

Moments of Disjuncture: The Value of Corporate Ethnography in the Research Industrial Complex

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This paper seeks to examine some of the underlying tensions that shape how and why ethnographers in industry often find their efforts devalued or not realized by stakeholders – i.e. “moments of disjuncture.” I argue that in many large corporations there is a separation between the stories anthropologists tell about themselves and those which are told about them, which mutually constitute an “informed fiction.” This fiction acts as a catalyst within a broader cycle of knowledge exchange (the industrial research complex) that demands a fast paced churning out of “newness” in insights before they grow old. These two processes often come to a head, creating a “seen it before” phenomena which risks devaluing timely and important work. To understand this I examine a case study of smart and automated technologies and offer potential solutions.

INTRODUCTION

How do we build bridges? As anthropologists in industry it's through representing the outside, inside. Our building materials are not concrete and steel but texts, images, videos, and models about people and their lives around the world. Our tools are not blunt hammers, though we use ethnography and presentation to pack the same punch when it comes to getting our ideas across. Most of our work in applied ethnography, as practitioners and reflexive academics, is around the role of representation within corporations. We pride ourselves in being able to "represent the end user voice," give faces and names to the masses of undifferentiated 'consumers' out there, to show the complexities of other worlds so that the powers of capital do not outright colonize the other, but adapt to them in productive ways. We surprise, shock, and occasionally awe our stakeholders in the hopes that creating repeat epiphanies about “otherness” will gradually turn the gears of the corporation for the better. In some cases, however, we find our best efforts fall on silent ears. Our bridges collapse. Our ambitions and representations of other worlds fall through the cracks. The committees who bring us in are unwilling to listen, or at best give us a firm hand shake, a pat on the back, and a reassuring "job well done" as we're escorted out of the room. In these cases (which are not infrequent) why are we brought in at all?

There are many theories, both academic, and applied as to why these moments of disjuncture occur – from organizational “flux” that shifts the way ethnography is valued in corporations, to the need for methodological evolutions to meet business acumen (Salvador et al 2013; Cefkin 2015). In this paper, I argue that in many large corporations, the story ethnographers tell about their inherent value and "what they do" – to at once convince stakeholders as well as themselves of their place and role as innovators ready to turn the gears on an ossified business – is in large part an “informed fiction” (Anderson and Bezaitis 2012) brought on by the structure and culture of the organization, as well as the highly differential aims of two descript groups, one Emic (business stakeholders), one Etic (anthropologists representing people from the “rest of the world” (Singer 2014). These two

groups are caught up in what I term “the industrial research complex,” or a set of institutional relationships which demand a continual and fast paced churning out of “newness” in data and insights for decision making that quickly grow stale and lose value the older they become. The relationship between knowledge producer and knowledge consumer in this arrangement has three deterministic effects that shape how and why these moments of disjuncture occur.

Firstly, knowledge production becomes deterministic in that research findings become ancillary to this complex – research becomes a political necessity rather than pursuit of objective truths about difference (Latour 1993, 2013). Secondly, the data produced by the anthropologist is fetishized and ritually disseminated in “bullets” or snippets, disentangled from its ethnographic context in order to maintain a sense of “newness,” realizing a value that is incomplete (Nafus et al. 2006). Finally, the corporation leverages the industrial research complex, not to inform itself for the purpose of change, but to remain the same. By hiring the anthropologist to bring representations of the strange ‘other,’ corporations are more swiftly able to recoil onto the traditions they know – conservative business models – remembering what and who they are in the face of stark difference. This moment of realization spurs movement and change, though not always in the direction intended by the anthropologist.

To illustrate how these moments of rupture play out and the ways in which applied ethnographers can circumnavigate and work through them in order to better realize their value, turning the gears of innovation within the corporation, I split this paper into two parts. The first section examines a moment of disjuncture during a presentation on the future of automated and smart devices. Using this example I explicate the tenuous nature of the relationship between capital/the corporation and the anthropologist as knowledge bearer – the ongoing necessity for ethnographic work despite the distrust of it. The second half examines how the industrial research complex (or IRC) exacerbates these tensions, drawing both business stakeholders and researchers into an ongoing and uneasy alliance in the production of “insights.” This research is based on three years of participant observation as a UX researcher at a large semiconductor manufacturer in Silicon Valley.

WAIT, I’VE SEEN THIS BEFORE...

“Didn’t we do this research a couple years ago with the same results?” – UX Researcher

I stood at the head of a long faux-wood conference table in a narrow windowless beige room, flipping through my power point presentation one last time under the unforgiving white of fluorescent lights. This was the day we were to present the findings from our recently completed report on emerging ‘smart and automated technologies,’ which we had spent three months pulling together from a mix of publication analysis and ethnographic interviews with ‘cutting edge’ users who had automated every possible facet of their existence. The walls were covered with posters, post-it notes, photos and illustrations from our incubation period, making ornamental while simultaneously concretizing for our audience the mental labor performed over the past few weeks (Nafus et al. 2010). My stakeholders and colleagues trickled in a few minutes after the hour for our 9am meeting, sipping their drip coffee and making small talk in a half-hearted way, their minds torn between focus on the meeting at hand and incoming emails with to do’s for the week ahead.

“The future is in smart technologies” we claimed with gusto, breaking the lingering haze of the morning with an introduction of the topic at hand. “With an increase in ‘always on’ technology and more connectivity, devices people use will need to get much smarter – adapting to us real time, rather than us adapting to them as they used to.” Transfixed, the stakeholders – a mix of engineers, designers, and researchers – listened on intently as we flipped through some varying statistical projections on the expected growth of this market. “A 40% growth in this vertical over the next 5 years means that as companies around the valley increase the human-like intelligence in the technologies we use, a deeper understanding of the interpersonal relationships that will emerge between peoples and their devices will be more important than ever to understand.”

To illustrate this somewhat nuanced point about a fundamental cultural shift brought on by the development of a new technology, I suggested we “have a look at what the users told us,” flipping over to a short video clip of a man showing us around his smart home. We listened as the thirty something mustached hipster described his Roomba as his most faithful companion. “I think of this little guy as a pet who never lets me down...I call him Stevie...he’s always here waiting for me to get home and seems to somehow ‘know me’ without me doing anything... like I was planning for a party over the weekend and he cleaned twice as long the day before without me even changing his settings.” After a year of cohabitation, and without completely understanding the underlying logics of the system, the metro-jack techie had grown to completely trust the robot to take on a portion of his own cleaning responsibilities, while the robot too had adapted to the man’s patterns, cleaning only while he was away at work or for extra long periods before guests came over. “As you can see,” I announced to the room, “users project relationships onto devices with even the simplest form of algorithmic intelligence...this will only expand and complicate in the coming years as more of these technologies enter peoples everyday lives. It will be our job to make these relationships meaningful, trustworthy, and lasting through smarter design.”

The report out continued unabated in a discussion fashion, as we walked the group through varying models, quotes, videos, and snippets – each format of knowledge dissemination strategic in its shape and form. The report was designed so that our stakeholders could deracinate and take with them the “nuggets” of the research insights to varying corners of the corporation, motivating their teams to design swiftly with our users in mind (Nafus and Anderson 2010). Yet half way through the now ritual report out, I noticed one of our group having some difficulties. A small pale character, fidgeting in disquiet for nearly an hour in the corner finally spoke up,

“This is all great work and I can tell you’ve put a lot of thought into it...but haven’t we done this before?”

“How do you mean?” I asked.

“We did research like this a few years ago with similar results.”

“Did we?” I wondered, “But this is all new research.”

“We did.” He said with confidence.

“Where’s that report now?”

“I’m not sure,” he said. *“Probably deleted.”*

"Hmm, that's bizarre. Are you sure it was the same?"

"The content was a bit different, but definitely similar.

"Shit." I thought, "After all this time and effort, how could this happen?"

"It doesn't matter though" the man said reassuringly seeing the panic in my eyes, "this research shows this phenomena is still happening 'out there' and is something the corporation should clearly address."

"Yes, exactly," I said in relief as the group nodded in agreement, "I would think so."

Despite this moment of disjuncture which could have led to a disavowment of our findings, the presentation went on to a successful completion – meeting its target goals, making people happy, and so forth. Yet something about this event irked me well after the project wrapped up. The comment was by no means the first of its kind, it was in fact quite common. At nearly every presentation I witnessed during my three years at Intel, someone had inevitably ‘seen it’ before in some iteration or other. Did these veterans get some kind of twisted gratification pointing out that there was nothing new under the sun? Or were we indeed ritually repeating work unknowingly – and if so, why?

THE STORIES WE TELL ABOUT OURSELVES...

To better understand how anthropologists are often caught up in the broader structures of organizational flux and the demands of ‘fact making’ when it comes to the (re)production of knowledge in these situations, we must first examine the types of stories or “informed fictions” (Anderson and Bezaitis 2012) that are used to legitimate both our value as anthropologists of praxis as well as our productions. Some of the stories we have refined after years of trial and error, others have been projected onto us by our audiences and their understandings of culture and business – though both shape the relationships we have with capital. In either case, the value of what we do and say is a relative one, mutually (re)defined in crucial moments of contact and negotiation between emic (stakeholders) and etic (anthropologist) groups. During my time as a researcher I noticed a few predominate themes used by each party to legitimate a research project and subsequently the researcher involved.

"My roles have changed a lot over the years, but one thing has remained pretty constant, we're charged with bringing peoples stories from the outside world inside the corporation and showing stakeholders things they might not want to see, but need to...breaking down 'silos' in the process" – Corporate Anthropologist

On the one hand, anthropologists have a few unique claims. We do ‘innovation work,’ which loosely means we bring an outside perspective inside ossified corporate realms (Christianson). This viewpoint may not necessarily be ‘new,’ but it certainly is different from what our stakeholders are used to in that it is both global and provides a theoretically and critically informed perspective rather than a dry data table (Mack and Squires 2011). Anthropologists are storytellers, versed either explicitly or implicitly in the ways of thick description (Geertz 1994), which makes our arguments unique in that they are human and relatable. We claim to be ambassadors (Ortlieb 2010, Mack and Squires 2011), representing and sometimes embodying a particular cultural or “end user” group – from housewives in Mumbai starting a small business, to hyper connected SF techies who have burned out and

live unplugged in the woods – businesses stakeholders value our ability to cut through the often fuzzy nature of culture and distill down the richness we engage with into something that informs their decision making as has long been the case (Cefkin 2010). In this distillation we point out blind spots to the corporation, new markets, and new business opportunities – taking on the subjective world which institutions have a tendency to fear and reject due to their organizational structure and dependence on numbers (MacKenzie 2007; Scott 1998; Kunda 2006; Lampland 2009). Using ethnographic method and varying mediums (quotes, videos, pictures, models, etc.), we make our findings have a scientific and objective ‘truthyness’ that is digestible (Riles 2006; Mazzarella 2003) – an informed fiction that reifies our role as expert (Anderson and Bezaitis 2012, Jasanoff 2004).

“We use ethnographers to help us understand what’s happening in the world of users... usually they help set new strategic product directions and see things before others do... their insights can be invaluable, but their methods are somewhat unorthodox.” – Business Stakeholder

On the other hand, our business stakeholders see us in a similar though slightly different light. We provide a product – insights. These insights are tradable and some have more value than others in the corporate knowledge economy. The insights seem to be predictive of the future – this is fascinating to stakeholders. We somehow can see slightly ahead of other more standard marketing measurements, and can call trends before others can – something essential to staying ahead of the market (Christianson xxiii). Though in fact we draw from our theoretical and field training to recognize new markets emerging, often in places most people aren’t yet looking, or aren’t yet describing in a way that makes sense. This is because we are ‘on the ground’ and like scouts, can often see ahead of the rest of the pack sitting behind the hill. Our insights help bring difference into a system, either for the purpose of driving economic and business change, or for quelling internal political rivalries. We know stuff about users, who are important, because everyone else our stakeholders talk to seem to be talking about them and making money off of them – which is ultimately what our insights are supposed to help do. We do something that looks easy: we hang out with people, talk to them and watch them. Anyone could do this in theory, which makes our authority and expertise suspect (Hasbrouck 2015). Yet usually when stakeholders try to do it on their own, they don’t get the same quality of results. This helps them buy into (at least part of) our expertise and legitimates our presence to an extent. Yet, what we do (ethnography) is hard to quantify by most traditional market research measures, as it comes from an entirely different historical/philosophical root, which makes it divergent from the norm many business stakeholders are used to believing in. Our insights are therefore suspect and hard to fully trust as, like our informants, we remain (in part) outsiders.

Despite the overlap and discord between how each of these groups imagines the role of ethnographic research, they are both mutually constituted through their continued involvement in a broader system of knowledge production that is inherent in the structure of the corporation. Each of these moments of disjuncture and unity come to influence the types of insights produced and how they ‘travel’ within the corporate arena as well as their perception as “new” or “done before.” To understand this, let’s now examine how the industrial research complex works.

THE INDUSTRIAL RESEARCH COMPLEX

I define the “industrial research complex” (IRC), as a set of institutional relationships which demand a continual and fast paced churning out of “newness” in data and insights for decision making that quickly grow stale and lose value the older they become. Like with the production of currency, knowledge production suffers from a form of inflation – the more you produce, the less each piece is worth. This, combined with a fetishization of insights deracinated from their contexts (i.e. snippets), and a cultural obsession with ‘the future’ that runs strong in Silicon Valley (Suchman 2007) results in researchers producing and reproducing ‘insights’ or ‘facts’ to make them ‘new’ again – though their fundamental conclusions often remain unchanged. There are a few tensions driving this system that I will discuss:

- Structural ossification and the need for innovation
- Cultural demand for new data
- Necessary (re)production of “facts” or “truth”
- Devaluation through a form of inflation
- Corporate “filters” that makes knowledge “digestible,” reflecting insider norms rather than outsider perspectives

Firstly, large corporations tend to ossify, as they have “well-developed systems for killing ideas that their customers don’t want. As a result, these companies find it very difficult to invest adequate resources in disruptive technologies” (Christensen 2013; xix). Intel is so familiar with this concept that it even invented a word for this tendency to remain the same and close off from change, ‘siloh-ing’ –it is a symptomatic of bureaucracy (Weber 2006). Yet markets shift quickly and in often unexpected ways that can sweep away large swaths of market share in no time. This makes investment in innovation and research crucial, though hard to justify as it is both costly and runs against the nature of the company to go after big profits rather than “lower-margin appetites that their customers don’t want – until their customers want them... [which is] too late” (xix). Ethnographic research, with its ability to recognize shifts in behavior before traditional marketing tools can quantify (and thus legitimate) these shifts too late for companies to move, is often argued to be a savior to structural ossification (Christensen 2013; xxiii, Madsbjerg and Rasmussen 2014)

Secondly, as researchers within large corporations we face an inherent dilemma – our insights are meant to spur innovation and reveal the worlds outside corporate walls, yet they must always pass through a corporate ‘filter.’ Either implicitly or explicitly what we produce is not a pure representation of the outside world, it is a negotiated truth between two parties. The question is, which truth is more-truthy? On the one hand, we want to ensure our work is valued and goes on to inform decisions that make change happen, which often means playing to corporate cultural norms and the mediums they accept (e.g. snippets). On the other, we also need to maintain an accurate portrayal of the peoples and users we represent. This back and forth is the very “digestion” that can often lead to a distillation of knowledge into generalized pieces (i.e. snippets) that lose their contextual backing and travel freely, taking on new meaning that we don’t intend.

For example, with the smart and automated technology report discussed earlier, most of the primary ethnographic interviews were conducted in the US among affluent ‘tech elites’

with the wherewithal and cultural disposition (e.g. geographical high prices of labor, familiarity with automated technologies, surplus capital to purchase otherwise unnecessary objects, etc.) to participate in an automated economy. These subjects were chosen because they were the only ones currently in the market who could attest to a smart tech user experience. We made an argument that our findings would really only apply to western cultures with similar characteristics as our subjects and that this market – if it were to grow, would happen here first. Yet our stakeholders took these models of explanation and ran with them to justify other schemes, inferring that our subjects were simply “ahead of the game” on an inevitable exponential of global development and that in due time nearly all users would start adopting these technologies – a common solutionist mentality used in the production of varying techno-futures (Morozov 2013). This assumption of course negated many important cultural and economic variables around the world (e.g. labor in India is so abundant that, combined with a historical legacy of the caste system, automation of the robotic sort is likely irrelevant for the masses), yet it ensured that the main points of our research moved forward and were utilized by varying groups across the company – albeit deracinated from the contextual whole of the research findings.

Finally, this didactic is an eternal dilemma for ethnographers of praxis – when the very nature of our insights are turned from a scientific and objective production rooted in a particular context, to a reflection of an internal corporate cultural politic that could be devalued at any moment (Latour 2003). The researcher attempts to “construct order out of disorder” (Lator 2013;253) as a means of explanation. Yet, similar to the way corporations co-opt forms of dissent (University admin source for NSF), insights are made to match the ‘climate’ of the company, rather than reflect objective truths. Should we produce something that is a more holistic representation of the outside – of the fuzziness of culture and the infinite complexity of human behavior – we risk outright rejection of our work because it is too outside the norm, getting feedback such as “it’s too academic” or “too complex” or “can you make this into a one pager?” In these moments we lose traction and value, as our stakeholders recoil from the complex world outside falling back on what they know, conservative business models which provide “quantification of market sizes and financial returns,” causing innovation paralysis (Christensen xxi).

It’s in this ‘digestion’ or ‘negotiated truth’ that the “seen it before” phenomena arises. Findings can become so generally applied as they spread across the company that stakeholders occasionally recognize them as familiar or having been “done before,” despite their actually being new. And thus the anthropologist must endeavor to create new research and new insights time and time again before they run thin – becoming subject to a process of devaluation that mimics inflation: we must keep producing more insights/knowledge as the value of our products slowly diminish. Research is commodity like anything else, and its ‘freshness’ runs the same gamut as fashion – it comes in and out with the flux of the IRC and must be continually updated and remade as new to realize its value. The content may have changed (the locations, the peoples, the questions and hypotheses), but the conclusions that drive change and innovation often remain the same as the corporation has yet to change. This combined with the inherent demands for data and all drive the industrial research complex forward in its churning out of “newness” and insights.

CONCLUSIONS

Anthropologists have a historically tenuous relationship with capital and the stakeholders that represent its needs (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Capitalists want us most in moments of crisis, and least in moments of stability. We offer a service – we provide new and innovative insights about consumers that others can't, that are especially valuable when stable businesses are in flux. It is a form of power we hold in our expertise, and capitalists recognize this value. Yet, in the same fell swoop they are distrustful of our productions and our methods. Ethnography deviates from the standard marketing quantifications capital is used to taking as "fact." Capital will only believe to a degree that which deviates from the norm it creates. It's as if they're saying, "come throw some ideas at us, and we'll tell you which ones are right, because we know best" – giving value only to those insights which affirm their own hypotheses. This nullifies the work of the researcher and makes it a subsidiary part of a pre-ordained self-fulfilling prophecy, putting the anthropologist in an awkward prostitution-like position. Capital is in conflict about having to change – it likes to stay the same and doesn't have the gall to move though it knows it must eventually. So rather than acting and making real change happen, research is brought in time and time again to temporarily pacify the system rather than addressing the root cause of the problem – structural stagnation. This is similar to the phenomena of committee making to delay action, though in this case research acts as the catalyst for apathy. As discussed by Dubrin,

"management sometimes has a legitimate need to delay action on a problem and a committee is a useful vehicle for postponing action. For instance, if management feels pressed to take action about alleged sound pollution from its machinery, a committee can be appointed to "study the problem." By the time the committee is ready to make a recommendation, the management may be in a better financial position to take corrective action on the pollution problem." (2013; 215)

Rather than overt committee formation, in this case research is the vehicle through which corporate actors can further stagnation, using it to validate their own conclusions – keeping the system the same. Yet anthropologists also participate in making this relationship continue, we use these moments to call attention to the same issues that are postponed by stakeholders. Our job to point out problems and warn of impending changes in user behavior has not changed, and so our participation in this relationship creates an uneasy alliance between the anthropologist and capital – our intent to keep pushing for change, while the system we push rebels. In this we are afforded an opportunity to exorcise our talents though our productions become supplementary or "nice to have" rather than essential. This can be hard to face as a researcher when it comes to finding personal value and meaning in one's work, especially as work can be all consuming (Gregg 2014).

What are some things we can do to shape this relationship and our value for the better? Ortlieb discusses the didactic of validation between "knowledge buyers" and "expert providers" positing that the growth and general acceptance in the business community of "culture" as an object to understand will be a long term boon to the field (Ortlieb 2010; 202). I would agree that culture is now here to stay, though the negotiation of how culture 'sticks' and what culture becomes when appropriated by the corporation will continue to be an ongoing challenge as anthropologists press for particular kinds of validation and change.

We can certainly continue to work alongside our stakeholders very closely, getting buy in and understanding from the beginning of any project to make sure that they're with us on our journey of learning from beginning to end. This often eases much of the educational and

decision making process down the line. Though perhaps producing research alone is no longer enough. We must go entirely native and become the business stakeholders whom we service – erasing the didactic. By having more individuals with anthropological backgrounds in decision making business positions, we may have a better chance at maintaining an accurate representation of ethnographic work and making change by better reflecting the world outside – having more power to make capitalism better, rather than exploitative. Many of us, in some ways, have embarked upon this very path already by entering the realm of management or by breaking off and forming our own companies. Others have made lateral moves to new realms of influence by leaving the field industrial praxis for work in governments, NGOs or the academy.

Answers to this problem are never simple. They are epistemic and evolve at the confluence of historical coincidence, affinity, and necessity (Knorr Cetina 1999). They are always contextual, individual, and in flux. They require keeping a pulse on the industry and the ways our value shifts over the years – inventing the future as we go. Perhaps the best thing we can do to find solutions is to get together, drink, and talk – here at EPIC – comparing notes, understanding each other and ourselves as we strategize what’s next for the field.

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