Skillful Strategy, Artful Navigation & Necessary Wrangling

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This paper addresses three main issues: the fixation on the individual in corporate research, the emic need to privilege and represent relationships driving the political and cultural economic lived experience and the pressing need to find useful, effective ways engage corporate structures that otherwise are impervious to "views of the collective". That is, we argue for a reframing of ethnographic work in industry (in some instances) from that of the individual to that of sufficiently contextually complete relationships people have with other people and institutions, especially when working with "emerging markets." We rely on data and sources from comparative ethnographic work over time in several countries to identify what we need to study and to suggest new, more powerful directions for our research. We also suggest implications for how to navigate within corporate structures in order to liberate ourselves and our work.

Introduction

> *"…this close touch of the fantastic element of hope for transformative knowledge and the severe check and stimulus of sustained critical enquiry are jointly the ground of any believable claim to objectivity or rationality not riddled with breath-taking denials and repressions."*[1]   Donna J. Haraway

The entrée of ethnographic field methods and critical anthropological theory into corporate America has forced our colleagues in marketing and product development to more carefully think about their customers, who they are, what they do (versus what they say they do) and how to connect with them, be it through products, services, or marketing. We have brought customers, users and consumers to life for corporations, for better or for worse.

In the following pages, we assume these benefits of our work and instead take a hard look at our limitations, particularly as we join corporations in seeking out new communities to translate into new markets. It is this effort to tackle the "emerging markets" that challenges our established ethnographic research habits as well as requires a change of heart on behalf of our employers and clients, the corporations.

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[1] Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991): 185.

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To do so we must leave behind some of our most valued tools of the trade, especially the individual that haunts our "personas," user case studies, scenarios and day-in-the-life timelines. Instead, we must find other ways to bring to life the ***collective relational*** lives of our research participants and capture the frustratingly complex local economies of their values, rights, knowledge and obligations.

The second, and by far more challenging, step is to then translate this knowledge into terms deemed valuable and actionable by our colleagues. Here we must face head on the problems of how corporations value research, ethnographic or user research, market research and more. Like it or not, we must make our work actionable within this latter field of meanings. Here we feel the pressure to distill our work into terms that work within corporations, such as users, consumers, market segments, markets, price and more. Call it the benign oppression of even well-meaning organizations: the pressure to translate the cacophony of what we see and hear in the field into terms no longer our own.

In the following pages, we call for new methods of distilling our knowledge, not into the handy frameworks of individual consumers and users, but into "ecosystems," a term we use to characterize the relationships that define complex local economies of values, rights, knowledge and obligations. We argue for a distillation of local practices into appropriately but only sufficiently faithful representations of those we study. With these we aim to challenge the corporate pull towards market models of consumers as collections of individuals and instead guide our colleagues towards consumers as collections of relationships within collective economies and an understanding of corporate value in both their and our local ecosystems.

We rely on data and sources from comparative ethnographic work in several countries over a long period of time. We also suggest implications for how to navigate within corporate structures and liberate ourselves and our work. Finally, we suggest ways to join with the local populations, offering what we can, while enabling them.

Foundation

There is a history to our predilection towards individualist accounts of culture and community. Malinowski wrote that that the point of ethnography was "to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world [sic]."[2] Gender implications aside, it is clear that Malinowski was not talking about a communally fraught and locally rich intersection of local political and cultural economies, just his world (and we can leave open the question of which "his" Malinowski saw most clearly).[3]

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[2] Spradley, 1979.

[3] Here we refer to the concept of political economy put forward by Karl Marx and revised by so many others as well as the concept of cultural economy put forward by Pierre Bourdieu. By including them both, we nod our head to Bourdieu who argued that it was not enough to look at the material means of production, but also the cultural means of social production. And that the two did not always so simply map onto each other. Pierre Bourdieu,

We suspect that it is obvious to the reader when we say that people live their lives in the context of other people, places and institutions. And yet, a closer look at our work in-house reveals that many of our representations have focused on "personas", on the "voice the customer", on "the user", on "the consumer" – that is, on the individual ideally, but not always, in his or her immediate world.

This is where we as researchers fail to support corporate research, design and strategy. We might consider the interactions, exchanges and relations that animate people's lives. But we fail to grasp these as situated experiences that necessarily breach and indeed call into question the usefulness of the category of the individual.[4]

This failure is compounded by the fact that almost none of the extant categories into which corporate research organizes people, places and things, e.g., market segments, offer satisfactory explanations of people's daily lives. For example, we see "poor" families (poor by our definition) in China purchasing plasma screen TVs and attribute this apparent contradiction to a desire for face or social status. We see an extended Turkish family in a tiny apartment with heat enough for only one room in winter with a *laptop* computer running video Skype so they can keep in touch with their family and we wonder about their priorities. We see small business proprietors in Bangalore purchase a computer then sell it when it proves not useful and wonder, what went wrong?

We contend that our research continues to pay lip-service to the "individual" to the exclusion and suppression of the "ecosystem" as defined by relationships. Yet, in our work around the world, we find this latter characterization a far more faithful representation of the population with whom we are working. In fact, the individual, a construct, emerges as secondary or peripheral if relevant at all.

The Allure of the Individual, Part 1

It is worthwhile to spend a few paragraphs looking at the kind of individuals corporations crave. To do so, we'll wander through a few examples to see how ethnographic and user data from two "emerging markets" – China and India – were read in-house and how profoundly easy it is to take the complexities of collective life and render it understandable and actionable by making it look like the familiar individual, in particular one who desires, purchases and consumes the products we produce.

Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

[4] The concepts of situated knowledges (Donna Haraway), situated action (Susan Leigh-Star) and others refer to shifting the frame of reference from isolated people to practices/actions in context. They differ in terms of what kinds of contexts are to be considered. We are borrowing most from Haraway, who requires we understand how knowledge is both created in our own terms/contexts as well as in the terms/contexts of those we research, and activity theory, whereby the primary unit of analysis is not a person, but an activity. Leigh-Star borrows from the latter to describe her term, situated action.

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Perhaps the most disconcerting aspect of our work is that we, as sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists, may find ourselves fascinated with the machinations of human desire and praxis, but what concerns our colleagues, and understandably so, is what will make these individuals buy, buy more and preferably buy higher margin products. Our contention is not the corporate compulsion to sell more. It is simply that the point of sale should not be seen as an individual at all, but a person or community enmeshed in local practices.

Let us unpack this a bit more. Below is an example of how the persistent momentum on the individual consumer can lead us astray.

In a study conducted late last year, a farmer in southern China was asked why he didn't want a PC. He answered, it is useless. So did most of his peers and fellow town residents. The research report concluded "The main barriers to PC ownership are knowledge of computers, price and the perception that PCs are useless." Back in the office, our colleagues followed up with the following question: what price would have changed the farmer's mind?

1 Farming family in southern China

Digging a tiny bit deeper into this report, we see that the blame for the lost sale fell not on the PC, but the farmer himself. He not only did not buy the PC, he did not even want to buy one. [He, of course, is a proxy for a collection of individual "he's".] So, the report concluded, what can we do to change his mind, increase his knowledge, perhaps raise his consciousness to the benefits of the PC? The assumption being that the PC was not going to change, but the farmer could, would, should. But, you see, we are not talking about the thinking individual in the Hegelian sense. We are talking about an end-user, a purchaser and a point of sale. This poor farmer failed on all three counts.

So, as a corporation, we cut him out of the picture. In the corporate lingo, this farmer fit into the market category of "non-owner, unafford and undesire." And he didn't get much more attention after that. Bye bye farmer in southern China. And his town, too. His town didn't have enough of the "non-owner, afford and desire" or even the wistful "non-owner, unafford but desire" to merit further attention.

There are several issues here; we mention a few relevant ones. First, the farmer was the default participant. Not the family, not the town, not the local political party. Second, corporately our response required the farmer to want the PC as an individual – "what can we do to change his mind". We failed even in post hoc conversations to consider other potential

collective or communal values to PC use and instead sifted through the data for the desiring individual. We missed the forest for the trees.

It is much easier when consumers' evaluations of products match those of the corporation. When they don't, we fall back on what is called attribution bias, a sociological term for blaming the individual for something we found wrong. Here was our third misstep. The PC was not to blame, nor the farmer; our frame of reference was and that stunted our ability to imagine what might, indeed, improve the life and livelihood of the farmer, his family and his community and, in the process, sell another PC.

Blaming communities for failing to purchase our products or doing so but remaining poor often drops them from the corporate radar screen and exacerbates the problem dubbed the "digital divide." The problem as we see it is not so much of have's versus have not's but a frame of reference that takes the individual consumer as the norm and therefore desired owner, consumer, the one who "has." Those who don't fit these parameters, in short non-individuals, fall out of the scope of corporate action.

The Allure of the Individual, Part 2

There's a second problem. Not only are corporations predisposed to the individual consumer, we are too. Dressed in the form of personas, case studies and more, individuals are a highly persuasive means of communicating what we see in the field.

Let's face it, we are valued as story tellers. We go out, we "research" (they don't know what this means), we come home with stories that move people. And ideally these stories do something productive for our colleagues and employers. To ensure our success, we "objectify" what we see in the field with our strongest tools to date – those that have been accepted – personas, day-in-the-life-of, user case studies, etc.

Figure 2 Entrepreneur in India

Let's look at a second example. In Aurangabang, Maharashtra, India, a man running the local agricultural supply shop recently returned from time spent in the US. Among other things, he brought with him a computer to use at his shop. In India, a nation of more than one billion people that is a net food exporter, agriculture is tightly monitored. Each month government agents come by to pick up the required forms, each dutifully filled out in pencil. To simplify the process, our entrepreneur computerized the form, filled it in and printed it out. It looked like the paper & pencil form, only typed and printed out. To his dismay, the government agent rejected his form as not being proper. Our entrepreneur sold his computer.

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At first glance, we expected the entrepreneur to find a utility in the PC and its capabilities. But there was none. The computer's utility was not embodied by the entrepreneur and instead it was rejected by the ecosystem, one in which a highly bureaucratic and not unsuccessful agricultural industry wanted its information handwritten in pencil on paper – PC or no PC.

Here's a third example: in coastal Haining, Zhejiang, China, a middle-aged inventor bemoaned the demise of his metal parts factory. In an effort to expand his business beyond the local region, he had mailed brochures advertising his latest invention, cold-called potential buyers, even traveled to northeastern China to pick up a backstreet deal that soured his taste for the business.

3 Frustrated inventor in coastal China

Down the street, a young thirty-something businessman with a constantly ringing cell phone, two computers and an expanding metal parts business made the leap from a regional business to an international company, selling stamped metal candleholders and doorstops around the world. Our research team argued through the night – why was the young businessman successful and our mad inventor not? We debated their educational backgrounds, business experience, computer expertise and psychological makeup. We lost ourselves in the battle of two men, one who succeeded (thanks to alibaba.com, we decided) and another who did not, and forgot about the vibrant local economic and cultural environments that fed the successes and failures of those who lived there.

4 Young businessman in coastal China

As storytellers, it is easy to favor such characters as the wronged entrepreneur, the mad inventor, the successful young businessman. We launch impassioned pleas on their behalf. As individuals with names and occupations and some compelling drama, they make fine story telling tools. They eclipse the need to muck around in the details. They are neat, powerful, sometimes even sexy. They do great PowerPoint. These individuals stand out in the endless drone of meetings and presentations, especially when compared with our fellow (market!) researchers who are bereft of wild tales and instead left with dry charts and figures (okay, our bias).

Yet, when we use individualized representations to breathe passion into our reports, be they personas, user case studies, or scenarios, they risk standing in for markets in the form of individualized desires and economies. Such representations handily move us and our colleagues to act because they are familiar and deceivingly interchangeable with

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other individuals. It's an easy next step to ascribe to the values attributed to one individual to another, especially one who correlates with the former. Do the math and we emerge with a describable, actionable market. As the data collects around these individuals, our individuals gain an aura of objectivity, even though they are nothing but a dangerously bounded set of data that happens to correlate with other data.[5]

We need to challenge this objectivity of the individual. It is not simply that there is no such thing as "an average person" or even a fully representative one. Rather it is that in the corporate environment, individuals blur into each other and the critical information about people's ecosystems drop out of the picture. As individuals, they attract the kind of values and data that better represent our corporate ecosystem than what we saw in the field.

To return to our example of the farmer in southern China who argued that the PC was useless, it was not that he could not afford and did not desire a PC, it is that he became associated (as if a transferable data point) with other individuals who had similar responses to these few questions. The unique qualities of their environments, their different reasons for arguing PCs were useless faded against the objectivity of their status as "non-owner, unafford and undesired." Our southern farmer who lived in what one colleague commented was not "real rural China" because he lived in a two story home with a motorcycle and refrigerator was paired with his statistical compatriot, a young government cadre who lived in a thatched home in mountainous western Sichuan with dirt road access, limited power and running water (aka "real rural China"). With the loss of this data, their ecosystems, we lost the ability to imagine other scenarios, other possibilities.

No doubt, it is easier to interview a handful of entrepreneurs and introduce them to our colleagues than to track down and characterize the competing complex economies of an ecosystem. Intuitively, it feels easier to sell to a single entity with a measurable budget and means of purchase. Yet, we argue, as we venture into cultures unlike our own, we enter economies that don't easily distill into consumers, points of sale, and markets. Instead, commerce happens as but one face of the local, lived ecosystem, its politics, economies and cultures. So we must find research methods that can envision the situatedness of life in Aurangabang and Haining rather than find ourselves once again reunited with our familiar friend, the individual.

In Search of the Ecosystem

As trained social scientists, we do recognize the differences between a farmer in southern China with a motorcycle and two story home and a farmer in western China who lives on a hill far from even dirt roads. We are trained to consider the debilitating effects of poor transportation and the power of a thriving network of friends and family. We can – and

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[5] Haraway describes the danger of objectivity in bounding data at the same time stating its impartiality. As objective facts, then, these bounded data sets become effective objects, scientific facts, that change the world, like microbes, quarks and genes. Haraway, 183.

should – trace the fine webs of relationships between entrepreneurs and government agents, farmers and their families, mad inventors and their customers, even young businessmen and their alibaba.com accounts. Indeed, the tensions, resonances, resistances and complicities that define them are the stuff of the ecosystems in which corporate players, such as Intel, must play.

The question, then , is how to conduct research on an ecosystem, to study not only individuals but more importantly the links and obligations that link them on good days and divide them on others. This requires that we reframe our research questions to examine both how actors navigate the economies of their worlds as well as how these economies identify the possibilities of their identities and actions.

To do so means leaving aside time-worn truths. Think of radical feminism's refusal to believe that women really exist. Theirs is a refusal to believe that the women as a categorical identity must define how women – you, I, our colleagues and our partners – act. This refusal opened new vistas for understanding how gender poses possibilities for action, necessitates unnecessary wrangling, offers momentary opportunities and insists on obstinate glass ceilings.[6] We can do the same for the concept of the individual (especially in the corporate context). We can also shift our attention from cultural meanings to cultural distinctions. Here think of Pierre Bourdieu with a touch of Levi-Strauss' insistence on how differences never sit still.[7]

This kind of reframing shifts our attention not only during the research process but also during the analysis and reporting. Below we discuss some of our successes, many more of our missteps and some surprises along the way – all of these are learning in process. Finally, we suggest a few next steps towards productively collecting and communicating our insights to our colleagues and peers.

Method or madness?

Sometimes the imperative to focus on the collective realities of our research participants was, well, forced upon us. In short, we might have started thinking we were going to interview some familiar individuals, but once in field, we did something else. The fieldwork pointed us towards the collective realities of our research participants, whether we were prepared for them or not.

While advising some students at an Indian University in Hyderabad, India how run a trial of a particular technology, we agreed to interview the local elected official, the

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[6] Two particularly forceful examples of this argument include Donna Haraway's essay "A Cyborg Manifasto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in Haraway 1991: 149-181 and Audre Lord's attack on white-washed feminism in Audre Lord, *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984)).

[7] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinctions: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984) and Claude Levi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (New York: Atheneum, 1978)

sarpanch, of a rural area comprising several villages. Two students were ostensibly involved in this "training" interview. Yet things began to slide at the get-go. We were picked up at the hotel by three students, only one of whom was expected. On the way to the village, 11 more met us there and the "interview" was held with, at various times, from 12-25 of the local population. At one point, one of the lead students asked: "What do you expect the 'computer' to do for your village?" The sarpanch answered: "We are not sure what "computers" do, so we are not sure what to answer." The student began to explain and suddenly, to our ears anyway, the room erupted into what seemed like all 30+ people – standing, sitting, hanging on in windows and open doorways – speaking simultaneously. At one point, several minutes into this, the other student, sitting near us leaned over and said "this is getting out of control". Then, just as suddenly the tumult quieted and the sarpanch indicated the room now understood what "computers" could do. They then proceed to provide excellent responses to the original question.

5 Fifteen "interviewing" twenty-five

The point of this story is that we certainly would never have imagined planning an interview of that nature. Second, had we, it would have been exceptionally difficult to muster the sheer number of "interviewers" the students were able to bring. It also didn't lend itself to a lecturific discourse by an eager engineer on "what 'computers' can do'" as the means of "informing" our hosts. Third, the "interview" certainly did not lend itself to transcription or the sort of analysis we were used to conducting. Finally, it did not lend itself to the sort of synthesis we had imagined. Who was being interviewed? Who was answering the questions? How could we attribute the sarpanch's answer to him as an individual?

And yet, the notion of "collective interview" is alive and well. Recent work we did with Mart, a company in India, integrated insights from the collective interview into the analysis. During the research project in a rural village in Northern India, a small advance team from Mart approached the village quietly to ask permission to talk to people there. Later, we "interviewed" all the men of the town who wanted to be there. We did not select these men, they selected themselves, with an average of 50 of wide ranging ages joining the "interview" over the course of the day. Remarkably, a group that spanned from 15 to 30 participated as a group in several tasks over a span of hours. As in the prior example, they talked, argued, debated, convinced and laughed – repeatedly, but cordially – as the researchers from Mart led them through the various conversations.

From this research emerged several consensually produced representations of their everyday lived realities, maps of the shared village environment as well as examples of the where social consensus ended and dissent began. As researchers, we had no opportunity to pin down the experience of these realities onto monadic individuals, but instead it handily illustrated the social dynamics of shared knowledge in these communities. In the end, we

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got more than answers to our questions, we witnessed how local economies of knowledge played out in these communities.

In search of the ecosystems

In other cases, we started with familiar research methodologies but quickly shifted our analytical from focusing on the individual in the community to analyzing socially situated practices. Here we drew on a wide variety of literature, from activity theory (s.a. Vygotsky, Le'ontev) to early studies on situated action and the workplace (s.a. Engestrom, Leigh-Star) to more recent work in science studies (s.a. Latour). With this analytical shift from individual agents to situated activities, we found ourselves mapping flows of people, resources and practices with particular attention to how these flows intersected and diverged. What emerged were economies of knowledge and action.[8]

For example, in a recent study of rural internet bars in villages and towns in China, we began with the familiar carefully scheduled interviews with internet bar owners, customers and even IT staff. We used these interviews as touchstones to track down the webs of social relationships, intersecting business interests and even monumental government obstacles (not just the policies, but the practices that made these policies real and more often than not, surreal). We looked for the intersections of activities and practices that made these businesses tick, despite it all. We were on the hunt for an ecosystem (or two).

To be honest, there was little new about our research methodology. We started by talking with people then fanned out to trace the contours of how people made their actions meaningful (or how they were rendered meaningful – positively or not). Think of Clifford Geertz seeking out the turtles upon turtles upon turtles of meaning. [9] Only we were starting with online gamers and 20sth IT staff and looking for the day-to-day practices that made internet bars a simultaneously vibrant and illegal enterprise.

6 Kids in internet bars in rural China

Our days looked like this. We chatted with customers, ran into local officials, discovered the occasional internet bar business association, tracked down the nosy old ladies sent by the Ministry of Culture to snoop on the businesses, even sought out the rare geriatric online game player. We listened to owners gripe about rapacious local power suppliers,

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[8] Yrjo Engestrom has experimented with representing complex economies of activities. For a more concise explanation, see Yrjo Engestrom and Virginia Escalante, "Mundane Tool or Object of Affection?" in **Context and Consciousness: Activity Theory and Human-Computer Interaction**, eds. Seth Chaiklin and Jean Lave, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 64-103.

[9] Clifford Geertz, **The Interpretation of Cultures** (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

parents spin horror stories of how online gaming turned other people's children into hard nosed criminals, and eight year olds brag about their online gaming exploits. We played the games, we tried out the chairs, poked around, coughed in the dust, photographed the toilets and suspicious backrooms (chock full of under-aged gamers), collected tall tales and even unwittingly inspired one taxi driver to open his own internet bar. In short, we did what ethnographers do. We talked to all the people we could find, and followed their leads to others, to government offices, to opportunistic local policies, to town and county planning directives, to the local monopolies of electricity and ISP suppliers. We hung around people's offices, work places and online game sites until the talking ran out, the stories ran dry and we thought we had found all that we could find.

Like most ethnographic research, these findings did not lend themselves to neat Powerpoint presentations. We struggled with how to represent the richness of all what we had seen. Amongst ourselves, we shared tales of this internet bar owner, that customer who beat us at CounterStrike (yet again), and the parents who frantically searched for their missing child (presumable next door in the other internet bar). We drew maps of where the internet bars were located as well as the schools and the massage parlors and the factories the employed the more frequent customers and more.

We went beyond Geertz to emphasize the relational dynamics of how meaning and action emerged. In short, we looked for the artful navigations, the skillful strategies, the necessary wrangling where people juggled their day-to-day obligations and values. Here we found ourselves in unfamiliar cultural realms, ones handily described in local terms, such as "上有政策,下有对策" (China, "above there's policy and below there's counterstrategy") or with a different cultural twist, "fahlawa" (Egypt) and "крутиться" (Russia, "twisting").

To render these dynamics visible, we shifted from developing personas and case studies to crafting representations of the complex links between family-run businesses, the cultural value of education, central government policy on information dissemination and local government economic interests. We struggled to illustrate the tensions, the risks and the profits, the spheres of interest that met uncomfortably at the door of the internet bar as well as those meeting behind closed doors. We began to map out the fraught networks of intersecting practices and interests.

I'll be frank. It was fun, but we bored our colleagues to tears. Our colleagues did not want all the stories, charts and maps. They wanted the ones that moved them forward, that gave them an action plan. We described an ecosystem. They just wanted the next step, one that pointed towards a product development strategy and spelled out a go-to-market plan. Here we missed the boat. We had faithfully represented what we had seen in the field – we found our ecosystems. But we described, rather than prescribed, and as a result failed to deliver a recipe for corporate action.

Here then is our a second hurdle. In order to have any effect in the corporate workplace, we must have mutually intelligible conversations with our non-researcher

colleagues. For them and for us, the individual is a recognized entity – a designable entity. It matches the expectations of our colleagues as well as their data. In contrast, political and cultural economies don't. They aren't very sticky, to borrow Malcolm Gladwell's term.[10] And we need to be a lot stickier, especially when representing less familiar emerging markets.

Representing Collective Realities

We must find the tools, representations and methods for honestly representing lived economies of life in the emerging markets. We must translate what we have seen into a language that our colleagues can understand AND on which they can act within the confines of corporate possibility. Here we must play with graphic representations of communal life, shared activities, patterns of social movement or interaction, etc as well as challenge what looks like and counts as actionable data.

In the case of MART, "the individual" did not emerge as the unit of analysis from our research. The methods and findings eclipsed "the individual" to reveal collective imaginings of home place, time, family and more. As knowledge and meanings pooled and social tensions divided the stories, we began to have a map of the terrain of daily life in rural India. From here we could begin to understand where ICT use could fit.

In the case of our internet bar research, we retained the explanatory power of the individual, particularly those whose stories mapped out the fault lines of local community tensions collecting around internet bar usage and operations. One such story was that of a young entrepreneur in a remote Chinese village who wanted to open up his own internet bar. He faced no small number of obstacles: government licenses traded at a high price in the local market and he would have spend the time, energy and money to maintain friendly, advantageous ties with the local cadres and village busybodies. Add to this the daily extortion of the monopolistic power industry and ISP providers.

But the real issue was his father. Like many of fellow residents, his father saw the internet bar as about as wholesome as opium dens and at their best on par with mahjong gambling parlors. He did not want his son or any other parents' children associated with such a place. Out of respect for his father's concern, the son waited for his father to leave on vacation before investing his savings into the purchase of 20 new PCs for his unlicensed (aka patently illegal) internet bar. So far, he is still in business, thanks to the daily juggle of family obligations, local official interests (such as preferring a rich local economic base over official business permissions), regional power and ISP monopolies, provincial Ministry of Culture concerns over the ideological health of its citizens, and the demands of the pre-teens

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[10] While Gladwell talks about how trends move in US consumer culture, it is not too far-fetched to consider how such trendsetting might work in our US corporate environments. Malcolm Gladwell,, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (Cambridge: Back Bay Books, 2002): 89-132.

and teenagers who flocked to his business to play Counter Strike, chat and otherwise hang out.

From this story we distilled a representation we could show our colleagues. It mapped out a recipe for a successful, for-profit internet bar complete with challengers of its particular brand of success. The map showed distinct constellations of people, organizations, local communities, government offices, online content providers that intersected across the operations of each internet bar. As we sketched out our results, our entrepreneur disappeared, but his daily juggle remained as the skeleton of an internet bar ecosystem.

It is worth noting that we designed this representation with very specific goals – to encourage brainstorming around a successful rural business model. Our hope was to communicate what was important about the internet bar both for our research participants and for our colleagues. We were not shy about our goals – to copy, improvise, alter only enough from the original ecosystems to build new market opportunities, ones that hopefully retained the vibrancy these businesses gave to their local communities (even including tense familial relations).
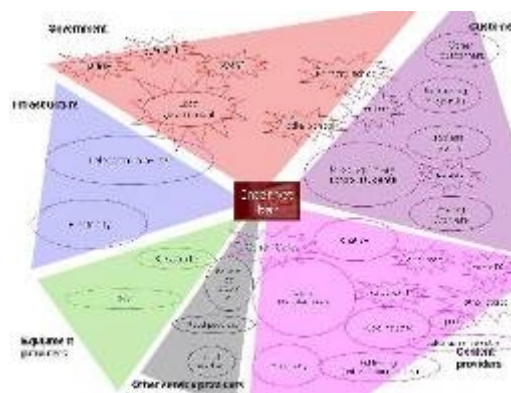
**7 Internet bar ecosystem in China**

In another example, Mateas et al., we moved from stories of how individuals spent time in their homes (with and without their PCs) to develop a representation of middle class American home life as a collective interrelation of time, space and social contact for the family as a whole. The familiar focus on the day in a life of a person at home faded as we highlighted the interlocking relationships of home space, computing and home-based activities.

Let's delve into this specific example: The framework we used encoded and juxtaposed three characteristics of life in US homes, with two-parent households and kids between 2 and 12 years old: time spent in the public space of the home (kitchen-family room complex), that time is broken into relatively small contiguous bits and that often when one person is in that space, at least one other is too. That is, people are together in the public space of the home seamlessly transitioning from one activity to another.

Again, the representation was developed for specific purposes – boosting design of home-based computing devices. It distilled just enough of the lived experiences of middle-

class Americans collectively in their lived home experience to simplify the research data and facilitate the design process.
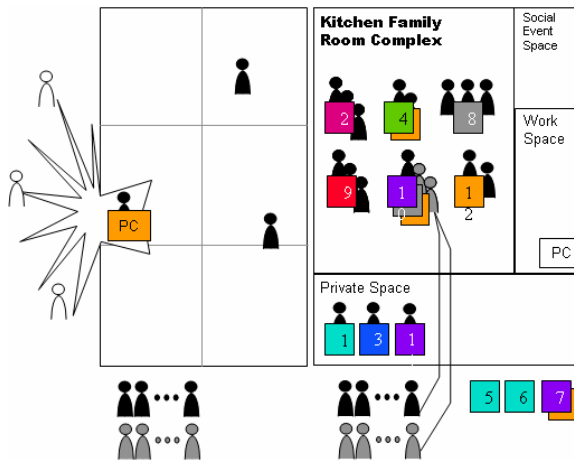
Figure 8 Generative framework representing collective family life. Left side: imagined home life based on PC design. Right side: home topology as described in text and relative placement of PC. Circa 1995-1996.

This is only one representation of the home experience. There are others. We found this one particularly generative within Intel. It's fair to the families, if a bit structuralist. Moreover, it is possible, if desired, to acquire aggregate sample statistics for these variables. However, the same statistics, unless considered in relation to one another would not "tell the contextual story" as well as this simple framework. And in fact, without the framework, the likelihood of asking these particular questions around this particular interrelationship would be low. The irony is that the people were also representative of the people in the corporation: middle class Americans with kids between 2 and 12.

As we experiment with how to represent these collective realities, it also becomes clear that we must distill our findings such that we present plans for corporate action, not complete thorough representations – in short, just enough data to lead our colleagues along to make them effective, but not so much so as to put them to sleep.

Each of these examples built from rich ethnographic research on shared lives to distill what we argue was a sufficiently faithful representation, one designed for corporate action. They accommodated corporate interests, but not, we argue, at the expense of the local. These representations, then, became the mutually generative representations, be they reports, brainstorming sessions or product concepts, that simultaneously supported the needs of the corporation and honestly addressed the tensions, needs and desires of local ecosystems.

A Call for Sufficiently Faithful Representations

We cannot give up the hope for more faithful representations of people in the context of their relationships – a form of knowledge forgotten or dismissed by the atomizing

corporate science of market research. We need to do more than bring anthropological field methods and critical theory into the corporate environment. We must actively engage in both the fields of our research and the fields of our work. We must play the role of the trickster to thwart the easy reduction of new communities of practice into markets of discrete purchasing individuals and their analytical tribes, the market segments. We must actively engage our colleagues with sufficiently faithful tales of the field so that we can bring about mutually beneficial products, services, solutions to the real worlds of those whom we study and those with whom we work.

Here is the difference between academic anthropology and corporate anthropology. We must make sufficiently faithful representations, over and over again. For this audience and that. And even in Powerpoint. We must distill what is faithful AND relevant to each of our audiences. And we must generate action of a different kind than theory making. Donna Haraway can stop at the call for radical feminist cyborgs. But we must build them, on Intel processors with high profit margins and in high volume. This is, in the end, the actions by which we are valued.

As we increasingly work with people whose lived experiences are ever more distant from ours, then appropriately and faithfully representing them and their ecosystems becomes ever more pressing. Our sufficiently faithful representations may depart from "the answer" commonly sought in corporations. They may also rely on holistically collected data analyzed both on behalf of the population and the corporation. Thus, we not only do "fieldwork in the field," we also do "fieldwork in the corporation". This interplay of the field with the forum of the corporation defines the synthesis of our work and creates structures that can support the generation of new ideas and innovations that should have mutual value.

And yet, in our experience, this work is very difficult. If it succeeds, it represents a classic Kuhnian paradigm shift, in which the prevailing theoretical view of aggregate sample statistics will wane. In the meanwhile, the continued corporate emphasis on the consuming individual unintentionally yet inexorably leads us towards a contracted, constricted and constrained approach to the development of technologies for the majority of the global population. The corporation, being larger, more prevalent, with extant profit motives and the means of acting on these motives, engages us in a benign oppression of the people and economies we seek to represent. It forces us to use its terms not only to understand what we have seen in the field, but also to communicate it to our colleagues.

This paper ends with a conundrum: As the lived experiences of those we research move farther from those in the corporation, our representations become increasingly vital to both communities. And yet, as this distance grows, the corporate pressure to regularize, categorize and normalize the lives of those we research into extant data structures also increases. As the tension escalates, so do the needs for mutually appropriate representations that as yet are in their infancy.

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