



The EPIC 2012 Conversation

MELISSA CEFKIN
IBM Research

MARIA BEZAITIS
Intel

ALEX MACK
Pitney Bowes

KEN ANDERSON
Intel

ED LIEBOW
Battelle

When we offer *something* to another person, community, or organization, we create the conditions for some sort of value to be created. This proposition about value creation remains at the heart of all ethnographic work in industry, and it has framed EPIC's exploration of Renewal, the theme set for this year's conference in Savannah. What does it mean to do something that is valued? How is that value organized and shaped in everyday life, in the workplace, in ethnographic practice itself, from methodologies to questions of ethics? As a broad and diverse community of practitioners, is there such a thing as "our" value? Should "we" expect ever to standardize it in those terms? These were just some of the provocative questions raised by the content shared at EPIC 2012. Indeed, both the opening and closing keynotes demonstrated this complicated dance of renewal and value creation in very personal and specific ways. Architect Emily Pilloton opened this year's conference with a story about how she and Matthew Miller, her partner at Project H, provided a group of high school students in Bertie County, North Carolina with the skills and tools to begin to rejuvenate their community. Emily and Matthew, who is also an architect, lived in Bertie County for three years, working unpaid as teachers at the local high school. There they designed a learning curriculum, studio environment, and shaped day-to-day interactions with students and the community that produced a set of compelling physical environments for the County. Emily's story, inspirational on so many levels, raised additional important and troubling questions, including what kinds of value are realized on either end of this relationship between Project H and Bertie County, and how does that value unfold over time and for whom?

In his closing keynote, Philip Delves Broughton stressed the inevitability of dealing with value in terms of sales. We're always selling, argued Delves Broughton, as he observed that sales are tied, inextricably, to personal worth. If you believe you have something to offer – a thought to explore with

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others, an opinion to advance, knowledge to impart, a creation of your own making to share – then you should be concerned with how you turn it into value. Value is created by representing that something with clarity. Pitches, Broughton reminds us, are often refined over time. EPIC is dedicated to pursuing the worth of understanding social phenomena in the world. As Broughton encourages, we must represent our work clearly for others to see. In this piece, we aim to capture a view onto the conversation at EPIC 2012 and to open up the conversations further to examination and debate, a core commitment of EPIC.

Presentations at this year's EPIC included a variety of looks at the social phenomenon of value-creation in the world. They also exposed fissures and tensions, ways in which meaning and action can be undermined and sometimes re-appropriated. Participants also were exhorted to reveal and justify the mechanisms through which ethnographic examinations turn observations, insights and thoughts into worth.

This year's conference was rich with resonating strings looping through the varied presentations. Both **time** and **place** made strong appearances in this year's presentations. **Openness** was another theme explored in a variety of ways. Concerns for **naming** – from labels to metaphors – entered the discussion, often from the side and sometimes about the very nature of ethnographic work in industry. **Praxis**, including both its location at the intersection of method and theory, and its ethical dimensions, was reconsidered directly and indirectly throughout. And in an encompassing manner, this year's conference theme, **renewal**, was richly revealed. We'll touch on a few of these themes below.

TIME AND PLACE

The first session of papers started with endings, and with it renewal. Drawing on a traditional anthropological interpretation of rituals as ways to mark endings and renew beginnings, Salvador suggested that businesses, too, should think about endings. To look towards the right futures argues for designing for endings. Ladner explicitly focused on temporalities and the specific benefits of ethnography in revealing significant markings of time. This has special relevance in technical practice and product design. Contrasting analytic findings from big data and the flatness of digital time she argued that ethnography provides the kind of description necessary for sorting our temporal confusions. Patel, with references ranging from French critical history to modern day sausage stands in Chicago, argued that places can be invested with meaning to serve as a refuge from temporal dissonance. Aiken examined a distinctive case of designing for endings, how NASA is transitioning beyond the end of the space shuttle program. Shifts in place and time were also explored by Leonard, who described the Occupy DC movement's reconfiguration over time from McPherson Square to a digital community. Places of work also made a strong appearance, from the ways that mobile devices are reconfiguring office spaces (Watts-Englert et al.) to the signifying practices of putting post-its and binders in specific locations to manage the process of medical record keeping explored by Vinkhuysen.

The conception and representation of space and place was emphasized in a whole Pecha Kucha session that offered a journey through richly visualized and acutely observed places. From Grenoble's exploration of mountain tops laid bare by mining to the sites of riot in the London neighborhood of Peckham (Roberts), the efforts of people were shown to be reconstructing these places of devastation. Venkataramani's sensitive exploration of how the Highline in New York City unwittingly exposed the backsides and normally unseen infrastructures of places suggested that it reinscribes social space by opening up new possibilities for expression. Such normally unseen and

socially reconstructed spaces were echoed in Athalye et al.'s examination of changes to the city of Mumbai, with its juxtaposed blocks of rich and poor and corridors in-between.

OPENNESS

Another theme to make an appearance was that of openness. Pilloton's hands-on design/build learning projects opened vistas and career paths for high school students in a battered rural setting. Dornadic and Conand reminded us that knowledge production is inevitably shaped by whether we operate in an "open" or "closed" fashion, and offered a conceptual provocation about open source and open access ethnographic research. More tangibly, "open systems" have become a focus for our research. Beers and Yeager explored new open configurations of family, while Cefkin explored both the opportunities and tensions arising through open work systems, particularly those enabled through marketplaces for digital labor. We also had a chance to consider how renewal can require openness. Ichikawa and Tamura projected a vision of interlinked localities around the globe as a path to renew a fishing community destroyed by the 2011 tsunami.

NAMING

The labels we use for ourselves as well as those used by others became a topic of discussion across many sessions. In the panel discussion about the intersection of research and design, Mauldin, Evenson, Sherry, and the audience struggled with terms such as "user" and "participant" used in describing the subjects of our research. Provocatively, Ensworth brought up how we label ourselves in asking us to consider opening up ethnographic practice in industry to standards of evaluation and naming a body of knowledge and embodied practices through certification procedures. Do we in fact want to (or ought we to) give ourselves badges that proclaim both who we are and what our qualifications are?

Labels serve other functions as well. Vinkhuysen spoke of how physical labels in medical records communicate to physicians and office staff with an effectiveness that has not been matched with Electronic Medical Records. Gregory expounded on metaphorical labels and explained how words have power in the process of renewal, or as in her case of Detroit, as barriers to renewal.

PRAXIS (AGAIN)

Not surprisingly, reflections on purpose and impact of our work ran throughout the conference. In terms of our practices, Dornadic and Conand's challenge to open ethnographic data sparked conversation around ethics, particularly around the sharing of data that comes from individuals. In the same session, Hammershøy and Madsen shined a light on Badiou's 'truth procedures' as a test for ethical research conducted in business context. They posited that we should understand ethics as relational rather than explicitly right or wrong, demanding that the ethnographers' ethics be driven through the active positioning of insight rather than the passive protection of subjects. Segelström and Holmlid used a very specific place-based event – the Advent fair in Gamla Linköping, Sweden – for a comparative test of three different practices of research and design: social anthropology, interaction design, and a mobile application. De Paula and his colleagues provided a carefully executed case study

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of how even the most vibrantly visualized patterns of data mining will be more fully understood by asking the actors for interpretive help.

Beyond these implications of our work, there were numerous efforts to bridge theory and practice. Jones spoke of the “chain reaction that occurs when theory and practice are brought together,” and many authors sought that chemistry. Lieskovsky, Hill and Ramsey-Elliot brought Mauss’s conception of Total Social Fact to bear on understanding a culture through the lens of a single object, and argued for reusing such key objects across research. Heine utilized Bourdieu’s concept of social capital as a lens through which to identify project goals and the deeper beliefs and issues her interviewees spoke about regarding the local music scene. Squires and Mack used praxis as a frame for pedagogy, inviting discussion on how the interplay of theory and practice can be taught in graduate programs.

Our broader goals were questioned by Venkataramani who prodded us to mark the daylight between ‘truth’ and ‘utility’ as our ultimate research objectives. Such discussions raise that question of the theoretical versus the methodological. Indeed, the notion of praxis, for many, remains troubling. Why not just change “praxis” in the title of the conference to “practice” we often hear? The reason is that we firmly believe that theory and practice are mutually informing. We believe that the value we bring through providing ethnographic ways of knowing comes not just from our attention to the actions people take (including ourselves) and the behaviors they evidence, but more importantly from the frames of ways of knowing, from the theories that inform understanding.

TO 2013 AND BEYOND

Last year’s Board opening to the proceedings began with the following crucial remark: “EPIC was created as a place for industry-based ethnographic practitioners to come together and take part in a conversation.” In many respects this statement crystallizes the great ambitions of this organization from the start. Indeed, it is no small accomplishment to succeed in bringing together a growing and diverse group of practitioners from around the world to keep a conversation going over eight years, a conversation that might never take place inside the organizations that sponsor many attendees to participate in EPIC. To reach a point where people in Europe, Asia and Latin America express interest in establishing regional incarnations is evidence of this success.

Alongside this enthusiasm that has been engendered in so many parts of the world, the incoming Board recognized the urgent need to work hard to be clear on what it is that EPIC has to offer in light of the growth that has taken place, and in recognition of the many organizations that have chosen to invest in ethnographic work, but maintain an often fickle relation to its value. In order to focus on the task of clarifying what it is that EPIC has to offer to its participants, attendees and sponsors alike moving ahead, the incoming Board took the decision, prior to the Savannah conference, to not extend the EPIC brand to regional meetings outside of the planned annual conference at this time. This decision was a difficult one, but it was made with the intent to work to establish EPIC as an organization that has a stronger core from which it can extend a brand that is accompanied by a clear sense of its value. As a Board we redirected to seeing the primary value of our praxis in terms of understanding social phenomena in a way that’s actionable by business. In the interests of this core focus, the Board intends to work towards three key objectives: 1) to continue to produce a high-quality program shaped by more explicit criteria for content, 2) to rationalize the operating complexity that has grown out of the last eight years of activity, and 3) to explore new business models that enable EPIC to create value above and beyond the annual conference activity itself. These objectives will not be met

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within a single year. We intend to update conference participants at the annual event and to reflect as openly as we can on what we believe are the stakes for this type of change and what we believe are the opportunities for us all.

We'll end this opening with EPIC's renewed purpose statement: The Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference illuminates social phenomena through theory and practice. We explore, debate and engage knowledge production in the digital age. While business is a primary context for this activity, the effects of ethnographic work are far-reaching. EPIC is committed to the view that theory and practice inform one another, and that through our work in a large range of settings, we transform industry and the world.

Please enjoy this year's proceedings, and we hope to see you all in London in 2013.