If you don’t read Proust and if you don’t like Van Gogh, why do you work here? *

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*Bibliotech, a conference at Stanford University, explores the potential for innovation that doctoral students in the humanities can bring to Silicon Valley.

‘Bibliotech’ is not the name of yet another digital humanities project, but a conference that took place at Stanford University on May 11th 2011 (http://humanexperience.stanford.edu/bibliotech/about-us). Its organizers, especially Anais Saint-Jude, a Ph.D. candidate at Stanford University, boldly envisioned Bibliotech to be the place where bibliophile aspiring humanists meet technophile senior business leaders from the ‘valley’ a few miles south (i.e. Silicon Valley). According to President John Hennessy’s opening remarks the conference was simply another first in a whole series of pioneering endeavors that have made Stanford University a hub for innovation, unrivaled by peer institutions.

A decade ago, when the new economy bubble burst, the parties to the conversation blissfully ignored or even ridiculed each other. Things are much better now. Still, Bibliotech did not always steer clear of the kind of awkwardness that is bred by the failure to understand each other (‘what does recontextualizing mean?’) and take each other seriously. At times, this awkwardness was even visible in the body language of some of the speakers and panelists.

The first person to break the ice and make a passionate case for the new partnership was Vivek Ranadivé, the CEO and founder of TIBCO, a software company. According to Ranadivé, the twenty-first century is the century of the so-called ‘right brainers’, who will steal the power from the left brainers, those left-brainers who single-handedly built many of the tech companies that are the pride of corporate America. According to Ranadivé, the day on which Apple’s market capitalization passed Microsoft’s market capitalization marks the beginning of the new era, an era in which creative, out-of-the-box approaches to technology and communications will outsmart conventional tech solutions devised by ‘philistine’ left-brainers.

It seemed to be the general consensus that Silicon Valley needs creative thinkers to boost and sustain innovation. There was also widespread agreement that educational policies that focus on funding engineering programs and cutting down on liberal arts majors

cannot be successful in the long run, as industry leaders in Singapore and China have
started to realize.

But not everyone shared Ranadivé’s belief that humanities Ph.D.s are the right kind of
right brainers. His namesake Vivek Wadhwa bluntly observed that people who spend ‘nine
years working on a dissertation’ (sic!) will not be able to add any value to Silicon Valley
businesses, ‘because they just haven’t acquired any relevant skills’. Regardless of whether
Wadhwa was encouraged to play devil’s advocate or spontaneously chose to play that role,
his rant against the new humanities hype raises interesting questions: to what extent does
solid scholarship translate into having acquired any skills that are desirable or
advantageous for the business world? Is thinking a lot about 17th century Parisian theater
performances really a good way to steel oneself for a C-level job at a tech company? Or is
it, as Stanford’s Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht suggested, the humanist’s implacable ‘weirdness’,
er her obsession with weird and bizarre questions, that makes her a perfect addition to most
technocratic teams (the very idea of ‘salting’ a team of 10 tech-minded people with one
and only one humanist would be propagated by Patrick Byrne, CEO of Overstock, several
hours later).

Next up was Google’s Marissa Mayer, the wunderkind of Silicon Valley, coming home to
her undergraduate campus, on which she majored in Symbolic Systems, one of those
unique Stanford majors designed to give a broad overview of four related areas. Some
Ph.D. students in the audience may have been secretly holding their breath and waiting
for Mayer to announce that a deal with Stanford will be brokered, a deal that commits
Google to hiring a certain number of Ph.D.s every year, but those unacknowledged hopes
turned out to be futile. In fact, for all the rhetorical praise of the humanities that inundated
the room, none of the industry leaders were ready to commit to any concrete program or
measure addressing the career-related concerns of humanities Ph.D.s. That does not
necessarily need to be a bad outcome, since the purpose of the conference was to start or
resume a conversation, building trust between the interlocutors, without any clear
agreement on tangible outcomes.

One keynote address stood out. It was Michael Moritz’s (Moritz is CEO of Sequoia
Capital, a venture capital firm.) In his very personal talk, Moritz avoided the pitfall of
being naively enthusiastic about a humanities Ph.D.’s ability to transform Silicon Valley,
but he was not extremely pessimistic or cynical either. He made an honest effort to give
job searchers that are thinking about leaving Academia valuable advice. ‘Give me the
impression that you didn’t just regard the 5 years of your PhD as a convenient extension of
your undergrad years - show me that you were captivated and driven by something’.

According to Moritz, the high priests of Silicon Valley in 2011 are still engineers and
computer scientists, even if only a minority of them think like Larry Ellison, the Oracle
CEO, who once infamously remarked: ‘If you don’t code and if you don’t sell, why do you
work here?’

Maybe Bibliotech was in fact the feeble beginning of a new era, an era in which the power
in technology companies will be shared more equally among people whose talents straddle
different areas. And if Silicon Valley cares about user interfaces and the content that is
being communicated through its various distribution platforms, it cannot afford to not
recruit talented humanists. Good content needs curation and effective communication
requires a thorough and empathetic understanding of the habits and expectations of the
audience. Humanities folks have a great deal to contribute to both successful communication management and high-quality content curation, which naturally translates into a competitive edge over engineers. The hardest challenge for humanities Ph.D.s right now is getting a foot into the (many) door(s) of Silicon Valley. Bibliotech cracked these doors open and allowed the participants to peek through the half-open doors. It remains to be seen how many humanities Ph.D.s have the confidence and determination to walk in and chat up the guys in the corner offices.