The Real Problem: Rhetorics of Knowing in Corporate Ethnographic Research

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This paper explores discourses of the 'real' in commercial ethnographic research, and the transitions and transformations those discourses make possible and impossible. A common strategy to legitimize industrial ethnography is to claim a special relationship to 'real people', or argue that one is capturing what is 'really' happening in 'natural' observation. Distancing language describes 'insights' into a situation somehow separate from ourselves, 'findings' and 'quotes' that we seemingly extract from one context and plunk in another. Whether it is chimps (in Jane Goodall's case) or consumers (in ours); we know what is going on or not. This model of ethnographic knowing has adopted the naturalistic science discourse of the behavioralist—the neutral observers in an environment. Here we explore how this epistemic culture has been created and its 'real' consequences. What we do not attempt is an assertion of the merits of one kind of ethnography over another, or a rehash of tired squabbles about ethnography as method versus ethnography as episteme. In fact, the authors themselves have been utterly complicit in producing discourses of 'real people' while holding epistemic allegiances elsewhere. Rather, we are more concerned to investigate the conditions, both within companies and for research agendas, that this way of talking effects. In our experience this language abdicates authorial responsibility, unduly reduces ethnography to "butterfly collecting" at the expense of other business opportunities.

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Introduction: Why Real and Why Now?

Last year's EPIC conference had the necessary flavor of manifesto production: 'we' in industry were situated apart from 'them' in universities (a knowing theme in Babba's (2005) work), 'we' ought to inject more reflexivity in 'our' work, configure 'the role' of ethnography in industry as if it were a singular knowable entity, or use xyz technique to further 'our' work. It was a moment of professionalization, even institutionalization—by talking about 'we' there came to be a 'we'. We (the authors of this paper) remain partially unconvinced of this precarious but now easily invoked 'we', as there are serious differences epistemologically, institutionally and materially that render any unity questionable. Perhaps, though, the one thing that does sustain this 'we' is a certain commitment to ethnography as brand. That is, in 'our' professional lives, there is a moment in which we describe to others whatever 'we' think ethnography is, claim it as a marker of a certain researcherly territory and disposition, and suffuse the word with expectations about what is coming next. We are quite deliberate in calling it a brand; it does act as a set of discursive markers and implied understandings that 'we' ourselves have created in order to persuade others to grant us

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positions that historically have seemed implausible. Like a brand, too, it gives little away: to simply say one does 'ethnography' reveals very little of the substance. In this paper we explore the nature and consequences of one aspect of this brand.

A central element of this positioning has been a kind of commitment to a professed reality: that 'we' can help businesses figure out what 'real people' want, or otherwise what they do with products. Such 'real people', are always at some distance, a shifting horizon to which the ethnographer goes and returns. The 'real people' refrain posits these shifts as a kind of territory; a field of knowledge to which only some have access. The strength this aspect of the ethnographic brand has in fact sustained a 'we' of sorts. Firms generally *do* have notions of what ethnography is, and have expectations of what it means to hire one of 'us'. The real people brand is now mature, leading people in various quarters of this 'we' to ask what this maturation will mean for the future. Is ethnography doomed to become obsolete fashion or, as in a recent Business Week article (2006), will it become a much more sustained core competence of organizational life? The question we raise here is whether the 'real people' refrain, and the knowledge practices it prefigures, will continue to dazzle in either scenario.

This paper interrogates the 'real people' construct by considering the epistemic culture (Knorr-Cetina 1999) that such 'real people' talk has created, and its (ahem) real consequences. Knorr-Cetina (1999) describes epistemic cultures as "those amalgams of arrangements and mechanisms—bonded through affinity, necessity and historical coincidence—which, in a given field, make up how we know what we know."(1). For her, discipline and specialty are a poor indication of the "architecture—and the diversity—of the manufacturing systems [of knowledge] from which truth effects arise" (12). The phrase is catchy—like Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1991) one thinks one knows what it is from the title. In Knorr-Cetina's hands, however, epistemic cultures is a term that emphasizes *the plural*. That is, for her 'science' is not a unified entity, and to locate epistemologies in social arrangements is to expose the fiction of a singular scientific method. The structures of knowledge production that produce convincing answers in molecular biology, for example, are profoundly different from those in high energy physics, which in turn is comprised of many elements outside physics proper. Such situatedness calls for strange bedfellows; reading her work made us wonder whether the sort of ethnography we do in fact is more analogous to high energy physics than observation work in other social sciences. Fields such as high energy physics can successfully continue producing truth effects, that is, answers to questions of research which its imagined audiences find convincing, without enjoying any wider consensus on what the 'scientific method' is. Like ethnography, the scientific method points to an assumed commonality which, in its non-specificity, enables miscommunication. This has lead us to ask, do 'ethnographers' really need the conceit of the 'ethnographic method' to legitimate themselves?

What we do not attempt is an assertion of the merits of one kind of ethnography over another, or a rehash of tired squabbles about ethnography as method versus ethnography as episteme. That 'ethnography' is no longer a unique claim of anthropologists

is now a given. There is no clawing it back from what many see as its extradisciplinary abuses (Strathern 2005). In fact, the authors themselves have been utterly complicit in producing discourses of 'real people' while holding epistemic allegiances elsewhere. Rather, we are more concerned to investigate the conditions, both within companies and for research agendas, that this way of talking effects what we produce, how we produce and how it is received.

The sites of our explication are several. In part we reflect on our own practices—such is the expected in the genre of the emergent body of work from commercial researchers. In this vein we discuss how our own descriptions of research (and sometimes 'our' own, as the 'we' here necessarily varies with organizational change), and claims to its value, have contributed to an epistemic culture amongst those 'we' are in dialogue with. But of course 'we' successfully construct such epistemological structures only inasmuch as they appropriate or convincingly challenge other epistemological structures currently in circulation. Late capitalist economies are rife with knowledge producers. In a society run by expert systems (Giddens 1990) and knowledge workers the machinations of industry are a cacophony of experts, specialists and technicians. Ethnographers are situated amongst the engineers, management experts, marketing gurus, scientists and public policy experts with whom 'we' deal daily, who similarly tout knowledge as a claim to agency. These are the various sites into which the 'real people' brand has successfully asserted itself. Indeed it is remarkable that 'real people' comes as a surprise in so many quarters. What kind of appeal to expert knowledge does the 'real people' claim make, if clients, firms and other punters live their ordinary lives with equally non-imaginary people in the form of spouses, colleagues, etc.?

Who's episteme is thus a challenging question. Introspection is of little help here; instead we identify the sites of dialogue 'we' have created and attempt to understand the sorts of epistemological commitments that these other people do share that made the 'real people' claim so seductive. The sites, therefore, are elicited just as much from other scholar's arguments about the late capitalist economy as our work refracted through the eyes of our immediate audiences. Some of the work of situating 'real people' talk in fact happens not just in dialogue with clients and firms, but amongst researchers, such as at the last EPIC conference. Some of it is instantiated in media reportage. Some of it is configured by the cultural claims made by powerful economic organizations. Still more of it is constituted through the wider expert systems in which we find ourselves. The point is to identify—and by doing so call into question—the dominant features of this brand that are rapidly becoming normative expectation amongst an ever widening diversity of people. Some time ago one would have called this 'following the metaphor' (Marcus 1995).

The Invention of Real People

There are many stories of the origins of industry-based ethnography, and we are not starting at everyone's beginning. In our organization—which is not every organization, but also not unlike many organizations—part of the 'real people' story takes place in the late

90s, when there was a steadily creeping dissonance between the markets that held share of mind within Intel, as it were, and the growing revenue stream from elsewhere. At the time the firm had literally divided up the market into US and "Rest of World." To change rest-of-world from the remainder category required ethnographic intervention. Moves had to be made to convince the company of the specificity of this lumpen Other, and that to successfully operate in these markets the company had to recognize that one size did not fit all.

Here, ethnography filled the rather traditional role used by anthropologist of de-mystifying the Other, but did so in a particular way. The practices of the Other were not in need of explanation; rather the very existence of the other was in need of assertion. Our mission statement at that time, and self-conceptualization, made this move: "Uncover new uses for computing power, identify important activities that are not well supported by technology, and understand barriers to technology adoption by studying *real people in their natural live environments*" (emphasis added). Our very existence was in a sense an assertion that the Other existed.

The tool of choice to perform this assertion was the photograph. The visual language of the photographs used varied somewhat from ethnographer to ethnographer and ranged from the semi-staged informant shot which prompts "this is N, she is a middle aged woman from Rio, she lives here, and she does X", to the 'computer sits in some unfamiliar context' shot. The photograph in these instances may or may not have been used as a kind of visual notetaking for some broader analysis, and one can make all sorts of evaluations about whether the selection of picture was representative or exoticizing/in or out of context[1]. At the time, though, there is a sense in which the picture itself trumped all. It made a move that no amount of insightful argumentation could: it said for rest-of-world "we are here, we are real." Pictures spoke louder than even dollars in these conditions[2].

Using pictures was started as a part of triangulation of data. Pictures, combined with interviews, observation, diaries, inventories, projective questions, shadowing, etc.helped analyze the data. The pictures, however, became the expected output. The pictures, unlike models and frameworks, could be shown and showed the supposedly manifest obvious. As such, what became hidden was the analysis that the ethnographic team had done. A subtext of the presentation then became, take pictures because they show the real, which does not require interpretation or analysis. In this unanticipated way, the work became something that anyone with a camera could reasonably do. It was, after all, observation and "deep hanging" out. It was "natural". Everyone looks and everyone can talk and hang out. The language of the mission statement echoes this natural, that is un-theoretically informed analysis, by talking about this as "natural". What is lacking is the notion that cultural and social behavior needs to be what Geertz called "read" , i.e., actively interpreted. Here one can easily recall

[1] There are quacks in every profession and in the end we choose to take it on trust that our colleagues performed proper analytic work to make points about the pictures

[2] By this we mean the revenues from these areas in no way matched the corporate interest in them.

the example of a difference between a blink and a wink – same action that needs to be analyzed and interpreted or "read". The historical legacy has meant that the form (the photograph) is now being adopted without the function (active interpretive work).

This use of photographs, originally a knowing practice successful in its desired effects, is now institutionalized. It is still largely impossible to give a presentation without photographs, though some in our group have experimented with giving presentations relying solely on photographs, without text. Text only will not do. The reverse, however, has been made impossible. What once was a pathway into the organization is now an expectation from which it is difficult to be dislodged.[3] Indeed the bar is being raised to have more and "more professional" photos of real life as part of the presentation to make it convincing and to make it "real" for the audience. Having succeeded in the struggle to get ethnography on the agenda as a legitimate way of coming to understand technology markets, the message that 'people are real' is not necessarily the dominant message we wish to make, yet everything about the ethnographic brand creates this sort of noise over which more substantive points must be made.

Quotations have a similar story as photos. In academic contexts, of course, one quotes both colleagues and research participants. In industry the use of quotes tends to be a one sided affair, relying solely on quoting participants in research. Again, both of us have found ourselves using quotes in highly strategic manners, to make points that need to be made that we hope are both correct ethnographically as well as commercially significant. The behind the scenes skill involved in doing this in a way meaningful to the ethnography will vary from researcher to researcher; however such skill is almost beside the point, as it is still widely performed as an offstage affair. The message sent to the audience is that the researcher has a directly ascertainable pipeline to a potential customer. Indeed, the types of quotes that are most often presented are not presented to be deconstructed for the audience, but to be consumed as truth out of the mouths of the customer. This type of quote temporarily absents the interpreter, and in the extensive reliance on quotes, the ethnographic brand suffers from a more systemic downplaying of interpretation. If real people are capable of speaking for themselves (and the use of quotes seems to remind the audience of this), then it is not at all difficult to understand the ethnographer's job is one of simply capturing the real quotes and bringing it back. With tongue slightly in cheek we use a quote to underscore the reality of this effect. In a recent meeting a senior engineer described an anthropologist's work as having "done drilldowns and got verbatims." The notion of collecting 'verbatims' has gained so much currency that now non-ethnographic researchers from other parts of the company now ask us for advice on how to elicit and select 'verbatims'. Indeed, we have been part of several in-situ research studies when video cameras have been turned off or pointed in a particular direction when participants have been asked to "repeat what you said" in order to capture this real quote on video. The language of

[3] We use photography as our example here because it is an older practice within our group, however, video has the same trajectory and effect. Indeed, in some ways it has become the new "real" medium.

verbatim is part of the corporation, not ours—but the effect, we argue, is partially traceable to our actions, which prioritized seemingly direct speech as a way of knowing customers.

We have highlighted just two examples, photographs and quotations, of among the many possible ones that we have routinely used. We used them to illustrate the way that our data and our representations of data produces a linearity of truth effects, especially in the way "real" have been re-interpreted by the various audiences of ethnographic work. One issue for 'us' ethnographic researchers then is that by using "the real" people through real photos and real quotes, through this naturalistic "finding" or "discovering" these gems in "real life", we down play much of the "real" work that goes into producing an ethnographic representation. We fail to highlight the analytics of our work and the value those bring to making a coherent argument about data, which in this linear model of truth effects is made distant to the researcher. By doing most of our "real" work, that is what happens out of the field, behind the scenes, we inscribe a "naturalness" to what we do as research, as if it were butterfly collecting or train spotting. We, and much of industrial ethnography, has indeed worked hard to conceal the complexity of our work.

There are, of course, claims in circulation that attempt to resist being taken for butterfly collectors. In marketing materials and in responding to journalist enquiries, 'we' often point out that there is a difference between what people say they do and what they actually do in order to show that ethnography, rather than other models of research, has unique capacities to get at what is 'real'. Again, in the corridor conversations amongst industry-based colleagues, or the mailing list posts on Anthrodesign (an Internet group and essential communication means within this community), this claim is both asserted, contested and deconstructed. The authors are not innocent of these claims; for us it has served as an important means with which to differentiate ourselves from the focus group world and market research surveys. With it we have been able to perform a dialogue between the firm's market research and our own work: when x percent of people say they buy a laptop for education, having the say/do discourse in place puts us in a position to say that perhaps ethnography might show that "education" was taken a little more loosely by the respondent than the question suggests, and that it "really" has to do with, for example, kinship. What they've 'said' may not in fact be what (business people think) they 'really' do, which in turn positions ethnography as a legitimate enterprise to undertake.

The success of the real people trope has been remarkable. It has particularly served well as the engine of media attention. A recent article in Business Week (2006) for example, while otherwise sensitive to the contingencies, cautions and ethnography's use in answering big questions rather than identifying immediate requirements, still began the story with imagery of middle class, middle aged, bespectacled people in lab coats peering into a mock dollhouse, populated with computer and mobile phone users For a media piece that refreshingly did not resort to discussion of natives and exoticism, and that in a sense 'got' the breadth of what many of us do, it was striking that they thought a general business readership needed such an image to de-naturalize observation. Though wildly inaccurate in lots of ways (who wears a lab coat as pictured in the Business Week article), it is also

strikingly and unsettlingly recognizable to the sorts of epistemological claims 'we' have been making. It connotes particularly the sort of checking up on people evoked in the "difference between what they say they do and what they actually do" claim.

On one hand the say/do discourse alludes to the panoptical—that humans are not to be trusted in how they account for themselves and therefore ever more data must be collected. For example, one frustrated market researcher, who had internalized this notion of differences between saying and doing, commented to one of us that he knew his respondents "are just saying any old stuff when they talk about what they do. It's like I just can't get to the truth no matter what I ask." The 'doing' element alludes to actual buying behavior, which in this context is the final validation of knowledge. At the same time this aspect of the ethnographic brand holds out the possibility of a relationship: that this behavior is ultimately human marks it as 'social', that what they say they are doing has a singular set of referents back to behavior, which is ontologically prior and an object of fallible recall. Knowing 'real people' is panoptically possible—more researchers, more lab coats, more clipboards—and yet always elusive. This distinctions summons both the relationship-building of entanglement and the distancing involved in creating impacts, without committing the ethnographic brand to either move

The quote, the photograph, and the saying-doing distinction served multiple interests: in a context where ethnographic work was struggling to gain a foothold, it asserted a substantive 'reality'—in our case, that there are 'real' customers out there which the business is ignoring—but also an epistemological claim that 'we' also can produce truth effects. As we will discuss in the following section, the 'reality' claim is used to trump other competing sorts of knowledge, which can be then repositioned as mere 'artifice'. Through the way it is practiced, however, one can see how this claim hinges on a doubling effect. The artifacts such as quotations and pictures double as *both* data and performance of knowledge. They are both waypoints to the conclusion, and thus mark out a claim to having done research, and double as assertions of that conclusion; i.e., this is what we found.[4] The assertion is persistently structured by a certain metaconversation, that people are in fact 'real', which is reproduced as a surprise.

The doubling works, however, at some cost. The issue is not the skill, sensitivity or reflexivity with which these things are mobilized; what we are questioning is the effect that their very predominance has on what it is 'our' audiences are able to hear. If our audiences now feel able to adopt the artifacts of 'our' epistemology as their own knowledge practices, without even recognizing the intellectual paths that were forged to produce part of the dual effect, this must be because we still are understood as collecting what is naturally 'out there'. Though legitimizing effects of social science degrees gives us some authority, the message

[4] An analogous doubling process, is of course a part of interpretive work. The data is dually constituted as 'data', once in the field and once again in a second 'fieldwork' of disciplinary knowledge (see Strathern 1999). The point is that the other doubling short circuits the plausibility of these interpretive processes as either unknown, or unknowable—a kind of shamanism that relies on secrecy for its effect.

that 'we' do more than butterfly collecting (Leach 1961) is comparatively left in the background. While there are many differences that divide the industrial ethnography community, from the most scholarly among us through to those only loosely aware of ethnography's anthropological origins, from the actor network inclined to the ethnomethodologically inclined, these differences are blunted by a shared set of now institutionalized practices through which we are now marked.

In the next section, we discuss how this brand has been shaped not just by our own deliberate practices, but instantiated by other knowledge practices in industry. We address both how industry has appropriated epistemic cultures from university research environments, and the way in which particularly the technology industries have produced a view of the world that renders the presence of people an unending surprise. We hope such an archaeology will help inspire new possibilities and new engagements in a post- 'real people' world.

'Real' Talk and the Economy of Research Knowledges

There are broader social configurations of knowledge practices in which industrial ethnography has situated itself. 'We' ourselves are not the only authors of the industrial ethnography story, even within individual firms and engagements. As Baba (2005) argues, the historical moves to distance academic anthropology from applied anthropology left the category of theory–and who can properly know it–hugely problematic. Here we argue that there are wider dispositions and frameworks for knowing what counts as valid or useful knowledge, and that these come from both the wider way in which industry has appropriated other research practices, and the epistemic practices involved in situating the relationship between firms and their markets.

Through the various strategies of creating truth effects, but most particularly in the professed difference between what people say and what they do, ethnography developed a connection with observation practices in the minds of 'our' interlocutors. What observation came to stand for was in part drawn out of disciplinary training, but was instantiated through the necessity to differentiate 'ourselves' from other means of finding out about the world already ingratiated into the economy. Being taken seriously in a social world suffused with other knowledge producers at once means differentiation: what made ethnography different from surveys? Psychologist interviews? Lab-based experiments of people interacting with objects? Following Knorr-Cetina (1999) again, a lab is not a lab is not a lab: observing the world can take the form of large scale staging and simulation exercises (such as high energy physics, where nothing is directly observed and yet the 'whole' is staged), to bench work requiring active involvement (her example is molecular biology, where a partial view is made possible through active manipulation of materials). In a sense 'ethnography' became a catch-all leftover category for describing that which takes place outside other researchers' seemingly contrived contexts. It marked a sense of being beyond someone else's work, the boundary objects that signaled their expertise. In finding data in the 'real world' (wherever that was), there is an implicit criticism of the artifice of the survey, focus group or lab

experiment. Photographs became the artifact of choice to demonstrate not only that what one saw with one's own eyes was real, but that there was 'natural' setting, supposedly free of artifice and constraint.

A continuity of sorts was also established. The psychologists, computer scientists and designers with whom we extensively worked—many of whom pioneered the use of ethnography in industry—did not have naïve, unconstructed ideas about what observation was. The mere taking things out into the wild, with the same cast of characters, would not on its own necessarily change epistemic undercurrents. In a sense the anthropologists performed a sleigh of hand of sorts, allowing ethnography to be perceived as analogous to that which is readable in a lab setting, but happens in the wild (and therefore implicitly 'better', involving 'more' data). The implication was that if one could just get beyond those boundary objects, one could see for oneself what was 'really' going on. By focusing on simply getting beyond these boundary objects, another implication went uninterrogated: that we were not just observing what occurred naturally, but that observation itself was also a 'natural' process. In psychology labs, for example, technologies of equivalence are developed to make what happens in the lab equivalent to what happens in the 'real' world (the blind and double blind experiment, for example). The human intervention is in the staging of it all, and the act of looking is assumed away as a natural property of eyes. This is not to accuse psychologists of lacking interpretation or analytic powers, but simply to note that the sociality of epistemological arrangements locates the validity claim in the technologies of equivalence rather than the capacity of the experimenter to actually see what is going on in his or her own lab. If ethnography involved no such human staging work to validate it, it seemed instantly accessible to all and sundry. Hence it continues to be adopted in so many quarters. We can all 'see' with our own eyes. In emphasizing 'more' data, we opened ourselves up to ethnography being seen as natural observation.

Such claims to access to unfettered reality did not just work well *vis a vis* the competition, allowing us to both distinguish ourselves but also play nicely in multidisciplinary teams. They also resonated with engineers' sense of the concrete and tangible as the convincing truth effect. It is worth remembering that industrial research and development historically has aligned itself with engineering and natural sciences, and that market research, associated with supposedly 'softer' knowledges, has largely been used at the end of the product pipeline rather than the beginning. Historically at Intel, and to a significant extent elsewhere, ethnography has been situated in the context of R&D rather than as shaping post-product development marketing opportunities. This positioning has everything to do with how epistemological questions give shape to organizational power. The empiricism implied by R&D in turn is a wider privileged model of doing things within technology corporations. Intel in particular has many senior managers who are themselves engineers, which renders it no coincidence that decision making is rooted in a sense of being 'data driven'. By situating ourselves in the context of product innovation, we made an analogy between our knowledge and engineers' epistemologies: both are establishing and validating data on which decisions are made. The equivalence is not a disingenuous one—

there is an element of empiricism, however cautious, literary, and postmodern, to ethnography that affords such a positioning.

Psychology gained a foothold earlier than anthropology because its truth effects were based around notions of what human beings 'essentially' are, allowing for 'fundamental' research. In constructing ethnography as that which occurs before rather than after products are made, and therefore a kind of research linked to technical innovation, a certain ontology of the person was produced. Real people formed the analogue to engineer's real technologies. That the real people sometimes actually used real technologies produced an aesthetic of haptics which tied together this epistemic circle. Technologies were touchable and therefore knowable, peoples' flesh, touching the keyboard or holding the phone afforded both an equivalence to engineer's sites of knowledge production and a way in to claiming relevance. This circle has lead to a now semi-institutionalized commitment to design as the obvious endpoint to ethnography. It is now difficult to 'shift' what ethnography is 'for' into other realms, such as business model strategy. This commitment to objects and design has been reinforced by certain developments in the late twentieth century economy, to which we now turn.

'Real' Talk and the Epistemics of Technoeconomies

The economy plays an important role in the making of "real" ethnography in industry: for Intel it was certainly hardware engineers who were the decision makers in need of convincing. In a broader sense, the multinational corporations which led the adoption of ethnography were in fact IT companies. This bias towards the 'technological' necessarily shapes the broader consensus not just about what counts as valid research knowledge, but what counts as knowledge relevant to companies. We must remember that in a world suffused with intentionally produced artifacts what counts as a technology is not in any way neutral, but a claim that validates some knowledges at the expense of others (Wajcman 1991). The widely invoked imagery of an 'information economy' 'knoweldge economy' or 'networked economy'—all of which is grounded in a view of the 'effects' of technology– loads the dice towards particular epistemologies and misrecognizes others as unskilled or unknowledgeable (see Nafus 2003). One wonders what kinds of self-descriptions industrial ethnography would have had to make for itself if the world economy had undergone a 'bioscience boom' instead of an 'Internet boom'[5], or if 'we' had more frequently worked with advertisers instead of designers and engineers. What if, as in legal communities, language was the technology of choice, imagined to instantiate profound effects for which electronic networks are now given credit? There is, of course, a huge diversity in the sorts of people that 'we' work with; our claim is simply that the way in which the late 90s networked/information/knowledge economy imagined itself as an engineering one (see also Kotamraju 2003, Barry 2001) privileged the notions of reality that the 'real people' discourse evokes.

[5] Of course a bioscience boom has also taken place; still one could argue that it was the fantasies of the dot com era that captured imagination and steered financial markets.

This privileging requires interrogation, particularly if industrial ethnography is going to grow beyond current fashionability into a core competence in innovation and technologies across a wide range of economic practices. Strathern (2002) has talked about Euro-American cultures as a social milieu that constructs technologies as unfolding according to a logic independent of human intervention. The social science of technologies, she argues, often tries to recover the various human interventions that shaped it. That human construction is not obvious, and such recovery efforts are of continual value, says much about an enduring context. She argues that a notion of contextless has already been pre-figured. One can see this most directly in the wild popularity that Christensen's (1997) notion of disruptive technologies has recently enjoyed. Disruptive technologies are said to come from an imagined 'nowhere'. The notion of disruption presents the material world as something that takes everyone by surprise. The 'nowhere' is nowhere because it does not sit within notions of what 'society' contains; the production of technology relies on an implied exogeny where there is an autonomous march of seemingly asocial objects that plug into walls, which in turn has impacts on society. Woolgar calls this rhetoric of impacts 'cyperbole' (2002).

Previous work has discussed how this view of context—the asocial 'nowhere' from which technologies come—is a necessary premise for how states, high-tech companies, and even non-profit organizations construct economic agency (that is, the capacity to act as economic entities) (Nafus 2004). This is not simply bad social theory on the part of firms that hire us which perpetuates the belief that technologies are a-social in need of social context, but an absolutely essential cultural element that people draw upon to make economic action happen. The imagined separateness from society, the implied exogeny, is a necessary component for markets and competitors to recognize that novelty has taken place, and therefore that innovation has happened.[6]

Agency is in this way structured as an oscillation between both exogeny and entanglement.[7] Value is created in the act of launching a product, and creating 'impacts' upon society. In this constant oscillation, it is in fact a repeated surprise that our 'real people' continue to use these objects. The forgetting that people are involved is an active forgetting for particular ends. Industrial ethnography, and in particular the 'real people' aspect of its brand is a key element of this model of value creation. Each of the above mentioned ethnographic strategies mirrors the kind of oscillation between contextlessness

[6] However, in another sense technology companies know quite well that they survive on the basis of social entanglements. For example, Neff and Stark (2003) have written about software firms as in a state of permanently beta, entangled in a network of customer expectations, user de-bugging, and technology coproduction. Indeed, in the software firm that Nafus (2004) studied, these entanglements were so deep, and customer relationships were so close, that they were actively working to hold back on releases and updates in order to be able to 'launch' something that appeared to be new. Constructing the software in this way enabled it to have a life of its own; that the product launch was launched only on those who already had a pre-release version was neither here nor there. Novelty had been successfully produced.

[7] See also the debate in Economy and Society (introduced by Barry and Slater 2002).

and entanglement such technology-inspired economies depend on. For example, it is no surprise that pictures of people with technologies already on the market, the laptop in the café or the mobile phone in hand, continually generates more interest than those not featuring technologies, there to represent potential but untechnologized 'need'. In the technology shot, "the surprise" that structures notions of innovation is built into the picture. Computers in Indian homes, on teenager's laps in Estonia or in the hands of maids in Brazil contribute to the ongoing meta-story that the world is changed by technologies. The other artifacts in these shots are not even recognized as technologies, and through this interpretive absence the pictures establish that 'innovation' has occurred. The notion of entanglement is also built in: the technology shot is a moment of recognition of the unanticipated social trajectory of these technologies, and the viewing of this shot is a kind of recognition of that sociality.

The usage of research participant quotes further underscores the sense of entanglement that companies largely already see themselves involved in. That customers might speak back is *already* embedded in business practice; their voices are an ordinary feature of business life. As this relationship is imagined to already exist, mediation is not obviously required. Or rather, the need for interpretation is made obvious only when cultural difference is assumed. In this sense it is not coincidental that the adoption of ethnography-like practices by market researchers centers on the notion of customer voice, and limits itself to those customers that appear to be easily understood. The quote strategy, too, bears a striking resemblance to a Baudrillardian hyperreal (1994). While the asserted reality of real people makes alludes to a sense of groundedness, the ease with which our interlocutors and adopters of ethnography fill in context with their own set of experiences suggests that there is no unproblematic authoritative 'context' from which speech emerges (Baudrillard 1994). In a technologized economy that uses ethnography to construct the nowhere from which technology emerges, the stand-alone quote is in fact the truth that conceals that there is none. It points to a seemingly external context that is being constructed inside the corporate meeting room. Such re-constructions are an ordinary part of how power plays out in social relationships: one construes the other beforehand, in the instance of interaction and post-hoc. At its worst, it is the truth that conceals the privilege with which technology producers can re-construct others' voices to their own ends. Nevertheless, this distributed and mediated conversation is, in a sense, authentic: technology, after all, really does 'impact' society.

Conclusions: The Fate of Real People

The way in to corporate settings for 'us' has been to knowingly situate ethnography within a complex set of epistemological strategies, in our view dominated by a larger conversation about how 'innovation' happens. We can reflect upon this as the "real people period" in corporate ethnography. To establish new fields in commercial contexts, and perhaps too academic ones, one must give audiences as much to go on as possible, as many handles into the work with which others might engage the knowledge presented. We asserted one way ethnography has done this is through the use of "real." At the same time,

what starts as a way in has rapidly become a kind of institutionalization. The expense has been a kind of naturalization of our work; at its worst a kind of butterfly collecting that surprises no one. The irony of course, is that just as everybody is their own designer (Gerritzen 2001), everybody is their own ethnographer. People have active sensibilities of what constitutes 'context'; ethnographers do not have a monopoly on this. In performing a sleigh of hand which leaves ambiguous the relationship between data and conclusion, and absents the active intervention by instantiating the two in the same instantly knowable artifact (the photo, the quote, the panoptical observation), 'we' draw on audiences' capacities to reflect on their own social situatedness. It was critical for us to create this "real" framework in order to be established, but it is equally critical to move beyond it. Remaining in the "real period" as the "voice of the customer," an eerie corporate embodiment of real people as ghosts, or specters, brought to the life by corporate ethnographers to haunt engineering, product development and marketing teams, is not healthy for growth of the field. It was, however, a starting point.

Our question, is how do we expand our presence and value in the corporation? What is next after the "real people period"?. What we do have to offer is a fairly reliable set of concepts and models of social life with which to make situated generalizations, and thus good knowledge practices with which to make sensible decisions about product development, business models, advertisements, human resources strategy, etc... Ethnography and ethnographers have so much more to offer our audiences and potential audiences than capturing or finding or discovering "the real". These further opportunities must be realized if we are both to continue to grow as a field and be recognized for our contributions within the corporation.

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