

Practice, Products and the Future of Ethnographic Work

MARIA BEZAITIS

Intel Corporation

Ethnographic work in industry has spent two decades contributing to making products that matter in a range of industry contexts. This activity has accounted for important successes within industry. From the standpoint of ethnographic practice, however, the discursive infrastructure that has been developed to do our work within product development is now a limiting factor. For practice to evolve, we must look critically at the ways in which our current successes are indicators of a kind of stasis and that change is a matter of radically redefining the kinds of business problems ethnographic work should address and the values and behaviors associated with how we do our work.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is about the future of ethnographic practice and the organizational presence, values and behaviors required for practice to evolve. This paper is also about the ways in which the goals of ethnographic practice in industry are in fundamental misalignment with product development, the corporate divisions that remain a primary anchor for ethnographic work in industry. The path for the future of ethnographic practice in industry will not emerge from the excellent ethnographic work happening in product development organizations, even when, or in some cases if, those organizations are successful in making products that matter.

Whether in the context of the consultancy, of an actual product division and/or even an R&D organization, ethnographic practice in industry has been largely centered on making products that matter. This investment in the relevance of ethnography has been the source of the development of an entire armature of processes, methodologies, discourse and deliverables, in particular over the last couple of decades and in the tech sector, the primary context for my discussion.

Here are just a few reasons to explain why we¹ should not expect practice to evolve exclusively or even primarily out of the work taking place in product development:

¹ I propose a “we” at various moments throughout this paper. By doing so, I assume that “practice” is a preoccupation of many; that there is a community invested deeply in the question of how we can evolve practice and still maintain deep relevance to the businesses in which we do our work. In no way do I assume that this “we” is entirely coherent. Indeed, this “we” may realize itself over time as a diverse collection of communities, rather than as a homogenous entity and arguably EPIC already has moved in this direction.

Adding Value in an Economic Downturn

1. The logic of product development organizations is such that “research” only matters sometimes. As such, social scientists have found themselves often working as writers of product requirements briefs or as sales support, a fact that turns them into extensions of other business functions that do not experience the same intermittency.
2. Product development needs to see a strong correlation between the question, the methodology, and the answer. Product development processes seek to turn research questions and progress into engineering tools and instrumentation, to maintain interest in the product. This sets aside the necessary openness required by research in order to flourish and evolve and to get to the longer-term value that corporations need but don’t necessarily know what to do with in the short term.
3. Cultivating ethnography leaders in the ranks of product development organizations doesn’t necessarily create more opportunity for ethnographic work. While this development—the reality of ethnography leaders as product group leaders—represents a crucial success in any corporation, it is not the same as creating radically new opportunities to evolve and grow practice.

Product development organizations and their core functional groups and processes do what they need to do to make products; the cultivation of a social research culture is not their concern.² Importantly, alignment to differing business divisions doesn’t by itself guarantee the ability to evolve ethnographic work to do new things, to expand in influence and relevance. Even the ethnographic work that takes place in market research, strategic planning, or business strategy groups remains strikingly similar to what happens in product development. Too often, new questions get answered with the same sets of techniques and approaches, with similar references for the people we study, with the same processes, with the same strong affiliations to academic disciplines as the source of the work that we do.

As ethnography has moved into a greater number of corporate divisions, the infrastructure created to function within product development has followed. In the tech sector in particular, so dominated by engineering culture, senior marketers are often engineers by training. As a result, the ethno-product development infrastructure has had a tendency to move with ethnography to other corporate divisions, such that applied ethnographers are always studying “users.” “Real” data remains a key differentiator of its contribution. Methodology is often reduced to interviewing technique with specific environments accounting for “in situ”. By extension, everyone is an ethnographer as long as

² Research can be done in product development organizations as long as it’s an extension to the product line, transparent, short-term, immediate, not too abstract, functional, characteristics which make the work feel less like research and more like an extension of engineering, a version of engineering that repeats itself through social questions. This window for research grows smaller as urgency behind getting products developed grows larger.

Adding Value in an Economic Downturn

they conduct interviews in situ. Ethnography remains the activity that advocates for “people in their natural setting.”

Whether for business strategy, marketing, or product development, ethnographers today are equated still with the “voice of the customer,” the source of usage models, the local proxy for “real” people, or more frequently, for “users”. That these terms, phrases, conceptions—users, user research, usage models, ethnography as a basis for—have become a limiting factor feels increasingly self-evident. For these aren’t just words and phrases. The term “users” contains an assumption about how to understand people, as if people were simply organisms that *use things*, living conduits of requirements for products. The term “usage model” is asked to account for the objective specification of activities that are important to people, often manifested as categories as vast as “entertainment” or “productivity,” as if these terms signified in nuanced and singular ways. “User research” contains within it a reference to research about real people and an assumption about the still privileged role of “data” that presents itself literally in the work.

Our collaborative work with engineering has brought to ethnographic work yet another assumption about the need to create a clear trail for interpretive work, even though that’s often impossible, to engage and unfold ethnographic work in terms of hypotheses, processes, and clear outcomes. This discursive space we’ve co-created with so many engineering colleagues spells out a faintly sociological version of engineering instrumentation. Product development needs this kind of predictability and repeatability to do its work. Consequently, the social work that happens within it needs to grow to mimic those characteristics. We have encouraged this in order to find success within product groups.

For a number of technology firms, the recession has aggravated the tendency of product organizations along with marketing and strategic planning teams to pull timeframes in, to tailor content to the immediate needs and fluctuations of “users” and “consumers.” To keep their jobs, when that option exists, applied ethnographers have little choice but to turn into support for sales or drafters of product requirements briefs. This is not an inherently bad thing and clearly represents an opportunity to develop sets of new skills relevant to business interests. But it doesn’t take advantage of researchers’ expertise and skills.

On the topic of our future, history gives us two vastly opposing models to work with: ethnographic research for product development—the placeholder that I’m using for all ethnographic work in industry that shares language, a set of assumptions, applications, and techniques—and ethnographic research as science.

Dating back to the work of Xerox PARC researchers in the 70s and 80s, indeed to the very birth of Xerox PARC tied so closely to the reinvention of the Xerox copier, social science has been situated in relation to corporate product(s) within corporations. That relationship has proven to be central both to the identity and to the work of the individual

Adding Value in an Economic Downturn

researcher. For PARC researchers, it was a question of distance and science. Lucy Suchman's discussion of PARC's role in the reinvention of the copier emphasizes the distance from product development that was so critical to the work of that research community. Their goal, instead, was to turn the copier into a "scientific object" that warranted their involvement. "For us PARC researchers, in sum, the photocopier could not be an object that was of interest in its own right; it was of interest only as a vehicle for the pursuit of other things." (Suchman 387)

This relationship to the object was at the heart of how PARC's value to Xerox would be established. This was social science as science, not an uncommon positioning for work within a corporate research lab. In the tech sector, product development gave ethnography an opportunity to prove that the product was of interest in its own right. As a result, ethnographic and engineering interests became culturally aligned, a critical source of business value.

"Practice" is the name I'm giving to ethnography's ability in an industry context to change and evolve over time. This change and evolution are made visible by researchers who are able to seek out the problems, methods, approaches, collaborations, and networks for addressing business challenges that attract new stakeholders within our business contexts. Ethnographic practice in industry does not persist as a function of the ongoing work in any one division or sets of divisions that espouse the same discursive and methodological armature, divisions that rely on repeatability and consistency as a source of business value. We need new types of problems and challenges to continue to grow beyond what has become a set of predictable paths and processes. We need new organizational relationships, new networks both inside and outside our corporate homes, to create the appropriate infrastructure for the evolution of practice. We need new ways of establishing relevance to the businesses in which we operate. We need to be able to do research while maintaining a commitment to being relevant to business and we need to be able to continuously redefine the parameters and content of this relationship to industry.

EPIC has grappled with these questions explicitly, but they are far from settled. I'm picking up where many others have left off. In 2005, Rick Robinson's opening to EPIC focused on theory, but what he was really talking about was practice and what it means to have one, where it comes from (not somewhere other than "here"), how you let it change, all as the first prompt to frame what this community should spend its time thinking about. In 2006, Ken Anderson and Dawn Nafus' analysis of "the real" looked critically at how ethnographic methods are appropriated and how the intent and integrity of ethnographic work gets contorted in the process that presents and shares visual data directly with stakeholders.

In EPIC 2005, Kris Cohen's discussion of how we decide who the "user" really is was in part a way to look at the transition made by "design research" in its move from academic

Adding Value in an Economic Downturn

settings to industry. His comments about the discipline and the fact of its limitations are worth repeating here:

“A final sweeping thought about design research is that perhaps something is wrong at the level of the field's aspirations. Perhaps the goal of studying users in order to design better products for them was well suited to the *instigation* of a new field, providing the means to draw together design, engineering, computing, the social sciences and the humanities. But perhaps this conceptualization of design research is poorly suited to the task of motivating the field to *develop over time*, theoretically, methodologically...politically.” (Cohen 2005)

My corporate career is bookended by two experiences, both of which are material to this question of our future, and to what it means to develop and sustain practice. The first story begins with E-Lab, the research & design consultancy that pioneered some of the language, framing, positioning, methodologies that became commonplace by the late 90s and certainly over the last 8 years and was one of the firms that drove the development of the disciplinary infrastructure we have to contend with now. The second story will focus on Intel Corporation, an excellent instantiation of ethnographic investment in product development as well as R&D. E-Lab represents an important model for the diversity and experimentation that I believe is central to practice. Intel represents a crucial model of the successes and limitations of practice and how at the end of the day practice is as much an organizational question and a question of values as it is one of methodology and experiments.

E-LAB

E-Lab was a small consultancy in business between 1994 and 2000. It never exceeded about 45 full-time employees. Built out of early projects for Thomson Consumer Electronics and Hallmark, E-Lab evolved into an organization that consulted to product development divisions as well as sales, brand, marketing and communications groups, innovations teams, retail strategy groups. The vision for E-Lab came from Rick Robinson, a PhD in Human Development, and John Cain, an industrial designer, who believed in this intersection of people/social/culture and design and what could take place in the space between the two. The methodological and technical rigor of the research practice was framed by anthropology but not limited to it. A few of the senior researchers at E-Lab were trained in anthropology, and others in human development, literary narrative, cultural theory, and art history. We were marked more by diversity than homogeneity, in training, perspective, and approach.

Of course this was the mid-90s and there was money flowing in the US for research. Budgets were substantial. E-Lab's largest clients paid upwards of 250K with the largest budgets reaching 500K for research programs with deliverables called things like “frameworks” with “implications for product, brand direction.” We were able to give ourselves room to explore and create from scratch. Proposals for clients were handcrafted

Adding Value in an Economic Downturn

with days spent thinking about how to reframe the client's question. Over time we developed a language for our "products" and our approach which invoked terms for the first time like "experience" to get at a more marketing friendly version of "context."

Anthropology provided a discipline for conducting empirical research and rigor around organizing the problem. E-Lab marketed itself in terms of anthropology early on. This marketplace affiliation with the discipline of anthropology was a means to affix a sort of credibility of offering with potential clients, but was also an acknowledgement of a deep legacy. In our qualitative social research in applied setting, our debt was not only to Mead, Geertz, and Malinowski, but to the PARC researchers who broke early ground for us all in the corporate space. The practice, however, that E-Lab researchers and designers co-produced, was not an expression of a single social science discipline, nor was it developed in relation to a narrow view of client work. The practice emerged from a shared commitment to studying people, a fascination with culture, an interest in visual work, an interest in the material world. In our research, there was always an eye towards a broader range of possible outcomes.

Expertise from many disciplines was invoked to provide the right kinds of organizational skill for dealing with the problem of how "data" evolves into what we all now refer to as "frameworks." This shift was the central differentiating factor of E-Lab relative to other design firms who in a similar timeframe started to bring ethnography into their portfolio of offerings. Our value and practice emerged out of an ability to move studies about people into the development of "frameworks," or what we later termed "experience models." When clients engaged us as a provider they did so because we fundamentally allowed them to explore their questions differently. We gave them access to new tools, perspectives, approaches. We turned their work into something more exotic, and in doing so we increased their power in relation to their own business stakeholders. We gave them new tools to work with.

The shift from data to frameworks, central to our research practice, was all about relinquishing the constraints of the bits and in their place creating a storyline about what was possible, a central narrative as organizing principle for the accumulated data. Geertz was an important reference point. As was De Certeau and Roland Barthes. The skill was essentially a conceptual one, a storytelling skill, and our "practice" gave us a place to work that out. Great stories didn't emerge from brilliant individuals. They emerged because we moved rudimentary ideas identified on sticky notes, in individual field journals, on whiteboards, often in public, out of group discussions or brainstorming across a series of stages of work. We relied on project rooms and group work. We relied on externalizing the work, making it visible because the visibility let us think about it differently. This wasn't about process; it was about the right tools for the right moments in the long road of moving from a set of research questions to a set of ways to address a problem.

Adding Value in an Economic Downturn

Frameworks and “experience models” have become constructs that are now deeply a part of this community. In many product development organizations and in strategy groups they are an expected means to represent an explanation for how experience in a particular domain is organized. They have become a commoditized part of the work ethnographers are expected to do, produced across projects as 2x2 matrices, maps of concentric circles, discussions of behavioral modes, but they were borne from practice.

PEOPLE & PRACTICES RESEARCH

Intel is where I’m currently employed on the R&D side as Director of People & Practices Research (PaPR). Intel Corporation has a long history of engagement with social science. A small handful of people, names familiar to this community, through patience, persistence and a fair amount of invisibility, managed over a decade to change the company in a number of ways. This is no small feat.

I am the newest of Intel’s leaders of ethnography-oriented organizations and so played absolutely no role in the “making ethnography matter” endeavor at Intel which culminated in 2005, the moment when Intel’s organization shifted away from microprocessor product categories towards platforms, a move that has allowed the company to start to establish a more explicit orientation to its markets, both existing and new. This massive organizational shift was further refined in part by a strategic presentation led by Genevieve Bell and an Intel colleague, Herman D’Hooge, where the case for user-centered design and ethnographic research was made. The case was made in terms of product value. As a result of this important intervention, Genevieve Bell, Tony Salvador and John Sherry moved out of People & Practices Research and over to Intel’s product groups to grow and run local ethnographic teams tied to the product interests of those business groups.³

People & Practices Research continues to reside in Intel’s R&D organization, Intel Labs, where over the last 3 years we have been attempting yet another project of reinvention. We are nested in a particular part of Intel Labs called Future Technologies Research, an organization chartered with conducting long-term exploratory research in a broad range of technical fields and application spaces. This is an important detail because it means that we are sanctioned to explore and experiment in research topics and approach so

³ This inflection point at Intel, led in part by social science, rests on the shoulders of many years of much smaller but critical successes that brought awareness to ethnographic work inside Intel. Indeed, this event conceived in 2004, co-founded by Tracey Lovejoy and Ken Anderson, who is an 8-year veteran of Intel’s People & Practices Research group, is itself part of the awareness building and influence campaign that culminated in dispersing ethnographic activity across so many parts of the organization.

Adding Value in an Economic Downturn

long as we continue to find audiences inside and outside the corporation who perceive us as valuable and indeed critical to their own programs and objectives.

PaPR's focus is not product development and this means in part that we have to find our way back into the company to be perceived as valuable.⁴ It also means that we have great freedom to make decisions about how to do what we do. The academic backgrounds of the PaPR team include psychology, design, cultural studies, media art, computer science, public policy and of course anthropology. To aspire to an ethnographic practice in a meritocratic corporate culture that fundamentally values individual work over collaborative work is a difficult proposition. The prospect of growing senior leaders that come from PaPR and don't necessarily become leaders in product development is a challenge we undertake through research programs that are centered as much on the kernel of an idea often more relevant to stakeholders outside of Intel than it is to stakeholders inside Intel.

The question of methodology is central to the everyday life of our project work. Questions of "how you do what you do," "to what end," "with what kinds of partners and tools," these questions that call attention to practice, are hard ones to ask young and brilliant social scientists to embrace. They are also dangerous questions in an industry context more comfortable with capabilities that have established paths to finding answers. But this danger often seems less threatening than the internal challenges of getting a team of researchers and designers to want to work differently than they are used to working.

From the standpoint of researchers, practice is personal. To ask young social science PhDs fresh out of world-class graduate programs and post-docs, or more experienced PhDs, to stop working in the way they are used to is arrogant and even disrespectful. Often, strong researchers perceive their practice as their own, the result of years spent developing as experts, toiling in academic work that rewarded their desire and ability to surface as promising individual scholars. This question of "practice" doesn't necessarily come easier to designers, who often have highly individuated and personal ways of knowing what they know, in spite of their skills in collaboration and demonstration.

To have viable, thriving ethnographic (social science, design) practice in industry, we need to look at what we do and take advantage of the specifics of where we are, who we are with, what kinds of tools we have or need to create to deal with our very present circumstances and with some foresight for how our work is likely to get implemented. This is as much a personal as it is a professional endeavor because it requires that we continue to

⁴ This doesn't mean that we don't seek to influence Intel product groups. Indeed, some of our most successful work to date is known for value delivered to product groups. However, our approach in working with product groups is not to work through the product development process towards detailed requirements. We have tried to use our engagements with product groups as opportunities to work against the discursive infrastructure I referred to earlier in this paper, and instead to introduce new language, tools and processes for doing and representing the work of social research.

Adding Value in an Economic Downturn

alter the interests of expertise in light of what we encounter in our organizations. In this way, inventing and maintaining a practice in industry is an inherently ethnographic endeavor: where are we, whom can we talk with, what can we know, here.⁵

Today, PaPR's identity needs to distance itself from the kind of ethnographic work that takes place now across many of Intel's product groups for some important reasons. We need to align with our organizational charter to conduct long-term exploratory research. We also need to set stage for what should emerge, over time, as a set of complementary relationships across the company with our social science and design colleagues in the product groups and elsewhere. Duplication of work makes this impossible. We have to be different to ultimately do something with them that is of value. This means framing programs that are not product development focused. Instead, our programs need to seek to identify the places at Intel where culture is central but somehow absent from the conversation.

At this conference, PaPR researchers present two great examples of this kind of program. In the first case, "ethno-mining" represents synergistic work across anthropology and computer science to develop an approach and methodology to studying everyday experiences of time and mobility. In the second case, "consumerization" is the name of a program that seeks to understand how consumers are produced by processes that reflect political contexts, entrepreneurial and policy-making contexts, and everyday life. Consumerization seeks to contextualize the descriptive research efforts of the market research and market strategy organizations in addition to the sales and positioning efforts of multiple Intel groups which assume that people are always consumers and that consumers can be described in terms of readily available needs and wants.

PaPR's organizational home within Intel R&D gives us the opportunity to look as broadly and often as unclearly or as abstractly as we do to establish new means for business relevance. The fact that we get to experiment, to reach out to new kinds of external partners, to explore and invent new methods and approaches, is absolutely a function of where we sit. This luxury comes with a cost: we have to find new ways to remain business-relevant, an absolute mandate for any kind of industry practice, to our engineering, management, marketing, human resources, design and social science colleagues. We were able to take on these risks because of the deep legacy of PaPR as a group that established itself in terms of

⁵ Recall Rick Robinson's remarks in his opening to the EPIC 2005 conference. This call to open individual expertise up to new influences should be a contentious point particularly amongst those practitioners, academic and industry alike, who believe that individually accrued and academically instilled expertise is the only means by which we protect our value as individuals against the corporation. The message isn't that we morph into whatever is needed by the corporation, but rather to embrace reinvention as a means to knowing new things and thus providing new forms of business value.

Adding Value in an Economic Downturn

product relevance. We continue to do so because our practice targets new kinds of questions, relies on new partnerships with individuals inside and outside of Intel.

WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN NEXT

I'm going to end with a few thoughts on what might happen next, a set of propositions about how "we" can shape practice going forward. These propositions suggest both a shift in values and behaviors.

1. *We need to figure out how to make reuse possible and even necessary.* This community has produced literally thousands of cases representing investigations and solutions to problems that are repeated. As a community we need to benefit from the knowledge captured by these materials. Rick Robinson's and Elizabeth Churchill's ideas on establishing organizations and assets that would indeed promote reuse would provide a big step forward to sanctioning reuse in a community that suffers a bit from "not invented here."
2. *We need to complicate our networks, usefully.* This means moving beyond the predictable sets of interlocutors, internal and external to the corporations in which we work. We might learn, for example, how to talk to economists, public policy experts, artists, government ministers and advocates and with these colleagues, seek the questions and areas of influence inside corporations where culture matters, but is strangely absent.
3. *We need to play an active role in creating the new (external) bodies to consume our work.* Research often provides an optimal opportunity to bring together distinct sets of individuals who share interests on a topic but don't routinely work together. What better way to show the relevance of work than to establish the audiences that need it? Often these organizations relate in interesting ways to the corporations in which we work. These might include partners, customers, policy/advocacy groups.
4. *We need to learn how to collaborate and how to build collectives.* Collaboration begins by acknowledging mutual interests and constraints; what we are interested and what we can't do alone. The interest side of this is easy; the constraint side more difficult. Collaboration is a risk. When we collaborate we risk lack of individual differentiation, a value that humanists and social scientists and employees who work within meritocratic industry cultures are trained to cultivate. On the other hand, collaboration allows us to meet, head-on, the value of scale and the power of collectives.
5. *We need to fund and seek funding for more professional development.* This last point is a call to diversify the opportunities available outside of the corporations in which we work. If it's time to move beyond product development, isn't it also time to grow

Adding Value in an Economic Downturn

our opportunities beyond EPIC? Practicing ethnographers and ethnographers who are invested in practice should have more opportunities for community and engagement outside of their corporate homes, opportunities that are not academically supported and directed, but cognizant of and responsive to the challenges and potential of doing ethnographic work in industry.

NOTES

I want to thank my colleagues, Ken Anderson, Genevieve Bell, and Tony Salvador, for their comments on early versions of this paper. I especially want to thank Rick Robinson and Susan Weiner for their detailed and thoughtful remarks for various iterations. This point of view reflected here does not reflect the official position of Intel Corporation.

REFERENCES

- Cohen, K.
2005 "Who We Talk About When We Talk About Users." EPIC 2005 Conference Proceedings (9-30).
- Nafus, D., and Anderson, K.
2006 "The Real Problem: Rhetorics of Knowing in Corporate Research." EPIC 2006 Conference Proceedings, 244-258.
- Suchman, L, and Bishop, L.
2000 "Problematizing 'Innovation' as a Critical Project", *Technology Analysis & Strategic Management*, 12:3, 327-333.
- Suchman, L.
2005 "Affiliative Objects", *Organization*, 12:3, 379-399.
- Robinson, R.
2005 "Let's Have A Conversation." EPIC Conference Proceedings 2005, 1-8.