

## **What's Next versus What's Valuable**

*Perspectives on the value of ethnography in a Future-Focused World, based on a decade of experience as an anthropological consultant at the human centred innovation agency, IS IT A BIRD. Shared as an EPIC Summit in May 2022*

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### **Ethnographers operating in the future-focused context of consultancy**

For those of you who do not know anything about IS IT A BIRD, allow us to just briefly put us on the map: For the last decade, we have specialized in applying ethnographic methods and thinking into collaborations where we act as trusted advisors partnering up with companies, who want to stay relevant in the future. Our approach is holistic and human centric in the sense, that we believe that humans shape our world, and that we therefore need to understand their motivations, beliefs and needs in order to drive positive change and to create impact for sustainable futures.

In our work, we very much apply some of the basic principles of the ethnographic methodological approach. An approach well formulated by the Danish Anthropologist, Tine Tjørnhøj Thomsen:

“Anthropological knowledge is based on the researcher **sharing time and space** with the people he or she wants to understand, establishing relationships with them and thereby **experiencing life from their perspective**. The anthropologist follows people, **reflects upon what is being told**, returns with new questions and adjusts the insights accordingly. The method is **open, flexible and grasps the unexpected**.” (Kirsten Hastrup et.al: Ind i verden, 2010)

In our ongoing conversations with companies and organisations, we experience that our approach is challenged. Our clients, both public and private, want us to predict and display what will be future behaviour, aspirations and dreams, what will change, what might disrupt and how people might be different. We are often faced with concerns about the “deep dive into the present”. Because what is this space? and does it not sound awfully limiting in terms of its innovation potential?

**We're often confronted with the perception of ethnography as a toolkit limited to exploring present worlds, and therefore holding limited value to futures work and business strategies.**

This always provokes us a bit. The notion relies on a somewhat sci-fi view on the future as something disconnected from the now. As something which is either already happening, ready to be uncovered, or moldable, for us to design, free of current realities. But it is neither. “The future” is always plural; it is technological enablers for new product and services, it is a projection of current narratives and discourses, and it is unpredictable pandemics, nature catastrophes and conflicts... Across all of it, the starting point is the present – unless you of course expect to move to a whole new galaxy.

What we want to discuss, is how we might be able to help each other, our clients and our colleagues expand the perception of the ‘nature of change’ and explore the contextual space of the present, identify connections and potential in what is all around, rather than zooming in on the limited concept of time, exploring the future through linear lenses.

What we argue is that by being truly curious about the circumstances, nuances and interactions in the present, we discover that change is everywhere, while not everything changes. And as ethnographers, we have a key role to play in pointing out what is valuable to hold on to, and what we need to let go of, to build desirable, and sustainable futures.

We have points of view, not a lot of answers, but hopefully a lot of conversation starters, and we are curious about what resonates, what provokes, what you are experiencing, working as ethnographers in a future focused world. Hopefully we can all get smarter, together.

### **Looking ahead? Look around! Identify and invest in the values most likely not to change**

Imagine the solar system. Back in the day, before Nicolaus Copernicus came around, we all believed the earth to be at the center of it. It seemed obvious, at least from our human perspective. Copernicus was highly unpopular for challenging this perception, and for suggesting that we might not be at the center of the solar system. In our collaborations with clients we often use the analogy of the solar system to start a conversation about the value of ethnography. We use it to challenge companies to shift perspective when looking at the role they play in relation to their users, customers or consumers. To challenge what is in the center, what changes and what stands still.

If companies accept that their products and services are not at the centre of the universe which they are a part of, it forces a shift in the mindset more broadly. From the questions relevant to ask, to the problems relevant to address. If the user, consumer – human – is at the centre of the universe, it implies a shift from a focus on the business problem, to the human problem, which the business problem is merely a symptom of. This shift also implies a new perspective on time. Business problems are often related to time in a very linear way – what are we up to today, what are our strategies going forward. Understanding – and acting upon - human problems require a different contextual understanding. They are related to the different spatial dimensions of our everyday worlds; our social, cultural and structural surroundings.

It seems obvious that it is preferred to design for the future, rather than designing for the present. Who would want to be the narrow-minded, not looking ahead. But what we would argue, is that looking ahead can be more conservative than looking around. And that designing for what is valuable to humans today is less of a risk, than designing for the future limited by our current imagination of it. Defining business strategies we are sure all companies would agree is related to a great sense of uncertainty, and our reflection is, that: In an uncertain world, the safer bet to futures is to explore, identify and invest in what will most likely not change.

### **A case displaying the value: Exploring potential beyond the ocean**

In 2018, Maersk released their new strategic vision of becoming the global integrator of container logistics, connecting and simplifying the customers' supply chains. For 115 years, Maersk had focused on ocean freight – moving cargo across the ocean.

**With the new strategy, Maersk wanted to move into logistics more holistically, providing their customers with products and services beyond ocean transport.**

With this strategic shift, it was essential for Maersk to have a deep understanding of the reality they will be playing into for logistics customers across the supply chain: What are their needs and challenges? How do they make decisions? How can Maersk serve them the best? When initiating the project collaboration, the business problem was the focus of attention. How to ensure successful logistical services beyond the ocean. It was at the time relatively new to Maersk to work with an ethnographic approach. Meeting customers in their work places and facilitating semi-structured conversations about their everyday challenges with but also far beyond their collaboration with Maersk.

**In other words, we explored the reality and context of logistics customers across the world in the automotive, retail and chemical industries. To identify the human problem in the business problem.**

With our explorative research approach, we conducted in-depth interviews with multiple customer roles and teams within each customer organisation. This provided us with a solid contextual understanding of the day-to-day challenges and responsibilities of different types of employees and departments working with logistics.

What the ethnographic approach to the collaboration enabled was an immediate shift in perspective from the company space to the customer space, and, as we will point out, it also had great strategic implications spanning across time. What became apparent in the research, was that the world view of the customers was different from the one at Maersk, and by challenging the company's focus on what's in the centre of attention, the impact is a change in the perception of both space and time.

In this case, the ethnographic approach itself ended up leading to a strategic repositioning of the multinational company. Through a customer lens, we provided strategic understanding and direction on what it takes to realize the new strategy to become a global integrator of container logistics.

The reason we are sharing this particular case is to show an example of the potential value of investing time and energy in understanding current relationships and values in this interactional space, to shift the conversation to how to enable for these relationships to be strengthened in a future collaboration.

**The innovation potential in this sense lies in the ability to identify what values will most likely not change and how to hold on to the valuables in the customer relationship when setting off to achieve new business goals.**

Many years ago, Jeff Bezos was asked a question in an interview... and his answer stuck. Jeff Bezos probably does not think a lot about the value of ethnography. And quite frankly, ethnographers probably do not consider him a thought leader either. However, listening to his answer to the question raised in the interview made us think that he might be more of an ambassador than first anticipated. The interviewer asked: "What's going to change in the next 10 years?"

Bezos thought about this a while and then responded: "That's an interesting question. And a very common one. I get asked it a lot. But I almost never get the question 'What's not going to change in the next 10 years?' And I submit to you that that second question is actually the more important of the two — because you can build a business strategy around the things that are stable in time. In our retail business, we know that customers want low prices, and I know that's going to be true 10 years from now. They want fast delivery; they want vast selection. It's impossible to imagine a future 10 years from now where a customer comes up and says, 'Jeff, I love Amazon; I just wish the prices were a little higher.' 'I love Amazon; I just wish you'd deliver a little more slowly.' Impossible." Innovation is crucial to long-term success in any industry, but predicting the future is impossible. Recognising this, and rooting your strategy in persistent truths is a powerful approach.

### **A case displaying the challenge: who and what has to change?**

So now we've shared an example of the success story so to speak, where we believe that we were able to change the conversation in a big multinational organization, it might also be the right time to share an example of a collaboration, where we had less success doing just that. In this case, the client, a big, Danish NGO, had requested a deep dive exploration of the future needs of their members, in order to ensure future relevancy.

The organisation held a lot of fragmented quantitative and some qualitative data about their members, but lacked the strategic overview enabling them to make decisions, set direction and define focus areas for the upcoming strategy period. In our initial dialogues, the client kept referring to the importance of us coming up with "something new" pointing to their big existing pool of knowledge. They were nervous that we would come back with something they already knew. At the end of our collaboration, the challenges and business opportunities we presented back were not new in their essence. The stories we could share based on an ethnographic approach were new, more detailed, nuanced and segmented than the existing knowledge, but the material was tapping into ongoing conversations in the organization, and an important key stakeholder, the CEO, was disappointed.

We spent quite some time talking back and forth about this, and about what it means to be “visionary”. Clearly, to the CEO of the organisation, being visionary was related to something differing radically from the present (knowledge). What we find interesting about this case, is the difference in how change is perceived, and where and who has to change in order to give the sense of progression and value. At one point, one of the key stakeholders in the collaboration, an employee in the organization who had played a key role in initiating and scoping the study at first, posed the question, that maybe the insights of our study reflected that the challenges already known had simply not been solved yet and therefore would still be relevant to solve in the future.

What he implied was that somehow the organisation itself had not been able to change their ways sufficiently, to tackle the known, consistent, challenges outside the organisation. The CEO, however, was clearly more preoccupied with chasing the presumed external changes than facing the need for change within the organisation.

This experience made us wonder what is actually next. It seems that often, the response is a new problem for us to solve. Somehow it seems convenient to shift focus to new problems, rather than investing the time in coming up with new solutions to the problems we are dealing with already.

To wrap up our point about looking around to really look ahead, the point we suggest, is that our ethnographic, contextual assessment of the “present” valuables is probably a better “future investment” than any prediction of the unknowns to come. In its essence: designing for a deep understanding of what is desirable today will be a safer bet than designing for how desires might change in an unknown future.

#### **What’s the rush? Technologies might change fast, but human needs do not.**

Innovation is not just about seeing what’s new, but seeing what’s already there in new ways. The ethnographer can act as the “alignment experts” between engineering imaginations and human realities. As an agency we have an ongoing partnership with a global window manufacturing brand. A company with an engineering mindset who over the years has made an ambitious effort to become increasingly customer centric. From a homeowner perspective, the experience and operation of windows are intertwined with perception of the good life at home and homemaking, and this context has led to many interesting ethnographic insight studies on both strategic and product level. A few years back we collaborated on a project assessing the future digital innovation potential for the company in entering the smart home market.

As smart technologies have made their way into private homes it was crucial for the company to understand how to respond to the development in a way that ensured their relevance in a digital future.

While smart home technologies have gained popularity both as exciting entertainment and through the promise of frictionless automation, the same value proposition could not be applied to the operation of windows.

When the company approached us, they were puzzled. In trend reports and across the home appliance categories they could see the smart home products increasing in numbers and as an attempt to tap into the trend, they had also developed smart products launched across markets.

However, the products launched did not perform well. In other words, they experienced a clash between a trend emerging and a consumer response which seemingly did not make sense.

#### **FROM HOW TO WHY – from linear to sensemaking**

As part of the preparation for the field trip, we were introduced to some of the digital innovations in the making, of how to potentially operate windows in the future. The company engineers were very curious to learn which method of handling a window in the future might be preferred over another. I think, had they designed the study, they would have preferred to spend the most time talking about this. However, we were very clear on wanting to broaden the

perspective of the conversation and ended up spending at least half the time with people talking about homemaking. Not in the future, but right now.

In order to understand why and how people operate windows, we met German and French home owners in their own homes. We asked them to guide us through their house and tell us about routines, worries and responsibilities around operating windows and homemaking. This provided the context for the following conversation about smart home technologies in general and discussions on specific possibilities for operating windows guided by visual examples.

Through a deep understanding of windows as a part of homemaking, we discovered two important needs that the operation of windows meets in the home; the first being control, and the second being care and maintenance. This was in contrast to their expectations and experiences of smart technology which was linked to a reduced sense of control rather than an increased control. Moreover, care and maintenance in the households as well as investments in new smart technologies are the responsibility of different members of the household.

With the ethnographic approach we helped shed light on a human problem within the business problem: From “how do I operate a smart window” to “how do I maintain a sense of control in my home?” And we thereby also shifted the perspective from a linear processual focus on “how” people would operate their windows, to “why” people open their windows.

The depth of the insights provided the engineers and product developers with a strategic direction for future development of new solutions to support home owners needs related to windows, home and homemaking.

We present this case as it has been following us since conducting the research. As an example of the dynamic between change and continuity. As we discovered here, as well as in many other cases, technologies might change fast, but human needs do not necessarily. In this case, we pointed out the human needs which are less likely to change. People will, also in the future of their life at home, want to have a sense of control. They get this from the feeling that their actions contribute to that, rather than true having their actions limited by design.

In other words, the future we can imagine, in engineering and technological terms, is not necessarily the future which is desirable to live in. This does not imply that change and innovations are irrelevant. Rather that change is everywhere in the home setting, and the ethnographer offers a careful perspective on what is changed, and what stays the same. And being aware of which changes are deliberate and which should be avoided.

The experience we had in the collaboration with the window company is similar to the ones made by Danish anthropologist and expert in the interaction between humans and robotics, Cathrine Hasse. Cathrine in her work experienced a continuous clash between people who make robots have a lot of knowledge about robots, but the ones who are going to use them have very little knowledge, leading to a clash between expectations and practice. Between imaginations of the future and the realities in context.

Cathrine Hasse, in her research argues, that there is an assumption that robots are efficiency tools and that this very much fuels the dream about the future usage. But this assumption is more imaginative than most engineers will probably acknowledge. At least it is not rational. Whereas the belief is that robots are efficiency tools, most of them are unprofitable. Fx self-driving cars: the imagination fuels the dream. The adaption to reality follows. We are wasting our efforts if we do not focus on connecting the imagination and the reality. (Cathrine Hasse: Designing Robots, Designing Humans. 2019).

### **Stay in the trouble! Embracing the nuances of the present to set direction for desirable (and sustainable) futures**

A part of our point of departure was the argument, maybe somewhat provocative, that focusing on the future could be more conservative than being curious about the present. Our reflection around this is, that the focus on futures as something out there for us to predict and await, detached from the present, limits both our creativity, our imagination and in the end our ability to act, to define and enable, not just the futures we can imagine, but also desire. Perceiving futures, as something detached from the present, makes it conveniently easy to push the troubles ahead of us. As something abstract which never really hits the fan.

A few months back, Donna Haraway, the American professor Emerita at the History of Consciousness Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz gave an interview to a Danish Newspaper, (Information). Haraway, in the interview argued that we, as humans wanting to shape sustainable futures have to: “stay with the trouble”. In the interview, Haraway elaborates by stating that:

“To me it seems obvious, that we must learn to stay with the trouble. (...) We cannot control the future, and we cannot come up with big solutions from a position in the future. The big solutions are the wrong way to go about it. Elon Musk who wants to create life on other planets, and Bill Gates, who talks about the big technological solutions, have exposed how the old progressive dream about new worlds is desperate and denying the reality. Instead, we need to work together to repair the damages, and create a vision of a present and a future which is still possible. Forget about the big futures. Let’s stay in the trouble. The person who stays in the trouble does not look away, or up, but explores the surroundings and lives with them”.

Haraway’s words resonated with the ethnographic thinking, and it rang true to us as human centred innovation consultants. At present times, many position the human centred approach in opposition to what we might call the planet-centric approach. But in our point of view, these are not opposites. Humans shape our world. Therefore, we need to understand humans to drive change. And enable sustainable (and desirable) futures.

The ethnographic approach offers a tool for how to stay in the trouble! It prompts us to embed ourselves in the mess of the present. And with this as the starting point, explore, identify and enable desirable change towards sustainable futures.

### **A framework for ethnography and futures work**

At IS IT A BIRD we have developed an operational framework for helping our clients stay in the trouble and navigate there way with an eye on both the current messiness and futures. And for applying ethnography to futures studies. The framework is our take on how to operationalize the holistic approach to futures, and break it down without pulling it apart.

One of the key elements of the framework is the need to connect the micro and the macro level, the I-frame and the S-frame as some might prefer to call it, and acknowledge the dynamics between people and objects, people and people, and people, structural environments and discourses. A second element is not to detach the micro and macro level of human behaviour and not to limit findings to present conditions. We distinguish between them, not to divide them analytically, but to be able to see each layer, as we peel them off in our research. We need to zoom in on the specifics to identify the universal, and we need to stand still and be present in order to see how things are moving and connected around us.

In our research design, we aim at linking the micro and the macro levels of change and facilitate a conversation between them. The framework enables us to facilitate tangible conversations without missing out on the bigger picture. Zooming in and dwelling on the details and zooming back out to see how the dots are connected.

In this dynamic we see the value of the ethnographers role as the “alignment expert” between technological future fantasies and human realities. In this time-spatial context, the ethnographic approach aligns, compares and connects the potential for change at micro and macro levels. The ethnographer detects the connections and relationship between moving parts in the present across the tangible and the abstract. It helps to operationalize what is otherwise abstract, and define principles and guiding insights to what is specific.

The flexible, creative mode of the ethnographic approach enables action. Instead of waiting until we have figured it all out, the ethnographic approach prompts us to explore and experiment, and to be flexible in our interactions with our surrounding worlds. Or as Tjørnhøj Thomsen puts it: “... (be) open, flexible and grasp the unexpected.”

(Kirsten Hastrup et.al: Ind i verden, 2010)

Wrapping up we want to go back to where we started. To the solar system. The ultimate trouble which we are all in you might say.

What we suggest is, ultimately, that maybe our main concern should not be the meteors which might hit. They are all over but somehow we're still here. Rather, we should look down, to the soil burning beneath our feet.

And when thinking about the nature of change, remember, that we have a role to play in this picture. The future is something we can actually influence, if we are curious enough to understand how it is emerging around us and decide on how we want to drive positive change. As late anthropologist David Graeber, who tragically died last year, poetically states:

"The ultimate, hidden truth of the world is that it is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently."

Thank you!