

Kids and Home-Work in Silicon Valley

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In contrast to the industrial workplace wherein the factory gate established a clear boundary between work and domestic life, workers in the 'knowledge economy' maintain more fluid boundaries between home and work (Nippert-Eng 1996, Shumante and Fulk 2004). Joining a conference call during dinner, sorting email while watching a movie with the kids and logging in to work for a few hours after putting the kids to bed characterize just a few of the routine ways that work permeates into the domestic sphere in Silicon Valley, California (Darrah, Freeman and English-Lueck 2007, English-Lueck 2002). For children growing up in the land of Apple, Yahoo! and Google, innovation, self-regulation, competition and other values associated with work in the technology industry are as much a part of everyday life as the company logos emblazoned on shirts, hats and bags hanging in the closet.

Image 1: Map of Silicon Valley <http://www.siliconvalleymap.com/otherpubs.htm>, Accessed March 16, 2007

Work and the material assemblages associated with labor also shape the very infrastructure of home. Sonia Livingstone (2002) has written at length about the increasing importance of 'bedroom culture', or the prevalence of televisions and other media in kids' bedrooms (Bovill and Livingstone 2001). While bedroom culture certainly exists in Silicon Valley, one of the most interesting aspects of Silicon Valley professional households involves the shift from the 'kitchen table society' (Gullestad 1985) to what I have been calling the 'desktop society'. For example, Jeff, a 14 year old in middle school student, lives with his parents and his elder brother in one of the wealthiest areas of Silicon Valley. Both of Jeff's parents are professionals, but his mother recently decided to become a consultant in order to devote more of her time to the boys' school and extracurricular activities. Within this remit is the remodeling of their five bedroom house. Although there are two offices (one for each parent) and the two brothers have desk space in their rooms, Jeff's mom decided to remove the kitchen table in order to construct a large desk space where the kids could do their homework each evening. Out of concern for their media usage, she then decided to make an addition to the home to separate the 'work' computer from the 'play' computer. Reflecting on her sons' use of technology and media, she notes, "We do restrict the use of the computer games and media during homework. And he said that well, sometimes or whatever - that's just to clarify that - so and I think one of the things that we just had a discussion on is the distractibility of IM and that's something that my husband and I have really talked to Jeff about...And the concern is the IM and the music and homework. So those three media is [sic] happening. So we're concerned about his ability to stay focused on task when all that's happening. And I think he's been working on that, disciplining himself, right J?" As becomes evident in Jeff's mom's discussion, it is by no accident that kids' work spaces are constructed in the traditional site of household and familial reproduction, the kitchen and dining room. At a very pragmatic level, this is because many parents fear what their kids could encounter online behind closed bedroom doors. The creation of work place in a shared domestic space creates the sense that what kids are doing on the computer and online is public and thus keeps kids disciplined and on task (see also Lally 2002). A few parents have explicitly stated that the transformed office space is conveniently proximate to where mom and (sometimes) dad are cooking and thus parents can keep a watchful eye on their computer monitors while kids do their school work. In addition, the decision to install a desktop computer rather than a more portable laptop computer assists in solidifying this particular area as a home-work space, akin to their parent's home offices.

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Image 2: *The Kids' Home Office*, Photograph by H. Horst, 2006

<http://www.materialworldblog.com>

But parents are not the only ones structuring home-work spaces in and through technology.

Evalyn, a 13 year old middle school student, lives in a four-bedroom house in a suburban neighborhood with her parents and two siblings. Evalyn and her older brother attend private school and her older sister recently started high school at a respected public school in the area. Evalyn's parents are both professionals who have worked for a few of the region's large technology firms, although in the wake of the dot.com bust have become independent contractors and thus work primarily at home. Now that Evalyn has started middle school and is 'not really a kid anymore', she has been spending more time with her older sister. One weekend they were talking and listening to music together and they came up with an idea — it might be fun to share a bedroom and convert the extra bedroom into their own home office. As Evalyn describes,

"My sister and I moved in together recently - I was always living downstairs and she was living upstairs. Now she moved downstairs with me and we both put our computers and all our homework stuff and desk stuff up into her room. So now like clothing, jewelry, beds, they're all in my room, and my room has an adjoining bathroom. And her room holds all the work stuff."

The 'work stuff' Evalyn refers to consists of desktop computers, a printer, paper and a range of school books, work and media devices, including a shared iPod and digital camera. As a place designated for doing their homework, the kids' office is also a space which is set apart from the shared family computers and printers which their brother and parents use. For teenagers, Evalyn and her sister are unusual in opting out of their own, private bedrooms, an act that seems to run contrary to almost all of the values of individualism and privacy associated with American middle class life. But as a semi-private space for 'the daughters', there is a curious symmetry between the integration of 'work' spaces in the home through the office and the re-segmentation of the spaces through the designation of one space as an 'office' and another as a 'bedroom'. While this practice is not as prevalent as the transformation of the kitchen table space into an office space for homework, there are a variety of forms of this consolidation and sharing of office resources among siblings in other families as they gradually learn to integrate work in their own lives.

As Mary Douglas (1992) has argued, the creation of 'home' is ultimately tied to controlling time and space in order to create an infrastructure to frame the household as a community. In Jeff's family and others where the home office is constructed in the kitchen and dining room, parents clearly play a key role in structuring the 'public' space and attempting to 'discipline' kids' time. Kids' strategies in using these media and technologies for 'hanging out' and countering 'boredom' may belie their structure — kids have lots of strategies for 'looking like they're doing their homework' or hiding their use of certain programs. However hidden or revealed, they nonetheless continue to discern the relationship between home and work where it is already quite clear to them that within the home there should be spaces for work. The kid-driven creation of a home office suggests an even deeper incorporation of work into home spaces, one that reveals the micro-dynamics of social reproduction and poses provocative questions about the changing experience of childhood in late capitalism.

This ongoing research, which focuses upon the relationship between technology, media and domestic space in Silicon Valley, is part of a large-scale study entitled 'Kids' Informal Learning with Digital Media: An Ethnographic Investigation of Innovative Knowledge Cultures'. A three year collaborative project funded by the [John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's Digital Media and Learning Initiative](#), research is currently being conducted at University of Southern California and University of California, Berkeley. To learn more about this research and the Digital Youth Project, see <http://digitalyouth.ischool.berkeley.edu/>

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