2001, 137; Eisenstein 1979). Second, the progressive theory of development presumes that rudimentary technologies are replaced by more sophisticated technologies until the "best" technology emerges. Instead, examining the history of a particular technical object often finds that many factors can cause one to "win" out over the other – the Sony Betamax, while largely considered superior to the VHS player, lost the competition for market dominance due to reliance on proprietary technologies,

refusal to license the format to the adult industry, greater expense, and shorter recording time (Pinch & Bijker 1992; Schofield 2003). The "techno-meritocracy" of internet culture (Castells 2001, 40-41) makes social media technologies particularly susceptible to this type of mythologizing. History of technology thus emphasizes a historiography of technology, understanding how certain technologies came to be dominant due to reasons other than their inherent superiority.

Bryan Pfaffenberger calls the idea that artifacts develop to fulfill specific human needs the "Standard View of Technology" (1992, 495). Pfaffenberger advocates for a social anthropology of technology to make visible sociotechnical systems typically placed as inevitable, ultimate, or at the end of a progressive narrative. A historical point of view is therefore necessary in order to understand how values become embedded within technologies (Pinch & Bijker 1992; Winner 1980). Specifically, I want to address Pfaffenberger's call for a material culture approach to technology, which is one reason to use ethnography as a principle method. A model for this type of research is Paul Edward's 1997 book *The Closed World*, which traced both how material technologies shaped the ideologies and logics of the Cold War, and how the values of the Cold War became embedded in digital computers. Edwards looks at two discourses, the "closed world discourse" and the "cyborg discourse," and follows them through the development of US global power, the development of digital computers, and models of the mind and subjectivity. Edwards examines the minutia of physical technologies, but also connects them to larger, social understandings of control, surveillance, and power. Other general social and journalistic histories of popular technology include *What the Dormouse Said* (Markoff 2006), Steven Levy's *Hackers* (1984) and Tracey Kidder's *Soul of a New Machine* (1982). These will be used in

conjunction with more specific scholarly and journalistic work to contextualize contemporary social media within a larger technological landscape.

Critical Discourse Analysis and Semiotics

Social media applications allow for communication that is, by nature, ephemeral and non-persistent. However, it is possible to grasp this communication by analyzing the structure of the software (features, visual aspects, and so on) using a semiotic approach. Understanding the conventions and grammars of any medium is crucial to understanding it (Howell & Prevenier 2001, 105). Specifically, Michele White's theory of internet spectatorship is useful when considering cyberculture iconography, such as user interface, icons, and so forth. White writes, "Employing the term "spectator," when considering these Internet and computer settings, indicates how individuals are looking at representations, are acknowledged or displaced by visual and textual addresses, and gain an understanding of the setting and their experiences through narratives and renderings" (2006, 5). The interpellation of the subject through software is one way in which power is rendered visible in internet technologies. Similarly, Lucas Introna and Helen Nissenbaum closely examine the design and functionality of popular internet search engines to demonstrate the political implications of software design (2000). They use a "Values in Design" approach to unpack the assumptions behind functionality choices.

Critical discourse analysis analyzes spoken and written texts to identify and understand "the discursive sources of power, dominance, inequality, and bias and how these sources are initiated, maintained, reproduced, and transformed within specific social, economic, political, and historical contexts" (McGregor 2004). Historians have long understood the importance of understanding how the words in sources are used, and to what effect (Howell & Prevenier 2001,

100-101). To this toolbox CDA adds an understanding of how language functions in maintaining, creating, or resisting power differentials (Van Dijk 1999). CDA can be used to examine primary sources, secondary sources, software and websites, identifying common discursive elements, representations, and their ideological presuppositions. Combined with semiotics and ethnography, which unpack *structure* and *social context,* CDA makes it possible to de-naturalize ideology as it is embedded in speech (Fairclough 2003). I will use CDA to analyze data collected ethnographically (tape-recorded interviews and transcriptions), online (interactions between Web 2.0 workers in specific internet sites), and historical material (primary and secondary sources about early social media applications) to examine status structures, hierarchies, and practices.

"Virtual" Ethnography?

As I have noted, my primary method for this project is ethnography. While ethnography has been used to study digital cultures since the late 1980s, it typically involves analyzing web sites and computer-mediated interactions rather than technological use. This has sparked lengthy debate over what constitutes ethnographic work (Axel 2006; Wittel 2000). One point of view maintains that it is perfectly legitimate to conduct "virtual" ethnography with data based solely on online sources (Hines 2000; Mason 2001). This is particularly salient when studying communities that only exist online, such as soap opera fan forums (Baym 2000) or transnational fan clubs (Darling-Wolf 2004). However, other scholars argue that this is not really ethnography, as it ignores other strands of conversation that take place off-line between participants (Lindlof & Shatzer 1998) and cannot understand differences between participants based on locations. Daniel Miller and Don Slater's book *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach* (2000) stresses

the necessity of multi-site ethnography that examines the social practice of the internet both on and offline. This is similar to the media ethnography point of view as expressed by Marie Gillespie in her book *Television, Ethnicity and Cultural Change* (1995). These authors critique what they see as a non-anthropological approach to ethnography that reduces the method to a series of interviews or general studies of online spaces, rather than long-term, lived involvement.

Much as media anthropology has called for situating media use as embedded practice (Abu-Lughod 2005; Mankekar 1999; Sreberny-Mohammadi & Mohammadi 1994), there is a need to situate the use of digital media in similar contexts. Too often, internet use is conceptualized as a separate “cyberspace” removed from mundane day-to-day life. Seven years ago, Miller and Slater wrote that “[internet] spaces are important as a part of everyday life, not apart from it” (2000, 7). Their five-month study of internet use in Trinidad provided valuable insights into the material practice of internet use. Examining internet use in the workplace, in cafes, through mobile devices and in face-to-face communication and discourse, as this project does, will help to position internet use as a located social practice. Moreover, internet use *informs* discourse in other spaces; 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)” (2005, 203). Understanding internet use is key to understanding contemporary daily life. Mizuko Ito, an anthropologist at USC, exemplifies this approach in her studies of mobile phone use among teenagers. Her recent paper with Daisuke Okabe and Ken Anderson investigated how cellphones mediated relationships with the urban built environment (2008 In Press). To this end,

they studied the cellphone as part of a series of portable objects, such as credit cards, MP3 players, and transit cards, and asked young people in Tokyo, London, and Los Angeles to keep media diaries tracking how they viewed and used these “mobile kits.” This type of ethnographic work does not isolate one kind of communication technology, but places technology use within a web of social practice. Rather than suggesting a causal relationship between the cellphone and one’s relationship to urban space, Ito et. al contextualize technology in a larger set of social transformations. Recent work by anthropologists Jeff Juris (2008) and Thomas Malaby (2006) similarly position technology use within broader social frameworks (youth activism and virtual worlds, respectively). These ethnographic explorations make it possible to understand the complex interactions between people, places, and devices, and how people make social meaning of their relationships to technology.

This project also interrogates the idea of an online/offline split. While some ethnographies of online communities supplement online data with face-to-face interviews (Kendall 2002, Campbell 2004), this still presumes a schism. Social media creators are highly technically adept and take for granted an "always-on" internet accessed through mobile devices like cellphones and laptops. Moreover, mid-90s internet studies assumed that people communicated online primarily with people they did not know, forming “virtual communities” (Rheingold 1993). In contrast, contemporary relationships often exist both on and offline, as the internet functions as a communicative choice much like a phone call or text message. As the social media community interacts in both internet and physical spaces, teasing out the complexities of this relationship is the primary way my project can contribute to contemporary ethnographic theories of studying internet use.

Studying Up

When studying privileged American professionals, as this project aims to do, anthropologists must interrogate the validity of "studying up" to answer larger cultural questions. Laura Nader published an article titled "Up the Anthropologist" in 1972, which called for American anthropologists to turn their analytical lenses on their own country, particularly what Hugh Gusterson calls the "capitalist processes of production and stratification" like banks and law firms, rather than the exotic Other (1997, 115). Gusterson points out that this process, now known as "repatriated ethnography," has primarily studied marginalized American populations like drug addicts and prostitutes rather than corporate executives or politicians. He 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." (115) Ethnographies of privileged groups can provide a sophisticated understanding of the operation of power in spaces where access is typically restricted.

Conducting these types of ethnography means rejecting traditional understandings of participant observation and far-away fieldwork. Instead, ethnographers must be creative, using a variety of methods to circumvent any barriers to access or participation. Gusterson writes,

> Polymorphous engagement means interacting with informants across a number of dispersed sites, not just in local communities, and sometimes in virtual form; and it means collecting data eclectically from a disparate array of sources in many different ways. Polymorphous engagement preserves the pragmatic amateurism that has characterized anthropological research, but displaces it away from a fetishistic obsession with participant observation. In my own case participant observation within the laboratory was impossible (except for meals at the cafeteria), though my fieldwork did involve a component of participant observation as I socialized informally with scientists from the laboratory in local churches, social clubs, bars, hiking groups and so on. However, polymorphous engagement also involved an eclectic mix of other research techniques: formal interviews of the kind often done by journalists and political scientists; extensive reading of newspapers and official documents, and careful attention to popular culture, for example. (116)

While Gusterson was studying nuclear scientists at a highly restricted Federal lab, and the sites I will be looking at are more open, this type of ethnography will still be the best fit for my subject, due to the lack of a single representative site or activity.

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). While most of the people I will be observing and interviewing will be mid-level technology workers, and thus only powerful in a relative sense (e.g. while they are well-off and influential in comparison to the rest of the world, they will be unable to have much effect over my career or future publications), some of them will be quite powerful. This questions the ability to remain "objective" in such a situation. Additionally, if I am able to gain access to workplaces, I expect that I will be asked to provide some sort of research work for the company in exchange. I have worked at three different technology companies as a researcher so this type of work is not difficult for me, but again, it threatens objectivity. I think the solution is transparency, self-reflexivity (up to a point) and a commitment to ethical honesty without causing harm to my informants, or myself. In addition, I will assign pseudonyms to my informants and refrain from including specific details about any single company.

Since I am going to be interviewing many people who are quite practiced at giving media interviews, such as venture capitalists and gossip bloggers, using these interviews as "evidence"

will require understanding that how such people choose to represent themselves to interviewers is as important as the content of their interviews! Priyadharshini writes,

> Because the task is one of "blowing the cover" of power, or, as Saskia Sassen (2000) puts it, to "excavate" file 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? (429)

Putting myself as a researcher in an employee-like position requires relinquishing the traditional power of independence granted to an on-site anthropologist. However, I think that understanding this particular dynamic can reveal quite a lot about the operation of power within workplaces, which should prove useful for understanding hierarchy.

Several key ethnographies of powerful groups can serve as models for this type of work. For instance, in the anthropology of science, Hugh Gusterson's study of the Lawrence Livermore nuclear laboratory, *Nuclear Rites* (1996), Sharon Traweek's *Beamtimes and Lifetimes* (1988) about energy physicists and Emily Martin's 1994 ethnography of AIDS researchers, *Flexible Bodies*, are all influential and well-regarded. The anthropology of work also provides possible models. Mariette Baba's literature review of anthropological studies of Fortune 1000 companies shows that the most sophisticated corporate ethnography typically takes place within corporations, such as the study of knowledge management conducted at Xerox Parc, making it difficult to access. There are also popular books that provide an "insider's view" of trendy technology companies, such as David Vise and Mark Malseed's *The Google Story: Inside the Hottest Business, Media, and Technology Success of Our Time* and James Wallace and Jim Erickson's *Hard Drive: Bill Gates and the Making of the Microsoft Empire*. However, these tend to be primarily celebratory texts rather than critical evaluations. Within anthropology, Gabriella

Coleman's study of hackers (2005), Christopher Kelty's (2005) work on geeks in Bangalore and the large body of work in fandom studies can all help provide methodological insights.

San Francisco Fieldwork

To provide context, I will examine status in early social media technologies, focusing on three textual communication applications: Internet Relay Chat, Usenet, and Multi-User Dungeons. Next, I will conduct online and offline ethnographic work in San Francisco from July to December 2008 among the social media creator community to determine status hierarchies, conspicuous consumption, and related social practices. This will include observing community practices and interactions in physical sites including workplaces, social events, professional conferences and public meetings; analyzing discourse and practice in online spaces like mailing lists and social media sites; and interpreting feature sets of social media applications. Individual interviews with approximately 30 people will be conducted to augment research findings. Archival research at the Computer History Museum will be conducted as necessary. All interviewees and other major participants in my research will sign an informed consent form before the interviewing or observing process begins and will be given the option of not being recorded or remaining anonymous within my research. Data will be analyzed using critical discourse analysis and semiotics methodology.

Interviews

I will conduct approximately 45 interviews with 30 members of the social media community. This will include company owners, technology workers, "net celebrities," journalists, venture capitalists, technology bloggers and entrepreneurs. All informants will be interviewed once for approximately two hours, and half will be selected to be interviewed twice

for further clarification and/or particularly useful information. All interviews will be recorded and transcribed. I will ask this group to describe the technology community in San Francisco, report on status symbols and high-status practices both on and offline, and comment on their own perceived status in the community. When possible, I will ask social media creators about status hierarchies in their own online communities. For example, if interviewing the owner of a popular technology blog, I will ask her to describe status-seeking practices among her blog readers. Agreement in self-reporting of status symbols, combined with personally observed information collected in the field, will allow me to understand how members of this community construct, discuss, and understand their own status practices, particularly with regard to consumption.

Informal Observation and Discussion

On a daily basis, I will informally observe the San Francisco social media community. For example, Ritual Roasters in the Mission, 111 Minna in SOMA and Café Centro in South Park are "third places" for many technology workers. These spaces will provide insight into how status hierarchies are created and maintained through everyday lived experience. Informal discussions with technology workers over meals and at events, parties and so forth will help formulate a broader understanding from which to contextualize how status is practiced in the community. In these group settings, social obligations among participants may lead participants to ignore the fact that they are being monitored (Gumperz 1972). Specifically, I will observe how digital content, like websites and online communities, is referred to in "real life" conversations, and how cell phones, laptop computers, digital cameras, and other mobile devices are used to mediate between "online" and "offline" spaces.

Online Observation

From discussions and interviews with members of the community, I will determine between five and ten social media sites where community interaction takes place. These will most likely be industry gossip blogs like Valleywag, social media sites like Twitter and Facebook, and media sharing sites like Flickr and YouTube. With permission, I will join these sites, identify members of the community, and participate in and observe interactions with others. I will read content on these sites, discuss it with community members, and attempt to draw parallels or differences between content on the sites and real-life interactions. These observations will allow me to understand the similarities and differences between the operation of status hierarchies online and offline. I will analyze these sites to understand the software mechanisms available for status display, such as reputation, feedback, friend lists, and so forth. If possible, the creators and coders of these specific sites will be interviewed to gain insight into their intent. I will request access to private mailing lists where issues of concern to the social media community are discussed. This will allow me to conduct discursive analysis of status creation and display.

Public Meetings

San Francisco is home to a host of user groups and technology clubs. I will attend as many events as possible during the fieldwork period, at least one a week. These may include informal conferences, special interest group meetings, lectures and public parties thrown by technology companies. I also plan on attending one major professional conference to observe a more formal social context, such as O'Reilly ETech, the Game Developers Conference, or South by Southwest Interactive. From these events and meetings I will collect evidence about things

that are considered high status, what is considered "common knowledge" about users and software design, and the status hierarchy of social media sites. I will also be able to observe the display of commodity goods, such as computers, cellphones, cars, and so forth, in a "real-world" context.

Workplace Observation

With permission from business owners and employees, I plan to "embed" myself in two different social media startups during business hours for one week each. Ideally, one of these businesses would be higher status than the other. I will attend meetings, observe work practices, discuss products with employees, and generally spend time with employees as they go about their workdays. All business-specific observations will be anonymized and confidential or proprietary information will be removed as requested by company owners. Company owners will be interviewed about their product, their users, and their understanding of social practices within their communities. I will provide copies of my findings to companies whenever possible. These observations will allow me to understand the relationships between discourses, practices, and hierarchies in the larger social media community and specific business practices and decisions, given the fluidity between work and social life for my informants. I also hope to understand differences and similarities between concepts of users and technologies in the community, and at particular companies.

Archival Research

While the bulk of historical and archival research for the dissertation will be completed before my fieldwork begins, the Computer History Museum is located in Mountain View, a $12 train ride from San Francisco. This museum holds several key internet history archives, and

provides 3 free hours of archival use to students (additional hours are $50 each). I plan to visit the Computer History Museum twice to conduct archival research and twice to attend lectures. This research will augment my historical research on status hierarchies in older forms of social media.

Dissertation Structure and Plan for Completion

Chapter Breakdown

The dissertation will have an introduction, four substantive chapters and a conclusion. As my study progresses, the topics outlined below may change based on discoveries in the field. Rather than writing a comprehensive summary in the introduction which is then repeated with additional examples in the chapters following, the first chapter will serve as both introduction, summary, and theoretical background. The remaining four chapters of the dissertation will be organized by topic. Given that the study has not yet been completed, it is difficult to determine precisely what topics will be covered in each chapter, as they will most likely be revealed through research. A preliminary breakdown follows.

Chapter One will introduce the concepts of status and conspicuous consumption through reviewing the literature and establishing working definitions of each term. I will introduce the San Francisco Bay Area technology community, providing a brief history of its relationship to the American computer and internet industry drawn from historical and archival research. The primary subjects of the study and the general functioning of the community will be summarized. In terms of method, I will describe the particular type of ethnography I chose to undertake, any problems or challenges I faced, and self-reflexive reflection on the work. Finally, I will conclude the first chapter with a brief summary of the dissertation, including any theoretical refinements to concepts of status, consumption, gender and technology, the online/offline split and so forth that

have resulted from my study. This chapter should provide the reader with a comprehensive understanding of what I am setting out to do through my project, how it has been done, and what should be expected from the rest of the dissertation.

Chapter Two is primarily historical, looking at three textual internet technologies, IRC, Usenet, and MUDs to provide a context for the rest of the study. I will use pre-existing work on these communities to examine the use and functioning of both emergent mechanisms and status affordances; this will enable the reader to understand broadly how technology can be used to mark and practice status. This chapter will also sketch the history of social media in order to bring the reader to the present-day social media landscape, including both academic and business hype around Web 2.0. This provides a strong foundation for the reader to fully understand the ethnographic findings discussed in chapters three and four.

Chapter Three will lay the groundwork for a taxonomy of status in the high-tech social media community, focusing on gender and class. I plan on adopting a narrative tone to write the ethnography, as that is often the most interesting, without taking too much license with my informants and workplace access. (Examples of ethnographies I consider “narrative” include *Learning to Labor* by Paul Willis and *The Devil Behind the Mirror* by Steven Gregory; these authors tell stories about their fieldwork and group their findings thematically, creating characters out of their informants. Gregory’s book does a particularly good job of situating himself reflexively. This taxonomy will discuss what markers, practices, and objects are considered high status, how different members of the community view these practices and how gender and class are interwoven with normative status practices and symbols. I also wish to look at how status hierarchies affect application development by drawing on discussions with interview subjects and the two week-long workplace embeddings.

In *Chapter Four*, I will primarily focus on consumption and status online. This will require a discussion of how the Web 2.0 community operates in online and offline spaces simultaneously, thus interrogating the idea of a schism between separate offline and online worlds. Specifically, I will look at how particular objects are used both on and offline to display status, and how the emergent mechanisms and status affordances discussed in chapter two apply to contemporary social media technologies used by the community. This chapter will also contain my primary discussion of luxury goods, and how "luxury" or "status goods" may change when communication takes place in mediated spaces.

Chapter Five may only be a short conclusion, or it may be longer in order to tie together the different themes. This will demonstrate how my work complicates, elaborates on or otherwise contributes to discussions of status, online community, conspicuous consumption, and so forth. I also hope to call on academics and technology researchers to be aware of status hierarchies and their effect on both technological and academic research.

Timetable

The following draft schedule reflects my ideal timetable for this project.

Proposal Defense:	February 2008
Historical and Theoretical Research:	January – June 2008
Fieldwork in San Francisco:	July – December 2008
Fieldwork in New York:	January – May 2009
Writing:	June 2009 – Finish
Expected Dissertation Defense:	May 2010

For the rest of my third year, I will be finishing and defending my proposal, applying for IRB review, and conducting background research for my fieldwork. This research will include continuing the literature review, examining pre-existing work on the California technology community, and reading histories of early internet technologies. I plan to lay the groundwork for

my field research by determining interview subjects, making contacts, planning event attendance, and conducting pilot interviews if possible. I also plan to conduct a pilot study of a technology workplace by working on-site at an interactive agency in New York or Boston for one or two weeks.

Fieldwork in San Francisco will take place from July to December 2008, during the first half of my fourth year; the Methods section contains comprehensive details on what this fieldwork will entail. The purpose of this research is to gather rich data with high internal validity in a variety of field sites and situations. Data will be analyzed as appropriate during this phase. Primary data analysis will take place from January to June 2009. During this six month period, I will also finish San Francisco fieldwork, including follow-up interviews as needed, attending professional technology conferences (such as South by Southwest Interactive or O'Reilly Emerging Technologies), talking to local technology professionals and maintaining contacts with informants. I will use semiotics and critical discourse analysis to analyze data, including software mechanisms. Historical work will be completed at this time.

Upon completion of my fieldwork in June 2009, I will begin writing, which will take up my fifth year. My goal is to complete the dissertation by May 2010, at the end of my fifth year.

Outside Funding

I am currently applying for institutional grants from multiple sources to fund my six months in San Francisco. San Francisco is a very expensive city, and in order to make the most of my time there, I hope to be fully funded for research. I have applied for the Wenner-Gren Foundation's Dissertation Fieldwork Grant, three fellowships from my alma mater Wellesley College, the Charles Babbage Institute's Adelle and Erwin Tomash Fellowship in the History of Information Technology, and the Science and Society Dissertation Research Improvement Grant

from the National Science Foundation. I will also be applying for smaller grants from the National Women's Studies Association and the Steinhardt School, and the Society of History of Technology's Melvin Kranzberg Dissertation Fellowship. As these are very competitive fellowships which range in amounts from $1,000 to $16,000, it will be quite difficult to fully cover my expenses during my fieldwork. I am double-teaching next semester in order to receive funding for fall semester, 2008, and will also be considering internships or freelance work while I am living in San Francisco. I will continue to investigate grant opportunities in order to fund further fieldwork.

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