

## How Silicon Valley Journalists Talk about: Independence in Innovation Coverage

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# How Silicon Valley Journalists Talk about: Independence in Innovation Coverage

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# How Silicon Valley Journalists Talk about: Independence in Innovation Coverage

Silicon Valley has become known for innovations that have led to substantial changes for citizens around the world. In 1960s'-80s' the innovation had to do with computers and electronics, 1990s-00s' it was on Internet and Web services. Since the later part of the 00's, clean tech has emerged as a keyword. The valley culture is known to stress the value of trust-based personal contacts. This applies also to journalists and their access to sources. This article discusses how this relates to traditional journalism norms that stress journalists' independence from sources. Based on explorative, semi-structured interviews with journalists who cover the innovation economy in Silicon Valley, the article seeks to understand the professional challenges the network structure create for journalists and the strategies they apply. Comparing the results with previous research in journalism norms, this study suggests that as access to powerful sources becomes scarce and controlled journalists tend to be more innovative and diverse in shaping professional norms to balance access to sources with their readers' mandate. The continued development of this diversity of norms, and its impact on society needs to be further explored.<sup>1</sup>

Key words: Journalism practice, innovation, journalism ethics, qualitative interviews, Silicon Valley, ecosystem.

## 1 Introduction

When Tesla Motors received \$465 million in U.S. Department of Energy loans and decided to build its new manufacturing facility in Palo Alto, in Silicon Valley, Mayor Pat Burt anticipated that the company would find a favourable environment. The *Stanford Daily*, published by Stanford University, wrote:

*Burt stated that the city's clean tech 'ecosystem' is "one of the greatest opportunities for Silicon Valley - possibly the greatest." Perhaps indicative of that 'ecosystem,' Teslas's new facility will be located just down the street from the headquarters of A Better Place, a company that has met international success in creating electric vehicle infrastructure support (Giannini 2010, our emphasis).*

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<sup>1</sup> The authors are grateful to John Markoff, Scott Harris, Michael Kanellos, Esther Wojcicki and Tanja Aitamurto for sharing their insight. We also want to express our sincere thanks to John Joss for editing the paper.

*'Valley'* and *'ecosystem'* are powerful metaphors used in everyday news reports on California's coast, and they support each other. Valleys are where small groups of people settle, physically protected by the mountains. Since they traditionally depended on one other for survival, the inhabitants tended to be mutually supportive. If valley people did not develop interdependence, valleys would likely be scary places to live.

Silicon Valley grew out of Stanford University's efforts to establish collaboration with industry under the leadership of Stanford Engineering School Dean Frederick Emmons Terman. In 1951 he spearheaded the creation of Stanford Industrial Park. It became the base for companies such as Varian Associates, Hewlett-Packard, Esatman Kodak, General Electric and Lockheed Corporation, shaping Silicon Valley's initial core.

Stanford professor William Miller, hired by Frederick Terman, is another example of Stanford's central role in building Silicon Valley. He spearheaded the creation of Stanford Office of Technology Licensing, played a role in creating the first Mayfield Venture Capital Fund, and served as President and CEO of SRI International, the former Stanford University Research Institute. In the book "The Silicon Valley Edge," Miller promotes the ecosystem perspective, describing how innovative regions create a favourable environment or 'habitat' for innovation and entrepreneurship. 'Habitat' suggests that innovation and entrepreneurship come from the complexity and quasi-randomness of an ecological system, rather than from a well-oiled factory machine. In Miller's terms, a habitat is the combination of physical, legal and social mechanisms that promotes speed in product development and in cross-firm learning about both technical and business issues. This helps the region adapt to waves of innovation and adjust to economic cycles. (Lee, *et. al.* 2000)

An ecosystem can be defined as "a functional unit consisting of living things in a given area, non-living chemical and physical factors in their environment, linked together through nutrient cycle and energy flow" (ecosystem, 2010). A stranger may find it hard to be accepted in the valleys unless a member of the community introduces him as trustworthy (Komisar 2010), which most certainly implies that he is not expected to threaten the existing functioning of the ecosystem.

The metaphors 'valley' and 'ecosystem' help construct the social life in the area bordered by San Francisco in the north and San Jose in the south, though the valley is no longer an isolated place but home to some of the world's most influential, wealthy and bright people. There are hundreds of companies in the Valley; the market capitalization of the 150 largest was \$1.5 trillion in April 2010 (Market movers, 2010), among them Google, Facebook, Intel, Hewlett-Packard Company, Apple and Cisco Systems. One of the few pathways to becoming a member of this exclusive community goes through the admissions office at Stanford University in Palo Alto, and that pathway is very narrow.

Silicon Valley has become known for innovations that have led to substantial changes in society worldwide. From the 1960s to the 1980s such innovation meant primarily computers and electronics. From the 1990s to the 00s it was the Internet and Web services. Since the later part of the 00s, clean tech has emerged as a

keyword (Harris, 2010a). Because of its amazing economic success, the Silicon Valley ecosystem has been studied intensively by international scholars during the last decades. The studies have pointed to a number of factors that support innovation, including the presence of a first-class university that co-operates closely with local industry and government, plus entrepreneurial practices such as personal contacts, the willingness to take risks and accept failure (Etzkowitz, 2008; Turner, 2008; Gansler, 2010; Kressel, 2010; Komisar, 2010, O'Brian, 2010).

However, innovation cannot take place without communication. The entrepreneurs, venture capitalists, university researchers, politicians and other Valley citizens must have means of communication, including communication on behalf of the individual players such as PR, on one hand, and journalism on behalf of the public on the other. Nordfors (2009a) calls journalists and PR people 'attention workers' because they generate and broker attention around specific issues or ideas among players in the innovation ecosystem.

For example, the metaphor of Silicon Valley was first introduced by the journalist Don Hoefler of the trade publication *The Electronic News*. Uskali and Nordfors describe how it was later picked up by other news media and spread worldwide. It initially was a nickname for the specific industrial area that had grown up around the Stanford Industrial Park, but transformed more recently into the name of this regional innovation ecosystem, enabling its inhabitants to include the ecosystem in their collective identity. 'Silicon Valley' also became the label of the vision of the perfect innovation ecosystem, enabling people worldwide to discuss innovation ecosystems. This is often manifest in attempts around the world to construct innovation ecosystems with names that include 'Valley,' alluding to Silicon Valley. (Uskali, Nordfors, 2007)

Turner has described how "an extraordinarily influential group of San Francisco Bay area journalists and entrepreneurs between the late 1960s and the late 1990s assembled a network of people and publications that together brokered a series of encounters between bohemian San Francisco and the emerging technology hub of Silicon Valley" (Turner, 2008, p. 3). Among other things they created forums in which "performers could collaborate with one another" (Turner, 2008, p. 252). A leading figure was Steward Brand:

*Whereas journalists are often thought to apply frames to events they witness and to present those frames in media, Brand and the Whole Earth network in fact created the forums within which frames were constructed. Once developed, the frames could be and often were exported, by both professional journalists and network members. Moreover (...) Brand often took on multiple roles—founder, convener, reporter, publisher. Within the traditional professional norms of journalism, such multiplicity would be construed as conflict of interest." (Turner, 2008, p. 254).*

Turner also writes that the case study may offer "important examples with which to think about the role of cultural entrepreneurship in public discourse, particularly in regard to journalism" (2008, pp. 252-53) and that the writers in this movement:

*(...) deprived their many readers of a language with which to think about the complex ways in which embodiment shapes all human life, about the natural and social infrastructure on which that life depends, and about the effects that digital technologies and the network mode of production might have on life and its essential infrastructures. (Turner, 2008, p. 261).*

This article focuses on how innovation journalists have adapted to the Silicon Valley ecosystem and—because the concepts of valleys and their ecosystems signifies strong *interdependence*—we found it especially interesting to look at how Silicon Valley journalists discuss the ethical challenges related to the otherwise generally accepted professional norm of *independence*.

## 2 Journalistic Integrity

Singer argues that journalism's strongest claim to professional status may lie in the normative dimension

*US journalists have long claimed to provide a public service, not just to help individuals but to help democratic society as a whole. (Singer, 2003, p. 144)*

Though journalism is not a profession in traditional sociological terms (Commission on Freedom of the Press 1947; Singer, 2003), several studies have suggested that leading journalists across different types of news media in elective democracies have similar norms and values in relation to their role as journalists (Deuze, 2005a, 2005b; Gardner *et al.*, 2001; Singer, 2003, 2006; Zandberg & Neiger, 2005; Mogensen, 2008).

A number of institutions provide information about the norms and performance standards that can be expected of professional journalists in a democracy. In America, these include professional organizations such as the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) and the Radio-Television News Directors Association (RTNDA) and their codes of ethics. It also includes university programs in journalism such as those accredited by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (ACEJMC). On the transnational front, journalists have united in professional networks such as the International Federation of Journalists and Global Investigative Journalism (Mogensen, 2008).

The Society of Professional Journalists is a nationwide organisation founded in 1909 that today has nearly 10,000 members (SPJ, 2010). Its first Code of Ethics, borrowed from the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 1926, has been revised several times. The existing code was adopted in 1996. Its essence is similar to professional codes for journalists found in democratic societies around the world. In the preamble it states:

*Members of the Society of Professional Journalists believe that public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues.*

*Conscientious journalists from all media and specialties strive to serve the public with thoroughness and honesty. Professional integrity is the cornerstone of a journalist's credibility.*

One of the four sub-chapters states that journalists should act independently:

*Journalists should be free of obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know.*

*Journalists should:*

*Avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived;*

*Remain free of associations and activities that may compromise integrity or damage credibility;*

*Refuse gifts, favours, fees, free travel and special treatment, and shun secondary employment, political involvement, public office and service in community organizations if they compromise journalistic integrity;*

*Disclose unavoidable conflicts*

*Be vigilant and courageous about holding those with power accountable;*

*Deny favoured treatment to advertisers and special interests and resist their pressure to influence news coverage;*

*Be wary of sources offering information for favours or money; avoid bidding for news.*

Singer argues that independence and accountability are what distinguishes journalism from other forms of communication such as that found on the Internet and elsewhere:

*Ethical commitment to these normative goals is quickly becoming the only thing that distinguishes the journalist from other information providers who are independent but not responsible, such as bloggers, or responsible but not independent, such as spin doctors of all stripes. A notion of journalism as an embodiment of existential social responsibility becomes not merely descriptive but definitive (...) Journalists as individuals must renew their attention to a moral center in which personal integrity informs professional decisions, difficult though those decisions may be (Singer, 2006, p. 14).*

According to the SPJ Code of Ethics, journalists should avoid reporting on anything that might be influenced by their special interests. They should also:

*Distinguish between advocacy and news reporting. Analysis and commentary should be labelled and not misrepresent fact or context.*

*Distinguish news from advertising and shun hybrids that blur the lines between the two.*

Traditionally journalists used the metaphor ‘wall’ to describe clear separation of the advertising and editorial departments. Those days seems to be gone, according to a recent article in American Journalism Review:

*There's so much economic pressure, it seems everything is on the table," says Andy Schotz, chair-man of the Society of Professional Journalists' ethics committee and a general-assignment reporter for the Herald-Mail in Hagerstown, Maryland. But "we have to be vigilant about maintaining the integrity of the news side. A struggling economy is not a reason to loosen the standards (Pompilio, 2009).*

Journalists insist on these moral obligations because the product they sell is information that the buyers can use as a foundation for their own decisions as citizens, businesspeople and parents. Trust in the product is essential for marketing news. If the news products—print, broadcast or Internet outlets—do not provide reliable, independent information, the product cannot be distinguished from PR material and opinion pieces that are freely available on the Internet. Trust is, however, not only essential in relation to the consumers of the news product but also in dealing with sources that can expect to be treated fairly. Since the sources want to convey their personal points of view, their interpretation of fairness is often not the same as the public’s wish to be fully informed, so professional journalists often try to balance the moral expectations of their various stakeholders.

When viewing journalism as attention work (Nordfors, 2009a), journalism captures the attention of the audience through story-telling and brokers it in a way that does not violate the principles of journalism. Traditionally, the audience attention has been brokered by selling advertisements that target the attention. Winning the trust of the audience will optimize the access to audience attention, and enable journalism to act on a mandate from the audience, which—if the mandate is powerful enough—gives access to the sources. This in turn reinforces the mandate and the profitability of the ad-based journalism business model, which re-inforces the access to sources and the ability to employ skilled journalists to do the work. At this time, the journalism business model—ads—has been challenged by competing services, such as Google’s search or Facebook’s social networking, that also monetize the users attention and actions through ads. This has weakened the financials of journalism organizations, making it harder for them to maintain leadership in storytelling, in turn weakening the audience’s mandate and thus access to sources based on that mandate. To maintain journalism in the future, it is important to develop matching pairs of journalistic principles and business models that establish positive feedback loops between the audience mandate and profitability.

A mandate is based on trust. Trust is a powerful concept, an important element through which people make sense of their life experiences, to understand their present situation and what to expect of the future. But trust is socially constructed and people use various techniques to “create a recognizable environment of trust” including arguing, expecting, committing and manipulation (Weick, 1995; Fuglsang, Jagd & Bitsch Olsen, 2010, p. 13). These techniques are “deeply

anchored in culture and society” (Fuglsang *et al.*, 2010, p. 22). Sometimes we trust people who do not deserve it, we learn from the experience and are more cautious in the future. Other times we don’t trust people who are telling the truth and regret it later.

Scholars found that trust is important for innovation (Fuglsang *et al.*, 2010, p. 1). In the long run it may be harmful to the Silicon Valley innovation ecosystem if the players—including the public, and people working in the media, the government, the universities, the venture capital firms and the tech industry—don’t trust each other. Communication is an important element in creating trust.

The SPJ Code of Ethics contains standards for the treatment that sources such as technology companies, government and universities, can expect from professional journalists. It also contains standards for what the public can expect of high-quality reporting but it does not contain answers to all the moral problems that journalists face in their day-to-day work. Journalists engage in ongoing discussions about the ethical issues involved. Often they try to find solutions through moral reasoning (Day, 2003), a process that draws on previous experiences within the profession (Janik, 1994) as well as concern for all the stakeholders (Day, 2003). Ethical solutions can become norms when members of a profession feel an obligation or a duty to act in a certain way, though it may be harmful to their personal interests. According to Ross:

*We need the concept ‘norm’ to express the social fact, which is independent of how any individual reacts, that is generally effective among members of a social group (Ross, 1968, p. 99, emphasis in original).*

*If the norms are in force, journalists will feel a special ‘prompting or impulse’ to act (Ross, 1968, p. 99).*

In this article we look closer at the challenges that professional journalists face when covering innovation in Silicon Valley. Janik writes about professional problems:

*Professionals’ problems by their very nature are problems specific to professional practice, i.e., ethical problems that arise in the course of carrying out the tasks for which one has been professionally trained (although they are not exclusively the problems of professionals) ... professional ethics is more a matter of the interpretation of problems than of the application of moral theories; it is much more a matter of hermeneutics than it is of value systems. (Janik, 1994, pp. 199–200, emphasis in original).*

### 3 Methodology

Based on the general assumption that role models are the best representatives of a profession (Ettema & Glasser, 1998; Gardner *et al.*, 2001; Mogensen, 2008) we chose to interview journalists who were recommended to us by their peers. We have focussed on them in their capacity as ‘innovation journalists,’ i.e. journalists covering innovation processes and ecosystems. This is usually not how they label

themselves in their daily work; they often call themselves ‘technology journalists’ or ‘business journalists,’ or by other traditionally established newsbeats manifest previously in the structures of large news organizations.

The project is ongoing, but so far 14 innovation journalists have been interviewed, using a semi- structured questionnaire with the following core questions and statements:

*How did you become a journalist and how did you end up in Silicon Valley?*  
*For which publications are you producing stories?*  
*Tell us about an innovation story you wrote recently of which you are proud.*  
*Describe a good innovation story that someone else wrote (and name the journalist).*  
*Describe a story you would like to write?*  
*Cite acquired wisdom on covering innovation?*

The interviews were face-to-face, explorative and lasted between one and two hours. With a few exceptions they took place in the interviewees’ own newsrooms though for freelancers that newsroom might be their private home or a workplace in a university. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed by the authors. The interviewees all signed a consent form, allowing us to use their names when quoting them.

## 4 Findings

The informants all shared the profession’s sense of public responsibility. When asked to describe the stories they wanted to write, the topics were challenging issues in our society, including water shortage, changes in the job market, misuse of information databases and problems in the education system. Talking about these stories they envisioned, they imagined being able to travel and having free access to sources worldwide, so that they could write reliable, in-depth stories that would create attention and provoke action. These story ideas were visions of what Gardner *et al.* (2000) call ‘good work.’ For many of their peers in the professional community, in-depth stories about such important topics would be considered high-quality journalism.

However, when doing every-day reporting in the Valley they did not have free access to sources. Rather they depended mostly on personal contacts for information. Such personal contacts could be professional friends or friends of professional friends. Friendship implies that certain social codes are followed—it is difficult to publicly scrutinize friends. Innovation journalists in the Valley use different strategies to tackle the professional ethical dilemmas caused by the collision of journalism norms with the social norms connected with friendships and networks. Below we briefly introduce five of the innovation journalists we interviewed and some of the challenges they face in their everyday reporting on innovation in the Valley.

## 4.1 The Classic Journalist

Scott Harris is a news columnist at the *San Jose Mercury News*, where he covers the intersection of politics and Silicon Valley industry. According to *BurrellesLuce*, the *San Jose Mercury News* had a circulation of approximately 225,000 copies daily in 2009, down from 231,000 in 2007.

Harris grew up in Southern California in the 1960s, started writing for his high-school paper, got a college degree in journalism and worked for 19 years at the *Los Angeles Times* “back in those days where newspapers were big and powerful, before the Internet and all that,” he says, referring to the big media house where he worked. As a reminder of previous glory, the house contains large, furnished newsrooms that have not been in use for some time.

Harris left Los Angeles in 1999 because he married a journalist in Silicon Valley. After freelancing he became editor of the *Industry Standard*—a start-up weekly magazine that was at the time leading in covering the Internet economy in the Valley. In 2000 it sold more advertising pages than any magazine in American history, according to Harris. The magazine was part of the dot.com boom and went down with it but Harris enjoyed covering the ‘revolution.’ He then freelanced for some years before he got a job at *San Jose Mercury News*.

As a classic, old-time professional journalist he clearly identifies with the journalism community in California and the traditional norms of the profession. Among other things he has for many years volunteered as a teacher for high-school students, organized by the California Scholastic Press Association:

*(...) you love your profession, you love this idea of it and you want to share it, he explains.*

As an industry reporter Harris receives 40-50 emails a day from PR firms that are trying to get free coverage for start-ups and other companies in the valley, but other industry sources hide from journalists:

*Harris (H): The most powerful people are hard to get to.*

*Interviewer (I): Even though you are the major local newspaper?*

*H: Well, this newspapers isn't as important as it used to be (...) there are so many news outlets. That is just the reality. (...) If you are out there and you want to leak a story of impact you don't leak it to the Mercury News. You leak it to New York Times or the Wall Street Journal. And Steve Job and Apple are very controlling (...) [some journalists] will get the special privileges kind of thing.*

*K: But if you have special privileges you also have to talk nicely about them?*

*S: Good question. I don't think it is that overt but I think that if you burn them you will never get access again. That is just kind of the un-spoken contract that happens (...)*

He mentions a story that a colleague is writing about a businessman who might buy the local basketball team:

*[My colleague] is going to ask for an interview but he is not going to get it. In a story like that you then try to ask people who knows him for interviews but they will not talk. Because he is up there and what does he gain by giving an interview or making a comment? (...)*

Harris prefers to go in the front door when he needs comments from politicians but it usually doesn't work that way in business in Silicon Valley:

*That is one of the things that are different between covering politics and covering business. The politicians are trying to effect change [and] they are doing it pretty much in the open, trying to get their message out. They are not trying to hide that side so you don't get turned away very often and I think that most people in politics know that if you refuse, if you have no comments, it looks bad. You are better off trying to answer.*

He will still ask for comments from big companies and sometimes he succeeds, but he doesn't rely on getting them. Instead he focuses on other aspects and other sources of his beat.

One survival strategy is *trend stories*. As an example, he wrote a major front-page story and a side story about the 'clean-tech revolution' in the Valley (Harris, 2010a). The story ran over two full pages and described how Valley technology entrepreneurs adapt to the clean-tech market and to the innovation going on in it. On the front page is a big, colorful graphic illustrating the industrial history of the valley.

Another strategy is to *focus on the consumers* and use ordinary people as sources of information and opinion. As an example, Facebook is one of his beats. He may not be able to get interviews with its top management but he studies how people actually use Facebook and may contact users to hear their stories. He also looks into sociological, ethical and legal issues related to the use of social media. Over the years he has, for example, observed and written stories about the 'moveon.org' movement and other political campaigns on the Internet:

*I don't use Facebook as the usual casual user (...) I explore it more (...) I will befriend people when I am kind of curious (...) I have my own agenda that is beyond the "lets get in touch" (...) A very interesting part of that story is where do we find our news? Like this tea-party movement here in America, I think you see a lot of it on Facebook (...) We used to think of the national dialog as coming out of Washington and it's still there but [the Internet] (...) has empowered average people and decreased the power of big institutions.*

One might think that when journalists cannot go through the front door to the major companies in the Valley and expect to get answers to their questions they will use other methods to investigate what is going on behind the closed doors. Over the years *San Jose Mercury News* has published scoops of that kind but investigative reporting is usually not an option these days, explains Harris:

*Since I started here four years ago the work load has definitely sped up (...) When you had 400 reporters here, you could give a few of them time to work on something else [such as investigative stories]. As the article has reduced its reporting staff there are fewer people here who are all expected to produce more quickly and produce more pieces.*

## 4.2 The Entrepreneur

Michael Kanellos is Editor in Chief for *Greentech Media*, a company with three core activities:

- “A business-to-business site covering daily news and market analysis about the end-to-end greentech market”;
- It also “provides critical and timely market analysis in the form of concise and long-form market research reports, monthly newsletters and strategic consulting services” and,
- “It hosts one-day conferences and two-day summits,” according to its website.

These activities support each other in the sense that information created through research is used in the news reporting and events, and vice versa. Kanellos would like to build a community around the company.

Kanellos grew up in Nevada in the '70s and had for some year a career as a lawyer but since high school he was also a freelance writer. Since he found reporting a lot more fun than being a lawyer, he decided to make a living as a journalist. He worked 11 years for *cnet.com* before he came to *Greentech Media* in 2008. It was during an interview in 2004 with the Dean at the Stanford School of Engineering, James D. Plummer, that he became aware of the importance of green technology. He asked Plummer what he was researching and the answer was ‘material science, nanotechnology and energy’. That answer surprised Kanellos:

*I was like: Energy? And he said: Find an alternative to oil and coal or shut down the economy in 25 years. I thought: Gotta go!*

Kanellos is mostly focused on new technology that may solve some of the problems the world is facing in the future, including shortage of water and energy, and he likes to write about startups:

*Kanellos (k): Startups are really about taking ideas from the lab and seeing if you can make money on them. (...) for some reason Silicon Valley is just good at that little thing and we see a lot of ideas going commercial.*

*(I): So in some ways the small companies are more interesting than the big ones?*

*K: The small ones come up with the ideas. The big ones, especially in this market, will buy the small companies.*

It is not difficult to find startups to cover. There are so many in the Valley that nobody can keep track of them and they are usually eager to get attention. He is called by approximately 40 PR firms every day and he also talks to many people at conferences. We asked him who his favourite sources were, and beside executives he mentioned technical people:

*The technical people, they know a lot, they have opinions, they are chatting.*

Policy people in large companies are harder to talk to and often don't talk to young, specialized media like *Greentech*:

*K: You will see big companies offer exclusives to the big publications and the big publications get so excited. It is a way for them not to have to worry about their flaws.*

*I: [the big publications] don't write anything bad or critical.*

*K: That's right.*

According to Kanellos it is of "huge" importance to build a network of sources in getting to know people and companies. When he approaches new sources the chances they will talk are better if they know his work:

*They know that you are fair. Some journalists are difficult to deal with – they maybe make more mistakes in their stories than they should – sometimes they do attacks (...) those [journalists] have trouble calling back – so if people talk to you it is often because they are familiar with your work.*

Kanellos likes what journalists call "good news" and constructive journalism (Haagerup in Nordfors, 2009b), preferably with a perspective to the future:

*What you want to know is how these inventions are going to change our lives and the people behind them (...) sometimes you look back and it is not so much fun to do when a company fails. If something is going wrong they can't avoid it. But I am not going to be sensationalistic about it.*

### 4.3 The National Correspondent

John Markoff is staff reporter for the New York Times in San Francisco, where he covers the intersection of computing and science. In the Valley he is often referred to as a role model for professional journalists covering the computer industry for traditional newspapers (e.g. Turner, 2008, p. 252). He grew up in Silicon Valley in the 1950s and 1960s, was a childhood friend of Bill<sup>2</sup> Hewlett's son and got a teenage job at Stanford University before he left for college. In the 1980s he started writing about technology in the Valley as a freelance and later got a job as a newspaper reporter through his 'old boys' network' (Markoff 2010). Markoff has written a number of stories about cyberwarfare. The front-page story he wrote on February 18, 2010 read:

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<sup>2</sup> With David Packard, William R. (Bill) Hewlett was co-founder of Hewlett-Packard Company.

*'Two China Schools Said to Be Tied to Online Attacks'*

By [JOHN MARKOFF](#) and [DAVID BARBOZA](#)

*A series of online attacks on [Google](#) and dozens of other American corporations have been traced to computers at two educational institutions in China, including one with close ties to the Chinese military, say people involved in the investigation. (Markoff & Barboza, 2010).*

The scoop had taken a couple of month to investigate and it was followed by several related articles in the coming months. Markoff said the tip came from a former government official that he had meet at a university on the East Coast and had started to “cultivate.” We asked him how much effort he puts into cultivating sources.

*You can't do enough of it. I do it all the time. Those are the relationships that pay off. In the Internet era the best stories still come from personal contacts so you cannot do enough of it.*

Markoff described how he cultivated the main source in the Google-China story:

*Markoff (M): I drove to her house to have a conversation in the snow in December in Washington. I had met her two weeks before in Boston (...) I wanted to build a relationship so I spend a couple of hours there (...) She got this information out at a Department of Defence conference in St. Louis. A company had briefed her and then I tried to persuade the company to brief me, which they ultimately wouldn't.*

*I: And you could not refer to her [in the conversations with the company]?*

*M: (...) I never referred to her and they never talked about her but they knew exactly where it came from and her relationship with them has actually been damaged. Not permanently, but they were pissed. Because this company wanted to keep a very low profile with respect to international issues.*

The company didn't want to confirm the story:

*They first told me was that this was classified briefing. I said no, it wasn't a classified briefing. So we went back and forth on this and they said let us think about it and ultimately they said that they were not going to talk. So I had to find another source. That took me another two weeks.*

Markoff had another American company confirm the story and then he sought comments from Chinese officials. But the Chinese were also not willing to cooperate:

*M: I know the people in the Consulate in New York and Washington and they routinely hang up on me. They got pissed and hung up (...) they just didn't want to engage in it at all. That story had fairly large impact.*

*I: So what was your standard for sourcing here?*

*M: In this case I had a former government official and a company that had been violated by this intrusion confirm the threads of evidence that came from these two Chinese schools. That met my standards as a journalist. At the end of the day I knew that this was truth, given who this person was.*

Secret sources are part of the game but though such sources are not mentioned in the article they may be suspected because they have shared inside knowledge known to a limited group of people. Markoff has had a source lose his job because he talked to the New York Times, though his name was not mentioned in the story:

*M: At a large technology company, a well known company in the Valley, the people around the company began to suspect a certain person as a source of mine (...) it was a very compelling situation. This was now five or six years ago. The company had not gone public and they fired this person. It is a very strange situation. There are some legal cases still around it.*

*I: Do you still have contact with him or her?*

*M: I do (...)*

*I: He is still your friend?*

*M: He is still my friend. We had been friends for a long time and he had been a good source for me for years but I feel a certain amount of guilt.*

According to *BurrellesLuce*, *The New York Times* had a circulation of approximately 623,000 copies daily in 2009 and the newspaper is sold in the Valley. But even for a star reporter at the New York Times it is difficult to get to talk to top people in big companies in the Valley if they don't develop personal bonds. Markoff advises innovation journalists to find sources who really know the ecosystem in the Valley, who hold the map of it, understanding how the different actors connect into the ecosystem. One of his own guides to the ecosystem was John Gage, who was for years Chief Researcher and Vice President of the Science Office for Sun Microsystems, an international information-technology company (John Gage 2010).

*M: He was like a diplomat. He knew everybody in the world. For a reporter, when you find a person like that it is gold because (...) through that person you can find anyone else. (...) So John Gage was one of the people in my career as a reporter who I would always go to first because he could get me in touch with others in the entire district.*

*I: (...) It was not like you had to write the story from his perspective?*

*M: No. Not usually. But he had his own priorities (...)*

*I: So these are the guys who have the map of the ecosystem?*

*M: That's right. If you find them you find gold. (...) They give me access because they know people and their credentials, people would talk to me; they have map and I learned it from them and then the third thing was that they had vision, so I got the big picture of what was important for them. They knew what was important and what wasn't.*

*I: Did you buy that vision?*

*M: Yes, they sold me a vision and I adopted their route (...) But I think that worldwide there are people who exploit networks.*

Markoff and Gage both belonged to the anti-Vietnam War movement around Berkley and other universities in the Valley in the '60s and '70s. Among other things, Gage now works with Al Gore on issues related to green technology (John Gage 2010).

#### **4.4 The Personal Bloggers**

Esther Wojcicki and Tanja Aitamurto are independent journalists who have blog sites at the *Huffington Post*, one of the most prestigious blogspheres in the U.S. Both have advanced degrees in journalism, have covered politics for major newspapers and received numerous recognitions from the professional communities. To blog for the *Huffington Post* is, however, only one of many activities they are involved in as journalists. Both also write for other blogs and print publications, teach and do research. Both claim to have a large network in Silicon Valley. However, Wojcicki is an insider, while Aitamurto is a newcomer to the Valley.

Wojcicki grew up in California in the 1940s and 50s. She is married to a professor at Stanford; one daughter is vice president at Google and another is married to one of the Google founders. She herself teaches journalism at the local high school and chairs Creative Commons.

Aitamurto grew up in Finland in the 1980s. She came to Silicon Valley as part of the Innovation Journalism Fellowship program in 2008 and worked as an intern at *VentureBeat* for five month before becoming a freelance.

Both use their connections at Stanford University extensively. Because Aitamurto was once a Fellow and Wojcicki is married to a Stanford professor, they have access to professors whom other journalists may find it hard to reach.

Wojcicki has numerous personal contacts among the Valley's most influential industry people. Some relations are family while others are parents of her students, but she is careful about how she exploits her personal contacts in her writing:

*W: The only ethical problem I face when I do my own journalism is that I can't write about Google. I can never write about Google.*

*I: No, that is obvious.*

*W: So I avoid writing anything connected with Google.*

*I: But you don't face other dilemmas as we usually do in newspaper writing?*

*W: There is always two sides to a story and the only ethical dilemma I can think of is if I don't get the other side to the story (...) I always try to find both sides of the story in every situation. I also sometimes would like to write about teachers and teaching, but then I have to be very careful because I never want to be in a situation of defaming a teacher, though some teachers are really bad and it would be great to say what they are doing. Sometimes I do, and then I try to make sure it is anonymous. As long as I don't pin it on a specific [name-given] teacher, I think it is okay.*

When asked to recommend an innovation journalist in the Valley, Wojcicki mentions John Markoff first:

*John Markoff is amazing (...) He is a really nice person and he knows what he is doing*

Aitamurto does not feel that she is limited in the topics she can write about:

*I am free. I am not so connected to my newspaper. I don't have any obligations to anybody so I am freer in my thoughts and my writing. (...) I don't get any special treatments because I am a journalist (...) Now that I blog for the Huffington post, I can get a press pass to a conference more easily, so that I can go and listen to people but nobody expects me to cover (...) there are so many bloggers, so many reporters these days so it is not like the PR people are not coming after you. If you want they will talk to you and you get the information you want, but they don't come after you.*

Aitamurto's network consists of people she has met at conferences, at Stanford or as sources. If she wants interviews she might send out five requests and get two responses:

*A: It depends on who these people are; if I know them; if I have met them. (...) So it always helps. But if I wanted to interview the CEO of Google it would take forever.*

*I: It is impossible, right?*

*A: Probably, I haven't tried. Why would he give an interview? Maybe he would, who knows.*

When asked to recommend an innovation journalist in the Valley she mentions Michael Arrington of <http://techcrunch.com>:

*Because he is not afraid of expressing his opinions, that is the value. His opinions are valuable, he has insights, he is an expert, he knows what he is talking about (...) when you read TechCrunch you learn a lot in a short period of time about the topic and you feel that these people really know what they are writing about and they are independent.*

We asked them if they had lessons learned to share with beginning innovation journalists in the Valley and they both mentioned the necessity to take risks and accept failure. Aitamurto:

*Take risks. Sometimes you fail, sometimes you don't, but at least you learn all the time. Don't be afraid to try new things. Even if you don't get the opportunity, you can try to create the opportunity. And don't wait until somebody comes and gives it to you.*

Wojcicki:

*Don't be afraid of innovation. Don't be afraid of trying, don't be afraid of breaking the rules, don't be afraid of making a mistake, because that is how you grow, that is the foundation of innovation.*

## 5 Discussion

There is no direct, front-door access for journalists into the major companies in the Valley. Not even Markoff from *New York Times*, representing one of the most prestigious newspapers in the world, can call Google's headquarters and expect to get to talk to the CEO. Business leaders want, for understandable reasons, to influence specific people such as investors and politicians with their corporate messages and they are not always interested in critical voices. To control the news coverage, larger companies in Silicon Valley insist that the rules of personal networks be followed. If journalists want access they must be introduced by people who are already known. If the access is misused, neither the journalist nor the person who introduced him is worthy of continued 'trust.' In a sense, the personal contact that introduces a journalist to a company official is a hostage in the game. Few journalists like that game in the long run.

Journalists such as Wojcicki have access to the most influential people but in accordance with the SPJ Code of Ethics she will not write stories that relate to these sources. Other journalists such as Kanellos apply a business model where they mix the news reporting with the sale of services to companies, including consulting, conferences and marketing reports and that gives him a broader personal network of people who trust him and whom he can contact stories. Very few journalists in the Valley have the time, resources and power to do investigative reporting like Markoff. Even if they do, it requires a strong sense of responsibility [for Markoff] to continue investigations when people repeatedly get angry when he calls.

Innovation journalists apply various strategies in their effort to balance professional norms for an independent and fair news account with the social norms related to the network economy in the Valley and the controlled access to the most powerful sources. The strategies include re-focus of attention from the powerful top people in the industries to consumer behaviours, small companies with new

ideas, trend stories based on publicised information, and opinion pieces based on public information.

Some journalists develop strategies that let them gain at least some information about relevant companies, even if that may compromise their integrity or limit their ability to cover the full story. When talking to some innovation journalists in the Valley we got the sense that they have adapted to the innovative, playfully creative Californian culture and feel that they have more freedom and fewer responsibilities compared with other beats.

Based on 11 in-depth interviews, we conclude that there is no set of shared norms among innovation journalists in Silicon Valley today. This diversity contrasts with the strong shared norms for crisis coverage (Mogensen, 2007; 2008) and the widely shared norms for political and social reporting among professional journalists.

The degree of diversity may be linked to the ability to access sources freely through the front door. During national crises like those caused by the events on September 11, 2001 or Hurricane Katrina, powerful sources become pro-active in their contact to news media. Also in everyday news reporting politicians are generally willing to share their points of views with reporters. The major industry players in the global innovation economy want to control information about them. However the consequence may be that people don't get the independent, accountable news reports they need to act optimally in society.

The development of the diversity in journalism norms and the impact of it on the innovation ecosystem and society in general need to be explored further. It may affect public expectation and trust in news reports that could, in turn, harm not only the democracy that journalists claim to protect but also the innovation economy that the companies try to control.

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