

Drawing from Negative Space: New Ways of Seeing Across the Client-Consultant Divide

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Focusing on the client-consultant relationship, well boned, but perhaps overly so, this paper aims to shed light on the conditions that at once streamline and challenge our collaborations. To do so, we borrow a page from the visual arts; namely an experimental method of representation called negative space drawing. In both its aim (to create a picture from a new perspective) and challenge (to shake off the preconceived notions that limit us) drawing from negative space reflects a similar dynamic to our own. By way of a case study commissioned by one author and conducted by the other, we sketch a framework of negative space which examines our respective biases and agendas and our endeavors to resolve them.

The purpose of this exercise is to develop facility at perceiving objects as physical shapes rather than as verbal descriptions. This exercise makes us "see" an object in an unusual way, and can help us draw what's actually there, rather than what we think "ought" to be there.

Robert Gardiner, the University of British Columbia

INTRODUCTION: CHALLENGING OUR ROLE IN THE VALUE CHAIN

Practicing ethnographic research in industry finds us at a particular moment in time. We have seen qualitative research of our 'persuasion' establishing a foothold across corporations and across the world. Settling down in a number of comfortable, synergistic spots where our brand of people based insight can find a home. The number of landing marks has proliferated, finding ourselves not only operating within product development processes and marketing but as well moving closer and closer to business development and strategy. In the consulting world in particular, qualitative research has found footholds from which to lift itself up, closer and closer to the places where decisions are made client side. In essence, we have moved from being a vendor to an advisor.

However, with this popularization of our practice, working consultancy side I have noticed tensions which may potentially limit the wider application of ethnography in industry. The very same places where we have been able to seek refuge, which have come to appreciate and require our services, are now places where our role can become potentially limited by the very processes developed to make our integration client side more effective. With the best of intentions, our clients' goal to enable smooth translation of people based insights into their own internal processes unfortunately bring with them the very same issue

that we set out to tackle in the first place – lack of critical perspective. Victims of our own success, our establishment within corporate processes raises ever more challenges to our development, especially as we aim to have greater influence.

This paper aims to shed light on these tensions in ethnographic practice across the client-consultant divide. To do so, it will borrow a page from the visual arts – namely a method for drawing, an experiment in representation – negative space drawing – which in both its aim (to create a picture from a new perspective) and challenge (to shake off the preconceived notions that limit us) reflect a similar dynamic to our own in consulting clients. Representational drawing refers to negative space as that which is not the object of representation. By focusing on negative space, the draftsman can disassociate from his bias of what he believes he is drawing: a cup, a bowl, an apple; and instead create a better likeness of the scene before him. In recognizing a negative space of understanding, I suggest we as practitioners can begin to move clients away from that which they believe to be the object of their research efforts: a finding, an insight, a need, which fit neatly into their agendas in order to craft a richer (but not necessarily complicated) picture from which to act upon.

LOOKING BEYOND DESIRE LINES

When we engage with clients, we enter into a relationship bound by the expectations of what qualitative research's role is in business contexts today. Similar to the draftsman attempting to draw a still life, clients bring with them pre-formed ideas grounded in professional experience. For many, a major foothold, or desire line, lies in marketing divisions. This is perhaps the longest standing tradition, or the one with which people most readily associate the 'tool' of qualitative research. By virtue of this, we find ourselves both in a comfortable place, as well as a staid place - or at least a place in which corporate processes, and presuppositions about how ethnographic methods should be used and towards what ends are well worn, and as such, difficult to challenge.

Sunderland and Denny, examine a similar tension, acknowledging the tenuous co-existence of 'entrenched practices' of anthropologists and market researchers (Sunderland and Denny, 2007). Nafus and Anderson in their paper *The Real Problem: Rhetorics of Knowing in Corporate Ethnographic Research* similarly problematize the relationship between 'us' and 'them' in order to exorcise very literally 'the ghosts in the machine.' By extension, this paper aims to build upon their framework of 'the real' by seeing the context anew – through a negative space construct. As client and consultant, our 'he said, she said' approach brings forth a different perspective on the conditions that frame our practice; not only exposing our reflective stance on ethnography in industry, but as well how our 'entanglements' (Sunderland and Denny, 2007) provide new instances of knowing that challenge our ability to see and theorize clearly.

In the shift towards broadening their perspective on qualitative data, marketing

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divisions and the product groups they serve have had the task of fitting such potentially vivid and often messy input into the way they work and are evaluated. Dealing with internal stakeholders is of course a major consideration for our counterparts in corporations and is one that we empathize and work to address in our engagements.

But it is this vividness and messiness that I'd like to take a moment to consider. One of the main proponents of engaging in the ethnographic is that somehow it is seen as more real. (Nafus and Anderson 2005) By taking them to the jungle (not the zoo), we promise a dose of reality and rawness that with it brought the promise of radical insight and change. (this is particularly the case within innovation where the emphasis on significant growth makes ethnography and other less conventional methods not just acceptable but desirable). In leading these kind of ethnographic forays, however, it is easy to err on the side of the selling point at times, and lose our heads (and at times theory) in the moments of serving our clients - and particularly, their expectations. These are the conditions under which Nafus and Anderson so clearly point out in their critique of the real.

This is not to delegitimize the rationale for bringing the client to the field in the first place. Doing this ensures a clearer path for insights to make their way into the organization and hopefully back out again into the real world. This 'buy in' as it were, has become a critical aspect of delivering on our mandate while also creating a solid and sustainable practice within industry. When we bring non-researchers into the field, and by this I do not mean to open up the whole can of worms debate from 2006 on 'real ethnographers', but rather to state we cannot forget that these are professionals for whom there exist specific tools of the trade and world views, shaped by the organizations and divisions that they work within. Tools and views that if we are not careful, can occlude our own vision in advising our clients, rather than just serving them.

Because we can encounter clients/stakeholders with varying degrees of knowledge about the breadth of insight ethnographic applications can deliver, we on occasion find ourselves devising (and sometimes struggling in the process) ways which challenge our client's perspective through navigable channels. At once playing to their expectations of delivery formats (hard proof - video clips, quotes, photos) but then having to contend with what our proof may inadvertently set into motion.

In an effort to examine closely these tensions - between how industry aims to easily fit qualitative research into their processes (e.g. segments, testimonials, use cases) and what we fear may get lost in the process (e.g. insights and strategies) - we propose a negative space framework of knowledge. Moving along the trajectory of a particular case - a project commissioned by one author of this paper (client), and conducted by the other author (consultant) - we will discuss three types of negative space: 1) that which does not transpire, 2) that which cannot be captured and 3) that which is in between. Each of these negative spaces examines the relationship between client and consultant - their biases, contexts and collective aim to wrest only the very best out of the process.

DRAWING THE NEGATIVE SPACE OF KNOWLEDGE

In the fall of 2007, Orange/FT commissioned a body of research on European homes. This study sought to uncover a deep understanding of practices in the home that could be used to inform new product development

Negative Space: That Which Does Not Transpire

As with most projects, the study was initiated through an RFP. Herein our first encounter of negative space arises. No doubt, the focus provided by a lens is vital, but we don't want to occlude our vision from interesting things that occur on the sidelines. The RFP introduces a scope to restrict subsequent shifts once work has started. Unfortunately, as we shall see, without sufficient care it can also have the unintended consequence of over constraining the work by preventing the discovery of new insights. It determines what is considered interesting and may act to occlude potentially important events.

For ReD the arrival of the RFP brings numerous challenges. Firstly, understanding what the client's specific research goals are and how they fit into the wider picture of the client's organization. We see this as re-scoping based on our view of what the client can't see themselves – the outside perspective. From the client side, however, they are very wary of this, perceiving consultancy's re-scoping of a project as potentially opportunistic, suiting themselves, but not the customer. For instance, moving scope onto an area they already know more about, but is of less interest to the client. Or changing the goal-posts so they have to do less work now, or so that they get the chance of doing more (lucrative) work later. Herein lies one of the more fundamental tensions between client and consultant.

Second, there is the task to not only address these objectives, but create a research approach that provides a fresh approach, a distinguishing factor that makes it stand out from competing proposals. This involves giving a flavour for what the research will reveal. Again, the challenge here is to draw attention without over-promising or building too detailed a picture because this may serve to consolidate early expectations of what areas are most important. ReD in this case, crafted a vision for the client which outlined household activities which it felt would cast new light on Orange's understanding of household needs. The proposal was organized around the family meal, a chore chart, and a night in; attempts to probe on how households may or may not engage in such activities and in turn point to potentially new ways to understand the home.

Yet it was this very proposal, or staging of ethnographic activities, which created expectations and stress on the part of the research team to ensure that these activities transpire. These issues of occlusion gain greater prominence as the process develops, peaking at various touchpoints of understanding between client and consultant - In the

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move from preliminary staging of research into the fieldwork itself. Fieldwork is one of the first touchpoints, presenting the first testing as it were of our commitment to the RFP, and the items outlined. To refer to it as a checklist may seem to overstate the role of the RFP, but we cannot underestimate its contractual nature. Segmentation in particular is one component of commercial ethnography where adherence to this checklist is readily found as segments institutionalized role within industry make this the case.

In the Orange case, the internal client was most interested in specific segments that constituted different types of families - those with young children and those with teens. Looking across life stages provided a structure for how family needs change over the course of their children's development. Beyond this frame, additional criteria were added to give further breadth and depth to the study. An urban, suburban dimension was added, and as well, an interview condition which required entire households to be present - if not for the duration of the interview - at least for some significant period of time.

With interviews lasting upwards of 5 hours at a time, combined with the aforementioned criteria, recruiting study participants proved challenging, which resulted in anxieties on both sides of the client consultant divide. As clients require research to be used immediately and effectively towards practical ends, their goal is to be able to add qualitative findings to the pre-existing corpus of data. Hence, when bumps arise, they present risks to this engine and can place the consultant in an uncomfortable position of having failed. Here is where we want to step back and ask ourselves whether or not failing to recruit families that met segment criteria and interview demands over the course of a one-week window should be necessarily viewed as such. In fact, we propose the opposite. From both perspectives, client and consultant, these real world bumps expose the realities of how families live today. In such metropolises as London and Paris, where the study took place, family structure and practices hardly match the idealized versions cast in the segments, and as well in the scenarios the consultancy used to illustrate how interviews would transpire.

While both parties were able to acknowledge this matter as a finding, there was still the very real concern that client-side stakeholders would perceive this as a failure to deliver. Experienced ethnographers understand that fieldwork does not mark the beginning or the end of data collection. Data arises from the friction between the research framework and the world, which it aims to study and understand, whether or not it occurs in the time-boxed activity of field research or in the stages before and after actual household visits. But regardless of the client's own ability to recognize segments as approximations, caricatures, even, it is their broader audience within the organization, especially those far from the actual research engagement, who forget that they are idealized descriptions rather than real people. Hence when things don't go according to plan, client and consultant alike must ask themselves why. By using a negative space framework, understanding why it is things did not transpire. And more importantly, why is it that for some it is so critical that it had. A lesson for all involved to negotiate their role in seeding knowledge across the value chain.

Negative Space: That Which Can(not) Be Captured

The struggle with the political economy of commercial ethnography is not the only hurdle our case highlights. Issues of negative space also occur with the very people whom we study. As market research has become commonplace, people willing to participate in studies bring with them assumptions about why they are being studied and in some cases how they should act. In our study of families, this self-consciousness of the participant was unavoidable. The majority of households visited exhibited in one form or other reaction to a perceived pressure to perform to standards of family life. This ranged from participant statements like: "We're just a normal family." and "We enjoy time spent like a family, together, watching a movie and stuff like that."

As much research has indicated previously, this can be used advantageously. Pink states how differences between actual practices in the home and people's aspirations in the domestic realm highlight deep needs that aren't so readily reflected upon, or articulated. However, while we are equipped to cut through this white noise (Goffman, 1959), our non-researcher counterparts run the risk of falling prey to taking these performances at face value. This is even more so the case given documentation and reporting standards which rely so heavily on statements made by respondents. In a recent RFP from another client, the request for 'at least 30 1 minute video clips' as part of their deliverable underscores the weight user statements carry in industry today. On the one hand, this can be viewed as a marker of our success in bringing the voice of the consumer to the fore. On the other, it raises questions of the ability to convey findings in this way, as talking heads, divorced from any context, let alone their own.

It can be said that video clips work within the realm of positive space. When relying on video clips as proof of respondents' needs, a singular picture emerges, one that is certainly legitimate, but when stripped of its wider context, can be a dangerous tool. In our study, there were a number of clips documenting family archiving activities, as it was an area of extreme interest for the client. A long and complex practice, which brings with it all manner of considerations: there is the identity creation of the family, the simultaneous struggle to keep abreast of capture and display technologies, and the ongoing debate in households between digital and analog versions of the family album. Hardly a dangerous tool in this circumstance, and certainly square with Orange's business interests, but in ReD's mind, a distraction, a MacGuffin even, diverting attention from where the real action is at.

Negative Space: That Which Is In Between

As the team moved into the analysis phase, it became clear that what we were looking at was far deeper than family album management. What researchers felt palpably in the field was a general sense of absence in the home. Certainly there was the absence of family members that we examined earlier, but the absence sensed by the ReD researchers was of a higher order – similarly encountered as Pink describes in her examination of multi-sensory ethnographic encounters (Pink 2004). For the ReD researchers, the absence sensed in

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Orange households was there, but not easily captured/documentated.

One researcher attempted to capture this absence through the documentation of a family meal. In one of the suburban households outside London, the researcher chose to document the preparation of the family meal on the night of her visit. In the scene, the camera is trained on a bowl of mash potatoes being made, rather than the respondent herself. Footage then reveals the meal, completed; sausages on the stove and the mash ready in a bowl. However, what is not captured is that the meal was never eaten. This happened off camera, the result of a series of micro decisions that occurred in the household, too subtle and too fast to have been able to capture successfully on camera, and yet one of the most critical takeaways from the research.

This combined with observations in other households allowed the research team to craft a deft account of how absence and its flip-side, presence, come together to form the major axes of family struggles. Presence, best reflected when all household members are together in the home brings the reassurance that the family unit is functioning properly. Yet we know households don't operate this way. Not only was achieving presence amongst family members difficult, but more importantly for Orange, presence appeared to be challenged by telecommunications, rather than supported. While the Internet and telephony create numerous channels for connection, they don't necessitate creating those channels amongst family members. In fact, it was quite the opposite.

This threat to presence illuminated three key insights for Orange: safety, providing breathing room, and fostering family togetherness. We do not have time to go into all three insights in detail in this paper, but will focus on the safety and breathing room insights in order to make clear how negative space in this context – the ability to see in between, to resist the temptation to focus on the positive space of knowledge – allows client and consultant alike to gain new ground.

Safety in Numbers

The coming and going of family members was an everyday reality. And one that was complicated not only in the challenge to overcome logistical matters of scheduling, getting dinner on the table, and organizing school runs and so on, but as well by the psychological burden of knowing one's child is safe from physical and emotional harm. This household was comprised of 4 tween/teenagers ranging from 12 to 17 in age. The mother's constant monitoring of her children's whereabouts revealed her concerns about unknown forces that could affect their lives. Conversely, she viewed recreational drug use and other typical teen problems quite ambivalently as part of the learning curve of life.

To counter this, technology played a role in the mother's ability to keep tabs and also exercise parental agency when needed. With the home phone blocked from making out going calls to mobile phones, the only phone in the house capable of making these calls were

the household members' mobile phones. Considering, however, how teen use of mobile phones is dictated by a parallel economy to that of the parents in the household (i.e. top up, pay as you go plans, and the hoarding of minutes) parents' mobile phones became the default home phone from which the majority of calls were placed.

Initially viewed as yet another boundary her children had breached, the mother's view quickly changed when she realized how to use her phone's call log as an alternate means to keep tabs on the children. Recognizing that calls were often the precursor to getting together physically, the log could be used for one of two things: 1) to indirectly keep tabs on the children's whereabouts or 2) under more dramatic circumstances be used to call children home immediately by calling the friend's mobile phone. While the latter was done sparingly, it did give the parent an unlikely sense of control, not less because of the ability to be in contact with her child's friend at the touch of a button, but more importantly holding the child in a contract of 'you don't want to be embarrassed by your mom calling your friend's mobile, thus you will be home for dinner on time.' In this case, both the direct and the indirect means of locating children afforded both parent and child a sense of presence and breathing room in a household otherwise complicated by interests which continue to draw them out of the home.

Breathing Room

A similar kind of breathing room proved critical in a number of other households studied. In the majority of homes, technology was perceived not surprisingly as a double-edged sword by parents. While understood as a must have in the home, technology and in particular the Internet brought with it all manner of challenges to the family. Examples abound in the research of the dynamics of parenting being changed and reset by the rapidly growing presence of technology in the home. Toddlers are now making purchases on eBay. Teenagers amass 500 friends on Facebook. Paradoxically, these examples were at once a source of pride as well as concern for parents, highlighting their struggle to grasp the future consequences of such forces in their home.

This tension in the study underscores parent's ambivalence towards technology's presence in the home. On the one hand it is a necessity, the key to ensuring one's child's future; a standard amongst modern families, a normative act of parenting. On the other hand it threatens to take children away from the center of family life. Not only are there unknown fears, previously limited to the outside world, but fears amplified by the web's ability to render the home more porous. "We don't talk to strange penguins now do we Zach." But simultaneously concerns about how to ensure that kids have the freedom to experience their own online worlds unfettered by the constant surveillance of parents. A kind of acceptance that the digital world is here to stay no matter what we do.

Rendering Negative Space Positive

For Orange, realizing a deep need to resolve these issues of presence and absence in the

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home, either through directly addressing issues of child safety or indirectly creating space for teens to develop their sense of independence, was not exactly what they had expected to uncover. While the client worked closely with the ReD team from planning the fieldwork and up through analysis and reporting, and understood intimately how key these needs in fact were, the internal clients (hailing from a product development context) were focused on fitting insights to current development projects. Because of this, they struggled at first to move beyond their current scope – asking for take-aways which they could relate to supporting logistical activities in the home in the near term.

It was not until we were able to make the opportunity we saw for them in this space tangible, that we were able to get them to see the significance of the insight. In essence, we had to render the negative space positive, bringing to a close how the framework can be applied, and under what circumstances.

CONCLUSION: RESETTING THE SCOPE

What we take at face value in an effort to meet and support seamless work processes may be something that professional standards dictate, but that we must remain critical of in our work as ethnographers in industry. In this paper we have endeavored to show, by way of a framework of seeing – the negative space that exists but is often overlooked in favor of the low hanging fruit. While client and consultant may struggle at times to resolve respective biases and agendas, what we have at least pointed to in the Orange-Red case are the opportunities that arise when care is taken not to let the process dominate the content.

The negative space framework we sketch out is still clearly that, a sketch of one case, but a sketch, which we feel could certainly apply to numerous other cases. By challenging what it is that we are actually looking at in the first place: ourselves and our own practice as shaped by the respective organizations we work within; the subject and why it appears at times not to even exist (that which does not transpire); the voice of the customer which keeps reappearing in uncanny ways (that which can(not) be captured) ; and the thing that simply won't go away, but has no obvious form to prove itself (that which is in-between); we allow ourselves a shift of focus, and the ability to reset our scope for greater impact.

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