



FROM FIELD TO OFFICE: THE POLITICS OF CORPORATE ETHNOGRAPHY

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Critical corporate ethnography does not stop at the field or our reports but extends into our day-to-day work in the office. Using the example of internal research conducted for next generation internet Café (iCafe) product development in the PRC, we will argue that corporate ethnographers must go beyond self-reflexive fieldwork to tackle the organizational and cultural politics of our domain expertise. In this latter context, we become conflated with “the field” and, indeed, our corporate value is equated with the veracity of our field representations. The situation becomes eminently more complex in MNCs where in-depth ethnographic research is analyzed and acted on in multi-national teams and where internal cultural differences and professional disagreements parade as divergent corporate interests.

INTRODUCTION

We unequivocally claim ethnography as a research methodology and analytical discipline in all Foucaultian senses of the term.¹ But ethnographic praxis in the corporate context forces us to reconsider what we have learned from critical cultural anthropology. The very terms we wrestled with as academics – authenticity, scientific knowledge, authority and power – come back to haunt us in the corporation as our *raison d’être*. This is particularly true for ethnographers, such as Xueming and I, embedded in product groups.

Academics long have sought to shirk the over-reaching claims to power that science, authenticity and disciplinary knowledge have inculcated. In particular, the image of the lone anthropologist and his (and her) authentic knowledge of the Other is rife with the abuses of colonialism, racism, nationalism and beyond.² Remedies have been suggested in terms of self-reflexive analysis, radically situated knowledge, a dialogic model of fieldwork and representation and more.³

¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punishment: The Birth of Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1995) and *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1927-1977* (New York: Pantheon, 1980).

² A succinct voice in this debate is Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1994).

³ To cite a few compelling voices in this debate: Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: the Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989); James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The*

But, the corporate drive for specialization and disciplinary expertise (key to achieving multinational scales of efficiency and task replication), we find ourselves back at square one.⁴ We might not claim an “authentic knowledge” of “the field,” but our colleagues demand it from us. With little understanding of our domain expertise, they grant us a research method that requires extensive journeys into “the field” and (to them) a frustratingly opaque theoretical toolkit for translating what we witnessed in “the field” into a report-able “authentic knowledge” of those located there. The demand for this domain expertise intensifies as we leave the company of our ethnographic compatriots and engage in cross-disciplinary teams, in our case, for the purposes of product development. The justification for our participation in these teams is writ large (and questioned) as verifiable knowledge of a field and market.

Despite this professional *raison d’être*, we do not recommend that we undermine the current faith in our knowledge and expertise. However, we do need to find more intricate ways of modulating our knowledge of the field, particularly as it is conflated with our corporate identity. Indeed, we argue that it is only by consciously playing with the shifting values of our fieldwork, our corporate expertise and cultural politics of our work – in short, the underpinnings of our authentic knowledge – that we can fruitfully engage with our colleagues.

To ground our discussion, we review a year’s worth of research on Internet Cafes (iCafes) in the People’s Republic of China we conducted in Intel’s Emerging Markets Platforms Group (EMPG). We do so to highlight the corporate specialization and discipline of ethnography as well as the necessity of adapting our voice as corporate ethnographers to address not only the cultural politics of the field but also of the office. In order to learn from this experience, we are frank about the strengths and weaknesses of our work and that of our colleagues.

To highlight the latter, we, the two authors, divide our voices as we discuss our experiences with research on China’s urban and then, briefly, that on China’s rural iCafes. We do so to highlight our uniquely situated experiences of the research.⁵ Xueming Lang is a PRC national with a recent master’s psychology and usability research. He works out our Shanghai office. Suzanne Thomas is a US national with a PhD in communications, cultural studies and Chinese studies. She also has extensive private sector research in qualitative and

Poetics and Politics of Ethnography (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); and Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

⁴ Here we draw on Benjamin G. Shaw’s intricate analysis of corporate cross-disciplinary design (and often product development). In particular, he examines the inherent conflicts corporate specialization and disciplinary domains bring to collaborative work environments. See Benjamin G. Shaw, “Speaking Different Languages: Metaphor, Discourse and Disciplinary Conflict in Product Development,” unpublished MPhil dissertation for the Royal College of Art, London, 1997.

⁵ See Haraway’s discussion on situated knowledge, Haraway, 1991.

ethnographic market research. In 2006, she worked between Intel's California Bay area and Shanghai offices.

We also distinguish our voices in order to illuminate the cultural and nationalist politics shaping our work. As we continued our research into rural areas, the seemingly cut-and-dried market behaviors of urban iCafes became muddied by hostile government action. Questions over what to do with China's rural iCafes neatly cleaved us along nationalist and cultural lines. There was no easy fallback on the language of corporate interest (aka market segment win, market expansion or simple profit). Nor did a moral call to bring bridge China's digital divide unite us. The lines that divided us revealed as much about our team members' cultural proclivities and corporate standing as they did fundamental disagreements about the moral implications of our collective work.⁶

BACKGROUND ON ICAFES

As quick background, PRC iCafes are shared-use computing environments operated for commercial purposes. Unlike the internet cafes in the United States that offer coffee, Wi-Fi Internet access and possibly a couple of desktop PCs for those without their own laptop, China's urban iCafes are vast halls crammed with anywhere from a 100 to 1,000 desktop PCs. They cater to avid online gamers, those interested in watching downloaded (and usually bootlegged) movies, music and television, QQ denizens (frequent users of a wildly popular, local online chat software), and the occasional Internet surfer. Customers pay a relatively low hourly fee



FIGURE 1 Large urban iCafe

(less than thirty cents USD) to use the equipment there. The businesses are profitable enough to have saturated the urban market (where competition is fierce) and are actively expanding into China's rural towns and even villages.

It's worth noting that China's rural iCafes differ from their urban counterparts primarily in terms of size, clientele and legality. They are smaller, shabbier and host far fewer PCs (as few as five or six). The business model of an hourly fee for on-site use of the PCs remains the same, but for reasons of rural demographics, the clientele are primarily elementary and junior high school-aged children. In short, they are all under 18. This poses a



FIGURE 2 Village iCafe

⁶ In the introduction to his edited volume, Richard Madsen and his fellow editors offer an elegant discussion of the morality and how it folds into everyday life and the experience of modernity. See Richard Madsen, et.al, eds., *Meaning and Modernity: Religion, Polity and Self* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

nettlesome problem for iCafe operators. Chinese law clearly states that no one under 18 may enter iCafe premises. However, by sheer fact of rural demographics (most middle schools are located in urban centers, outside of towns), town and village iCafes can only but attract underaged customers. Add to this that licensing for such businesses is strictly limited and expensive. The result is that most rural iCafes operate under the table in order to make a profit. Local authorities struggle to resolve the tension between maintaining profitable local businesses (like iCafes) and adhering to central policy that designates these iCafes as illegal operations. One profitable solution for them is to frequently fine the businesses, but not shut them down.

AUTHENTIC TALES FROM THE FIELD

During the urban iCafe research, Xueming and I unequivocally aimed to faithfully represent the voices of those owning, operating and frequenting iCafes. This was how we justified our participation on the Shanghai iCafe product development team in Intel's Emerging Markets Platform Group (EMPG). We grounded our work in a methodology that was ethnographic in spirit. Call it a professional sleight of hand, but what we did (and what is detailed below) was attributed to our domain expertise. We identified (and expanded) a definition of "the field," in this case urban iCafes and all who crossed paths there. We designed a plan that was open enough to allow on-the-ground expertise to bubble up and shape not only how we conducted our research but also how we would represent it. Finally, we reported our findings as domain specialists responsible for the exploration phase of next generation iCafe product development process.

To our surprise, it worked to both our professional and ultimately Intel's benefit. This is the successful part of the story. Few doubts emerged about our "authentic knowledge" of "the field." Even beyond our business group, we emerged as experts on the PRC iCafe industry and compelling folklorists of the field. It helped that our core insights were confirmed by subsequent market research.

However, problems emerged as we struggled to translate our findings into product strategy. Here we found the limits of our storytelling.

The fieldwork and the report

Much of the authenticity and appeal of our research came from the aura of it being "ethnographic." To be frank, this was not ethnography by any anthropologist's stretch of the word. It was in-situ, qualitative market research guided by ethnographic methodology. But to our colleagues it was "ethnographic," and at Intel the aura of ethnographic research meant we were given such license with little knowledge or care about what this meant. We simply had to deliver.

In the following dialogue, Xueming and I outline the nitty-gritty details of our fieldwork and how these grounded what it was that we had to deliver, a research report to the iCafe

product development team. We delivered that report, but it was not exactly what they expected.

Xueming – When I got the urgent request to do research on PRC iCafes, I had only been an intern at Intel for less than three months. The project started because Intel was bleeding market segment share to our competitors. We needed to act fast, and the goal was to deliver a spectacular next-generation iCafe product asap.

Suzanne – I got called into the research project as a kind of ethnographic research consultant largely because the project lead was heading out on maternity leave. It was a week before Xueming, a new intern then, headed out into the field. That got my attention.

If the iCafe team wanted a deeper understanding of iCafes and their ecosystem, then we needed a more open-ended research plan. We set about reviewing the project goals and overhauling the research design. Xueming and I ditched the focus groups and organized in-situ, one-on-one interviews. We even toyed with the idea of 24 hour observations of the businesses (they do operate all day and all night), but due to lack of resources (and Xueming’s understandable need for sleep), we settled for shorter observation periods.

Xueming – From the outset, Suzanne and I talked nearly every day. (At the time, she was in her San Francisco office and I was soon to be in the field.) It helped that she could speak Chinese. Because we were on a tight budget, we started the recruiting ourselves. While doing so, I met an IT expert who serviced a number of Shanghai iCafes. Initially, I approached him for help in recruiting small, medium and large-sized iCafes. But he stopped me short saying, “I have different way of categorizing the iCafe market. If I were you, I’d look for ‘luxury’, ‘common’ and ‘dirty’ iCafes.”

Suzanne – When Intel’s prior small-medium-large iCafe segmentation (based on how many PCs were on the premises) fell flat in Shanghai, we turned to the business distinctions Xueming saw emerging on the ground – neighborhood iCafes where one killed time gaming (the “common” and “dirty” ones, which we dubbed local hangouts) and centrally located destinations iCafes where one went for a night out on the town (the “luxury” ones, which we dubbed *entertainment destinations*).

Xueming – Local hangout iCafes were places where customers could inexpensively connect to the Internet. Interiors were functional, not fancy – they survived by offering fast connectivity and computing at a low hourly rate. Cleanliness was not top on their list. Typically, they were located in residential neighborhoods, often next to schools



FIGURE 3 Local hangout iCafe

and factories and so attracted students and wage workers, often rural residents who migrated to cities for work.



FIGURE 4 Entertainment destination iCafe

In contrast, the entertainment destination iCafes were one-stop shops for leisure-time entertainment. They offered more than online chatting and gaming. One Taiyuan iCafe offered a wide variety of experiences to its customers – KTV box rooms, large screen PCs with sofas, a restaurant and tea shop, too. These iCafes were usually located in downtown shopping districts and competed with other entertainment venues (shopping malls, bars, KTV bars, etc.) for customers. While they had their fair share of students, they attracted a wider range of clientele – more women, more mixed gender couples, and more young professionals. The demographic

remained young (under 35), but the socio-economic range widened to include young professionals.

Suzanne – What customers did on iCafe PCs did not surprise us (gaming, chatting, movie & music downloads), but how and why they did that in iCafes did.⁷ Some customers opted to go to iCafes over using their computers at home. Why? To escape parent's nagging about their homework or looking over their shoulders while they chatted online with friends. No longer just an online gaming hall, iCafes emerged as the place for urban Chinese youth to be youth. iCafes were one of the few places young urban Chinese could escape the pressures of schooling, work and their parents. In their eyes, digital technology made the iCafes modern, and the emergence of fancy, mega-iCafes made them hip.

For those who tended the iCafes, the beleaguered IT staff and hardworking owners, the pressures of relentlessly updating the games loaded on 100s of PCs, general PC maintenance, a viciously competitive iCafe markets and low profit margins forced them to consider avenues for beating the local competition. Depending on location and clientele, some went upscale while others fought trench warfare over technology prowess (primarily online gaming performance).

Xueming – Intel was not off-track when it incorporated iCafe management software into its first generation iCafe product. Owners did need to improve how they managed their businesses. But by 2006, nimble local companies were jumping to fill in that gap. Most of

⁷ For details on the Chinese internet and its tendency towards being an entertainment, versus information, highway, see Lyn Jeffrey's blog on IFTF's web site <http://www.virtual-china.org/> and Zhou Yongming's historical discussion of technology and political participation, Zhou 2006.

their solutions worked, well, not too badly and much less expensively than Intel's existing product.

Suzanne – In the end, it was the mix of urban iCafes and China's booming online entertainment youth culture that held the most promise for Intel. We shifted attention away from the iCafe owner's PC management headaches to highlight the potential of innovatively addressing China's tech-savvy youth market.

Xueming – Suzanne and I team-tagged across the Pacific Ocean to write the report together and three days after I returned from Taiyuan, we gave our presentation. In order to highlight the positives (a new iCafe industry segmentation and the discovery that iCafes were the places for China's new online and offline youth culture), we downplayed the negatives (the lackluster performance of our product in the market). Not only were these insights fresh to Intel, we felt they opened an innovative new product space.

Suzanne – Even though, Xueming did the research and wrote the meat of the report, we agreed that I would make the presentation to the opening meeting of the iCafe next generation product development team. This was in part because of the last minute demographic and cultural analysis I added. It also helped that I was a native English speaker (English was the meeting's dominant language) and the more senior researcher. The perceived status of the one presenting, be it in terms of professional experience or linguistic prowess, adds to the perceived veracity of the report.

Perhaps it also helped our credibility as fieldworkers that I gave the presentation from a small, noisy public phone stall in remote, western China. Outside, long-haul trucks rattled by, while next to me, small-town entrepreneurs made hurried calls home. But the locale made the silence after I finished the presentation surreal. After a moment of silence, a disembodied voice said, "So this is what ethnographic research is."

Xueming – In the room listening were industrial and interaction designers, engineers, software architects, marketing and product managers and one of our general managers. In retrospect, I think it was their first time to see an "ethnographic" research presentation. Our general manager was the one who broke the silence. The report opened up a completely new iCafe market for him, and that got him excited about our work.

But after the meeting, I heard a wider variety of responses. Our other general manager, emailed to say he enjoyed the report, particularly its singular use of photos from the field. My immediate manager seconded the praise but asked for more details saying, "You should have at least provided user needs!" Third, in a follow-on meeting the next day, the project lead asked me to summarize the most important user and market needs.

It became clear that the team accepted the report as a good ethnographic report, in short, we had told a compelling story about urban iCafes and their regulars. But they wanted something else. They wanted that story rendered in terms of actionable product

development strategies and directions. They wanted the prescribed “user research report format” which highlighted user “needs” or “pain points.”

COLLABORATION VS. THE FAMILY FEUD

As we moved from research exploration to product development, we joined a highly specialized (although junior) iCafe product development team. In these meetings, we parried our knowledge of gamers who wanted faster performance (what kind of performance?) and business owners who wanted that performance at a lower price (lower than what?) against the relentless progress of an Intel technology roadmap, the street value of a former iCafe product waiting to be sold, the promotional appeal of Intel brand, and more.

Frankly, the meetings felt more like a dysfunctional family fighting where the battle lines were drawn in terms of corporate specialization. Predictably, product managers argued with the research when it threatened their brand. Finance experts took hardware architects to task over the easy call for price and performance. That we, as the researchers, represented “the field” was a no-brainer. In those meetings, we were the field. Our problem was modulating our voice and the language of our insights into terms upon which others could understand and act.

Benjamin Shaw describes how corporate specialization and disciplinary training can lead to distinct “thought worlds,” each characterized by different practices and routines that, in turn, have their own syntactic, semantic and pragmatic dimensions.⁸ It is no surprise that specialists develop their own languages and jargon to describe things that are important to them.

But many more subtle or deeply rooted issues occur when people use the same word to mean something different or when people see different kinds of details across a similar body of data. There are ways to mitigate these barriers. Shaw argues for increased transparency and closer collaboration between disciplines. But this effect is best achieved after working for years together on shared projects.

As a relatively inexperienced product development team, we spent months hammering out the meanings of our terms, be they feature, price, performance and even the Intel technology roadmap. The script we followed, a series of meetings designed to discuss a preset array of questions, assumed that at certain critical junctures, we as a team would agree on our terms, reach a collective decision and proceed to the next set of questions. It was often not clear until too late that we were not operating with the same deck of cards.

⁸ See Shaw 1997.

The product development meetings

Xueming – After our research report, I returned to school to complete my Master’s degree. When I returned to Intel one month later, I met up with the iCafe team. They showed me an array of iCafe product features that came, in their words, from the research. I was shocked. Without my input, the design team crafted core design directions and concepts that were shockingly unrelated to our research findings. As an intern, I did not dare to refute their work. I called Suzanne.

Suzanne – There is no good version of this story. Prior to my work at Intel, I worked as an ethnographic research consultant. My work rarely lasted past the final presentation, and for this reason I took the job at Intel. I wanted to see how to make the research work beyond the report. But I certainly did not do that here. With the report given and out of my hands, I had ventured on to other research projects (my own, this time), and gave little thought to the iCafe work until Xueming contacted me.

Then, I confess, I felt betrayed. The designers had misunderstood the significance of our findings. If we crafted our careers around authentically representing the field, it would not do to have designers and engineers messing up that “authenticity” with product concepts that did not adequately represent those findings. Mind you, this was no longer the field’s authenticity, but that of our corporate identity and professional value.

Xueming – The next thing I knew was that I was back in meetings with the designers and had a second chance at the design recommendations for the next generation iCafe product. This time, they were much more closely linked to what we saw in the field.

But I was only a junior researcher there in Shanghai. My voice could not stand up to the challenges that emerged during the development process where we negotiated user needs, business needs and tech needs.

Suzanne – The minute Xueming’s second presentation hit the team, the recommended feature set defined the field across which hardware and software architects, product managers, project managers, financial folks and more debated which should constitute the next generation iCafe product and how. And it was a muddy and messy field.

Shortly afterwards, the design lead quietly suggested that neither Xueming nor I need continue attending the product development meetings. Our exploration work was done – a set of rudimentary features had been delivered. This was, in the team’s mind, not an iterative process. We completed our work with our reports. We could go while the designers, engineers, product managers, and financial folks did their magic.

However, I did not trust the iCafe team to hear what the research had said. Nor did I trust our report to withstand the onslaught of questions that would inevitably arise as the team made decisions about which technology would be sold when, where and how. As an

artifact, it highlighted the fieldwork we had done. It could not anticipate questions down the road. We needed to be in the room for that.

Ideally, frictions over core terms and misunderstandings across specialized disciplines can be resolved collaboratively. But tensions in these meetings were so high that they shut down the kind of environment necessary for us to admit a lack of knowledge about another's domain. Differences between attendees' English proficiency also complicated matters. More than once, a native English speaker used his or her native English fluency to silence a non-native English speaker. It was deeply unsettling to see how linguistic prowess was bandied about as decision-making authority. At points, the meetings simply became a matter of whose voice was loudest.

Xueming – None of the features that I worked on with the designers came to a reality. Unlike Suzanne, I remain disappointed. We recommended an iCafe next generation product that addressed what iCafe owners, operators and customers wanted. But nothing we recommended saw light of day. I still don't know why. Ultimately, someone high up in the process decided that the iCafe market could be better addressed by another business group. And the iCafe product slipped out of our, the ethnographers and EMPG's, hands.

Suzanne – It is true that none of the features we originally recommended were part of the final next generation iCafe product. But unlike Xueming, I agreed with the final decision to sell top-of-the-line Intel product into China's iCafe industry. That product did meet the core requirements of iCafe denizens. It also helped that those higher up in the corporate food chain took me aside and gently persuaded me that this was the right way to go.

Because EMPG was no longer creating a unique product for this relatively unique market but instead called for selling mainstream, volume product into China, this product no longer fell under our business group's jurisdiction. So, it was handed off to those who could follow through on our final product strategy recommendations. It did feel disconcerting to hand off all of our work and then hear little more of what happened next. But at the core, our research recommendations ultimately found an expressing in Intel's roadmap and market strategy. I see this as a success on our and the iCafe's team part.

CULTURAL POLITICS AND THE ETHNOGRAPHERS' VOICES

At no time during the urban iCafe product development meetings did we discuss the fact that the central and local Chinese government actively campaigned against iCafes. The urban iCafe market was too large, too promising and too enticing to consider this. Yet, when one of our product managers gave an external presentation in Shanghai, Chinese audience members challenged Intel to explain how it could support such an inherently immoral industry. In forceful terms, they made it clear that iCafes were the modern equivalent of 19th century opium dens. This is a tricky accusation for a foreign (and

decidedly Western) corporation, particularly considering the colonialist intentions of Britain's efforts to bring opium into the Chinese mainland in the 19th and 20th century.

Nor did we confront the uneasiness the Chinese government feels about iCafe regulars and the mechanisms it uses to control their on & offline lives. Western media and academics rarely fail to mention China's Internet censorship and other government controls over the access and distribution of digital information in China. Yet in our product development meetings, none of the US participants raised these issues. Neither did our Chinese colleagues. Our conversations were swept free of state politics and instead single-mindedly focused on the market practices of iCafes, their owners, their operators and their customers.

In hindsight, we researched an industry and its market and thusly framed EMPG's product development trajectory. The urban iCafe is less contentious than that of China's rural iCafes. Government restrictions on iCafe business licensing, policies forcing a consolidation of the industry and even crackdowns on unsafe or immoral iCafes guided the urban iCafe market rather than challenging its existence. Urban iCafe industry practices dovetailed with government policy in part because they had to, but also in part because the policies also meshed with emerging business practices.

Subsequent research on China's rural iCafes, however, delivered a resounding challenge to this relatively easy-going alliance between industry and government. Spurred by the business appeal of an even-larger iCafe market (one that reached deep into rural China) as well as research initiative designed to understand where technology markets existed amongst rural populations, we set out to explore the inner-workings of village and town iCafes.

As we brought home our research on rural youth and rural iCafes, we could no longer sidestep the state politics shaping China's online entertainment industry. The rural iCafe market was ground zero for government policy about youth culture and commercial Internet use. Internally, we enacted these conflicts and contradictions. We took sides with one side arguing that the market and its youth culture was strong enough to withstand government onslaught while the other side aimed to clean up iCafes so that the businesses would no longer wreak the wrath of local and central government offices and a larger body of youth and even young adults would feel more comfortable visiting the establishments.

What was striking about these two sides of our research was how easily they mapped onto cultural and national differences. Even the two of us authors quietly found ourselves on opposite sides of the fence. Xueming joined forces with his colleagues in Shanghai to brainstorm ideas on how to build a better, stronger and legal iCafes that would nominally conform to state policy and attract a broader range of clientele. In short, he and our Shanghai colleagues aimed to make rural iCafes into a more viable business and bridge the widening cultural divide between urban and rural residents. In contrast, Suzanne argued for what she felt was a more anti-establishment, support-the-underdog view – she wanted us to simply provide rural iCafes with as top of quality equipment as they could afford so that they could continue their unintended guerilla warfare on government cultural values.

What started as simple, cut-and-dried next-generation product development research evolved into a year's debate over what should be done about China's iCafes. During our urban iCafe product development process, we arrived at a common voice and singular answer. Yet as we continued our exploration of this industry and its regulars, we ended up deeply divided over how to answer this question. Ultimately, there was no easy fallback on the language of corporate interest (aka market segment win, market expansion or simple profit). Nor did a moral call to bring bridge China's digital divide unite us. Markets and governments (their own markets) clashed and we began to take sides. The lines that divided us revealed as much about our team members' cultural proclivities and corporate standing as they did fundamental disagreements about the moral implications of our work.

CONCLUSION

It is our job to observe and learn from those we research. It is also our job to represent our insights in such a way as to make sense of "the field" to our colleagues. In both cases, we face the myriad politics of authenticity. These politics shift tenor as we shift from representing the voices and lives of those we study, to our own as corporate specialists, to the voices of our mates, our nations and our cultures. To build collaborative and innovative business practices that value our work as corporate ethnographers, we must be prepared to tackle these politics from field to office and beyond. We offer this frank assessment of our year's worth of research on iCafes as fodder for learning, our own and hopefully others'.

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