RENEWING OUR DISCIPLINE

Framed by Experience: From user experience to strategic incitement

ARVIND VENKATARAMANI
CHRISTOPHER AVERY
SonicRim

Ethnographic and other related practices in industry focus - for a variety of historical reasons - primarily on studying the experiences of individuals/institutions as consumers/users. We suggest that this framing limits our work to descriptive forms of knowledge, and renders invisible larger social and institutional changes that nevertheless have an impact on the domains we study, and whose invisibility curtails the forms of innovation we can support. While a variety of practitioners are indeed broadening the range and scope of their work, we contend that for this expansion to succeed sustainably in our community it must also incorporate a discourse on values, and engage with other forms of knowing outside the frame of consumers and users, by encompassing context and engaging in a values discourse.

INTRODUCTION

The practice of ethnography in the corporation has most commonly been justified with a narrative something like this: "You make products for people. A better understanding of people will help you make better products. But it isn't enough to just ask people what they want, in a lab or focus group – you need to understand them in their context—their homes and workplaces. You need to understand how *they* see and experience the world. Guess what? We ethnographers know how to do exactly that! Hire us! We'll show you what people are *really* like. How do we do that? Well, we observe people, participate in their activities, interview them in a certain style, and we have our own special ways of doing analysis."

Now this is not to say that this is what ethnography *is*, but this baseline formulation is how it's now commonly understood by non-ethnographers. Note that this is a formulation based largely on methods: the most tangible and measurable aspect of our work, and historically the least contested and the least alien to corporate ways of knowledge-making. It is the one that least surfaces epistemological differences from other disciplines in the corporation, and appears to be the most scientific and "objective." Notice the focus on experience: the claim made here is the nature of people's experiences vis a vis a domain can be understood in terms of their behaviors, beliefs, values and, occasionally cultures – and ultimately expressed, prioritized and related to in terms of 'needs'; in many cases, "ethnography" is used as a short-hand for contextual, qualitative research. It is thus outward facing: the ethnographer is positioned as the intermediary between the corporation and the real, helping the corporation understand the world of its customers.

This format is by no means the only version of ethnographic practice: indeed, inward-looking ethnographies of work were one of the earliest strands of corporate ethnographic research [e.g. Suchman 1983; Zuboff 1989; Heath and Luff 1996; Orr 1996]; paralleling the shift in management ideologies, the focus of ethnographic research has since shifted from improving process and practice

to enabling innovation. Lately, ethnographic practitioners have been part of consultancies that influence business & product strategy (Depaula 2009), organizational change (Holme 2010), and other innovation capabilities.

In short: ethnography is positioned in the corporation as a way of understanding people and their experiences, and thence leading to implications for design or other action. This positioning is not without its downsides, nor are we the first to note this. Dourish (Dourish 2006) challenged the efficacy of 'implications for design' as a framework for understanding and transmitting knowledge. In particular, what is lost in this above narrative is the analytical commitment: "What is missed is the extent that ethnography is always, inherently, a perspectival view, and that this perspectival quality is critical to what ethnography is;" and reflexivity, the most significant effect of which is to introduce criticality about the nature of knowledge produced through the research activity.

We, the authors, contend that there are further casualties of the "study of experience to produce implications for design" framing:

1. that the focus on the experiences of individuals or other user/consumer units renders invisible certain kinds of challenges faced by society;
2. that this invisibility creates problem spaces that are not owned by any one economic/innovation actor, and thus leaves open spaces for innovation that are both essential for society's well-being and largely unattended to;
3. that a turn towards these problem spaces cannot succeed without a values discourse in the corporation; and
4. that since it is highly unlikely that corporate/industry ethnography will ever return to its "classical" form, ethnographic practitioners must engage in other forms of knowing if they are to engage with innovation in these big, society-level problem spaces.

We are aware that our commentary is aimed at a diverse community of practice and, per William Gibson, the future is already here but unevenly distributed; there are those among us who are already engaging with social-scale problems, some ethnographers have managed to create an ethnographic program in the organizations they work for, and the dialectic between design and research methods is evolving. At the same time, there are those who are still struggling to justify and establish their roles in terms of the aforementioned narrative. And those who are established within the narrative face competition from other disciplines – notably traditional market research – who also claim to do ethnography because they have co-opted traditional and emerging qualitative research methods. Finally, the role of descriptive research methods as a means to innovation is being reduced due to the development and now widespread adoption of what are called "projective" methods that are better at generating visions of futures and opportunities – a claim that only makes sense if the methodological narrative above is taken to be the definitive construction of ethnography.

This leads us to our final contention: that the continued existence and evolution of ethnographic practice in industry depends not on the creation and policing of disciplinary boundaries, or even one of bridging the qualitative/quantitative divide (Patel 2011) – those are probably necessary – but on a departure from the purely descriptive and methodological narrative outlined above to one based on forms of knowing and problematizing.

We are aware that several of these themes have been covered before, in some form; our intent is to bring them together in order to highlight some foundational issues, and to encourage discourse

about them. In what follows, we will ask more questions than suggest answers; given the nature of our work, we believe this is entirely appropriate.

FRAMED BY EXPERIENCE: THE PROBLEM

In order to understand the limitations of the experience frame, we begin by unpacking the assumptions underlying user/consumer research; make explicit the power structures surrounding our work; and examine some consequences of such framing and power context. Much of this has been discussed before in some form – what we aim to do here is show that these consequences limit our work in certain ways.

Axioms

The primary axioms of any user/consumer[1] research practice are:
1. Consumers/users are people conceived of primarily in relation to the things they use or consume, and this is the most salient feature of their lives to study.
2. The best way to understand users and consumers is to enact the appropriate combination of observation and expression, preferably in the context of their lives so as to limit the influence of the research setting. Ethnography suggests a few ways to do this well, but is not the only source of methods.
3. Understanding is achieved by first documenting and then analyzing the lives and contexts of users, and communicating those descriptions to people who will make decisions based on such knowledge; the ethnographic / user research discipline is primarily a descriptive practice that mediates between producers and consumers.
4. The purpose of such study is to reveal people's "needs," based on which the producers/institutions (sponsoring the research) will attempt to direct its efforts to satisfy such needs.
5. An understanding of needs will help shorten the socio-technical gap (the gap between what people do and what technology does) (Ackerman, 2000) by shortening the descriptive gap between what producers know about consumers and what consumers actually do.

Taken together, these axioms – for that is what they are – constitute a frame of inquiry. Each has limitations it imposes on the resulting frame. We will take them in turn.

1: "Users"

The user/consumer definition of people has been critiqued and problematized by Cohen (Cohen 2005); starting with the way that sampling and products are connected:

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[1] We hence will use 'users' to refer to both users and consumers, though the two have slightly different connotations and are used by different disciplines/industries.

"study users of X in order to understand the phenomenon of X, where we can replace X with "mobile phones" or "toothbrushes" or "SUVs" or "Internet-based investment banking tools." We identify a thing that we want to study, then look for "users" of that thing… One assumption at work here… is that, in order to conduct useful research, one must study people who can be considered a viable market for goods and services… Another assumption—in some ways far more problematic—is that users of X are the only people who can tell us about the social life of X." (Cohen 2005)

There are two major problems with this: the first, that

"it draws on a narrow band of people (the people who might buy, and who have bought in the past) in order to design the landscape of possibility for a far broader set of people… "users," as a concept, occludes most of the ways in which people interact with things, and with each other." (Cohen 2005)

That is, the "user" frame limits the interactional phenomena visible to research whilst also limiting who are considered part of the phenomena. Other than the fact that it may be methodologically worthwhile to include non product-user populations in the research sample for purposes of strange-making (e.g. Ljungblad & Holmquist 2007, Djajadiningrat et al 2000), the exclusion of populations from an analysis of effects and consequences is very much a moral issue; for instance, see (LeDantec et al 2009).

The second problem is that such framing assumes, and further naturalizes, market logic – the logic of exchange – as the dominant mode of relationship between the consumers of research output ("producers") and the consumers of their products ("users"), thus eliding aspects of the relationship that have to do with civic commons and power hierarchies. We will return to this point later.

2 & 3: Description

The primary outputs of user research are accounts of people's behavior; such accounts are taken – by the producer/institution – to essentially be descriptions of people; the impact of such research is taken to be the impact of having these accounts. This privileges the account over the process, and thus ends up positioning the ethnographer/researcher primarily as a fieldworker and creates a "fetishism of the real:"

"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." (Nafus & Anderson 2006)

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The natural progression of positioning the researcher as a pipeline of knowledge about 'real people' is that for some institutions, the researcher later becomes primarily the facilitator of the observation of real people by institutions – like tour guides for the real; this is already happening, and even recommended by some (Howard & Mortensen 2009). The consequence of this shift is that the analytical/interpretive aspect of the researcher's role is replaced by that of a facilitator of analysis in other people; this requires a different set of skills, and it is not clear that the user research community knows how to do this well, nor that such skills are equally distributed in the community.

Of course, not all user research is about documenting and describing what "naturally happens" – in addition to laboratory methods like usability, an increasing integration between design and research processes means that user research as a discipline is finding ways to stage encounters between people and products under a variety of circumstances, often corresponding to stages of the product design process. The purpose of this still remains to describe 'real usage behavior', with the understanding that as the lifecycle of product development proceeds, the research questions will become increasingly narrower and concerned with the increasingly fine details of usage and interaction. That is, these encounters are ways to create certain kinds of accounts – they are meant to identify problems with the people-product interactions in a way that suggests resolutions – and not critically, as means of creating new kinds of knowledge and new forms of problems. That is, such encounters are not used as epistemic moves.

This does not have to be so: description is but one form of creating knowledge, and in a later section we will examine some alternatives. The ethnographic/user research community may have its origins in a largely descriptive & interpretive practice, but in the contexts we operate in, there is no reason we shouldn't move beyond it.

4: "Needs"

That a user research study should end in an account of the needs of the users is almost universally taken for granted, and rarely even debated after the project definition. "Needs," however, is not a neutral term.

Firstly, the use of the word "needs" implies an element of necessity to the desires described in user research accounts. (This then leads to ways of gauging the relative priority of such necessities, and the prioritized needs list is a common fixture in research outputs the most common measure of which is the estimated impact on the users – not an entirely unproblematic metric.) This implied necessity has the effect of making an implicit claim that the users will pay for the fulfillment of these needs, and that these are the aspects of the user's lives that the producer should attempt to impact because, after all, it's what the users consider necessary.

Thus, "needs" functions to justify product decisions by deferring the rationale to descriptions of users' desires instead of situating it in the persons of the decision makers. It is thus simultaneously a political tool (within the context of the institution) and an economic one (suggesting the market relevance of desire fulfillment.)

"Needs" also has a positive spin: after all, research is not commissioned to find out "don't needs," and negative results are not the norm. This creates a warping of language: a common refrain heard by one of the authors (Arvind) at the beginning of his research career was to frame problems in positive terms: *"don't tell us what* not *to do, tell us what we* should *do."* Leaving aside the fact that not all negative

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language can be restated well in positive terms and that such transformation thus incurs information loss, this position assumes that the primary basis of making design decisions should be what users want, and not what they often end up getting as a consequence (unintended consequences being an early theme of corporate ethnographic research). That is, the focus on needs renders peripheral the *effects* that products have, especially those effects that are not part of a direct interaction with the products.

This disjunction is especially problematic, since it makes it difficult or impossible for a researcher to question the necessity of the producer's products in the lives of the users, because such problematization questions the very basis of the researcher-producer relationship, and the point of the producer's existence. It is not clear to the authors why this should be so, and this paper will not attempt to explore the issue; nevertheless, this means that the people in the institution who *do* engage in such questioning are not likely to be motivated by user research, but, as in the case of the outdoor clothing and gear company Patagonia, why an environmental sustainability initiative (in this case encouraging its customers to recycle/repair before considering a new purchase) appears to come from of the values of its founder, and not from consumer research. (Aaker 2011).

5: The Socio-technical Gap

This last axiom acts as a justification for the focus on needs, and more broadly on the necessity of studying users. Ackerman (Ackerman 2000) introduced the notion of the *socio-technical gap* as the gap between the design of technology and the actual practices of people around that technology. The default purpose of user research is assumed to help shorten this gap, by helping make products more closely fit the practices of users – which assumes such shortening is both possible and desirable, the history of science-technology and media studies notwithstanding.

> "Ackerman critiques the intuition that people adopt and adapt technologies because the technologies are poorly designed, and that better designed technologies would obviate the need for such adaptation and appropriation. By contrast, ethnographic perspectives suggest a different perspective on the creative processes by which people put technology into practice. In particular, these are seen as natural consequences of everyday action, not as a problem to be eliminated." (Dourish 2006)

The idea that a product should better reflect the realities and practices of its users is not in and of itself problematic, and is undoubtedly necessary to a degree. However, the 'must narrow' position on the socio-technical gap limits the forms of design programs imagined and conceived. As Dourish points out: *"By introducing and focusing on the notion of the gap, Ackerman suggests not that it is the fundamental problem to be solved, but rather that it is the fundamental phenomenon to be understood."* (Dourish 2006). Problematizing the gap opens up new forms of design: an example of this re-imagining may be found in (Dourish 2010).

Stated in other words: behaviors and desires are to be problematized with respect to their context, but the context itself is not a focus of problematization. This is the origin of the invisibility of certain scales of problems, and we will discuss this shortly.

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Power Structure

Most user research happens in a power structure established by the management and marketing disciplines, modeled as projects tied to one or more product units (though what a product/business unit is, varies widely). There are politically charged organizational, budget, timing, and epistemic consequences of this model, but they are both well discussed (e.g. Thomas and Lang 2007; Flynn et al 2009) and less relevant for the present discussion than the *fact of the power structure itself*. This has two consequences: first, that inquiry is bounded in specific ways, even if such bounding is not what is best for discovering opportunities and being innovative. For instance:

> If, for example, we had been working for a financial institution, we might have been constrained to develop innovations scoped by 'financial management technology'—despite our reframe early on pointing to a more appropriate, alternate entry point for the discovery process, leading to our refined focus for one concept on innovations in 'earning.' (Cliver et al 2010)

Ultimately, of course, all corporate user research will need to impact the economic bottom-line positively. However, to argue that we take our practice beyond this historical bounding doesn't mean we abandon the profit-making imperative, just that we think about innovations in more distal, social terms first. For instance, the Khan Academy started out as a personal favor to some nephews and now is a business leading a disruption in primary and secondary education.

Second, the fact that user researchers/ethnographers are rarely in a position to craft research programs as they see fit means that, for the discipline as a whole, a power strategy is indicated if such epistemic bounding is to be overcome.

Consequences: Invisibility

To sum up, the consequences of the "user experience" framing are:
   a. Only some kinds of knowledge are produced
   b. Everything must be accounted for / represented in terms of stories of individuals e.g. personas and segments; research is primarily a descriptive exercise
   c. The 'real' is fetishized; ethnographers turn into fieldwork 'tour' guides
   d. Extremely hard to look at boundary cases… the sort of stuff that only becomes visible through longitudinal observation
   e. A bias towards positivity; needs evoke fulfillment and novelty; outcomes are subordinate to opportunities
   f. Everything is seen in terms of the consumer-producer relationship; more specifically, as extensions of the particular existing consumer-producer relationships
   g. Context is treated as external and unchanging; instead of treating it as an object of study, and part of a chain of causation
   h. Assumes the sociotechnical gap is a problem to be solved; not a phenomenon to be engaged with

The sum total of these consequences is to make invisible certain kinds of problems. These are one of:

1. Problems faced by populations excluded from the research by virtue of not being direct users or consumers of the products forming the research focus;
2. Problems that cannot be solved by a particular product, or which arise due to the interactions between products created by different businesses;
3. Problems that challenge the dominant narrative of the institution's purpose;
4. Problems arising out of design/business decisions that do not impact usage behaviors;
5. Problems arising out of features of the users' context, especially at scales of complexity apparently beyond the domain of action of the relevant products;
6. Problems that do not exist yet, but can be envisioned based on design and business decisions and a knowledge of the social lives of products; and
7. Problems of society whose solution involves significant civic and political action, which are at least partly created by businesses.

Thus the automobile industry treats suburbanization as a reason to continue to make and sell vehicles to individuals and families, and not as an outcome of their business and products; thus, it is primarily non-profit organizations like Mozilla & EFF study and are responsible for innovations in electronic privacy even though the technologies involved aren't made by them; why the tensions between developing and selling new products and creating ecological waste are not normally seen as a topic for user research; why technology and, lately, design – instead of social contracts and political change – are seen as the most promising avenue for social innovation.

These kinds of problems are not hard to notice for user researchers and ethnographers; it is merely that the framing of our roles often sets these problems outside of our work's practice and discourse. (It also means that the primary difference between user research and other kinds of ethnographic practice in industry can be traced to the kinds of problems that are considered to be legitimate foci of inquiry: ethnographies of business/service, for instance, are legitimated from inception as trying to explicate social contracts and practices within institutions.)

Engaging with these problems will involve leaving the "experience" narrative of research; this is not easy, and naturally creates dissonance between a research team and its clients if not done well. We expect that in some workplaces, these kinds of problems are taboo, especially if it conflicts with deeply-held assumptions around the purpose of the company or the profit motive. Making these problems visible also introduces conflicts with multiple dependent layers of planning that a typical research project sits within, and questions that suggest rethinking the entire enterprise bump up roughly against quarterly budgets, product planning "gates" and so on.

Ultimately, this creates problem spaces that no one owns except entrepreneurs who – because they answer primarily to themselves – can align values, purpose and methods or, as the meme goes, work to a 'triple bottom line': people, planet and profits.

Given that we aren't all entrepreneurs with control of the direction of our work, or going to be, how can we make these kinds of problems visible, and worth engaging with? Foresight is an emerging practice, but in an organization that doesn't already have a long-term orientation supported by leadership, it's a non-starter. We suggest that a values discourse is a key element of creating a discourse around these (institutionally invisible but individually obvious) social problems, and a way of overcoming the constraints imposed by the corporate context.

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FRAMING A DISCOURSE ON VALUES

Discussions of "values" have a lengthy history in academic anthropology, from informing the education of budding anthropologists (Robins and De Vita 1985), to contemporary discussions of how cultural values shape the extrinsic value of objects and commodities (Eiss and Pedersen 2002). The values of an anthropologist shape his or her practice, and the values of research participants are often the key to understanding and representing larger interplays of culture.

Why, when the notion of cultural values is so critical to our colleagues in academia, do we not bring it to the fore of our practice in industry? What explanation do we have for such an anemic discourse on values in our corner of the field?

By making cultural values central to our mission, we can encourage corporate research sponsors to innovate not just product or service value, but moral and social purpose. This requires crafting insights that go beyond immediate consumer needs or economic benefits to the organization. This refocusing will enable corporations to think about *how* they into forms of social renewal that go beyond corporate social responsibility, to create shared value throughout the extended value chain to which they belong.

The word "values" has three valences in this context, all of which are pertinent to our mission of moving out of the experience frame and towards a context-focused corporate ethnography. These are: the value structures of the practitioner, the value structures of the participant, and the value structures of the corporation sponsoring the research.

The first mode is the value structures of the practitioner. The basic exercise of reflexivity, central to the training and effectiveness of an ethnographic practitioner, is fundamentally one of examining taken-for-granted values. We cannot understand others until we untangle our observations from our own ingrained judgments. (Agar 1996).

The second of these modes is the value structures of the participant. While the user experience is informed by deeply held values, we are often inexplicit in our pursuit of understanding how deep value structures arise and influence participants' decision making. This lapse is a consequence of privileging 'experience' and 'needs' over developing a rich sense of context. While the experience frame can contribute to beneficial outcomes at the level of the individual, it lacks both the incisive depth to touch on 'core values,' and the scope to examine the larger social forces at work that influence and inform them. User experience research does lead to actionable insights, however, a reframing towards a more 'value-conscious' corporate ethnography could have the dual benefits of enhancing not only the outcomes of product-oriented, user-oriented studies, but also positioning the corporation to have broader impact on the social landscape, for the greater good of many.

This notion ties directly to the third mode of 'values' addressed here—those of the corporation that sponsors a given research endeavor. Corporate Social Responsibility is one instantiation of corporatized values, albeit with an explicit focus on responsible stewardship and adherence to standards under societal pressure. More critical to our vision is CSR's recent evolution, "Creating Shared Value" (CSV) (Porter and Kramer 2011).

The concept of value embedded in CSV is not the top-of-mind association with monetary values, which is inextricably connected to short-term economic thinking, a focus of hyper-capitalism. Instead, CSV reflects a sea change in how corporations are reframing their connection to society. CSV is predicated on a growing assumption that the corporation can and should better align its values with those whom they serve, and with those in whose communities they operate. Moreover, by entering

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alignment with the stakeholders in their extended value chain as a means of driving business, the corporation stands to benefit not only their bottom line, but also to tie those economic benefits to commensurate social benefits.

As ethnographers, we are well situated to participate in and help to grow this novel re-envisioning of the relationship of the corporation to society. In this scenario, our role could grow from purveyors of consumer insights to encompass serving as brokers and translators between stakeholders, facilitating communication between corporations and communities, and identifying opportunities for communities and corporations to co-create *shared value*, in this emerging and profound sense.

Crafting a practice around understanding the values of users has the additional consequence of extricating us from the "experience" frame, and enabling us to step into "impact" frames. This modulation allows the researcher to refocus inquiry on motivation, context, and social forces, rather than assuming that the *default motivation* for the business is to satisfy user needs. By talking about values, one can have a reason to talk about aspects of human experience one would otherwise not be motivated or authorized to based on the project brief. Critically, this values-centered perspective can help make visible the problems enumerated in the previous section, but more importantly, empowers the researcher and their clients to identify heretofore unseen opportunities to address problems and innovate new products and solutions to service users.

A cross-disciplinary parallel to the value-focused practice we are proposing is already extant in HCI research in the form of 'value sensitive design'. Value sensitive design (henceforth VSD) is a theoretically-grounded approach to technology design that pays particular regard to the values of stakeholders, both direct and indirect, throughout the research and design process, based on the position that there is an interactional relationship between human values and technology (Borning and Muller 2012: 1125). VSD is a movement, taking root and influencing design, driving discourse in the field and shaping its future course.

Like CSV, VSD is a clear indicator of the way the winds are blowing, *vis-à-vis* the twin roles of values and empathy in shaping how savvy corporations will approach business as the decade unfolds. As we observed above, our discipline is well suited to lead from the front as this movement takes hold, but only if we are actively revisiting our methodologies and assumptions, and constructing our own values discourse.

OTHER FORMS OF KNOWING

As stated before, user/consumer research – including ethnography – is primarily a descriptive practice, with origins in documentary and interpretive methods. If we see our discipline as being primarily defined by such an orientation, this is not a problem. On the other hand, if we want to define ourselves in terms of the impact we can have on corporations and other institutions, we must consider other forms of knowing, and the skills that those entail.

Weber's exploration of the hermeneutic device verstehen—interpretive knowledge as a rigorous way of knowing, as distinct and apart from observational methods—resonates still with this framing of ethnography. We have new ways to 'do' verstehen—new forms of data (Anderson 2009), new ways of engagement with people ('crowdsourcing'/'mob'/mobile-device methods), new ways to do sensemaking (advancements in visualization), and new theories and understanding of human behavior. Some of this finds its way into the domain of impact (design, change management, etc.) Yet the

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dominant mode of user research knowing is still the interview/observation mode (because we continue to privilege the study of individual behavior.)

Epistemic orientations: Truth vs. Utility – The first issue here is the contrast between Truth vs. Utility as different epistemic orientations. A Truth orientation is primarily concerned with the validity of statements and propositions, whereas a Utility orientation is concerned with the use of statements and propositions to create new perspectives. The fetishism with the real we are faced with places us into a truth orientation; even ideas of reflexivity are essentially about the construction of what is claimed in an ethnography as truth. This essentially comes from our descriptive orientation: but it is not enough for the kinds and scale of problems we need to engage with. So far, in the EPIC canon, the question of problem scales hasn't arisen much; in particular, discussions of problem complexity are merely hinted at, and it's the rare paper that makes complexity an operating concept. e.g. Salvador (2011).

If we move away from descriptions of experience, what happens to our truth/utility orientations? What changes need ensue in our analytic stance and the theoretical corpus we use? We contend that the large portion of social science and anthropological theory that orients towards cultural or social behaviors & phenomena is of vanishing importance in our analytic work, and we will need to create new "theories" and operating concepts, such as 'flux' (Bezaitis and Anderson 2011) that aren't necessarily about the behaviors of individuals or clearly demarcated social groups but instead foreground the corporation's business model and its constituent interactions.

This is not just a question of taking our interpretations beyond 'opportunities' and into making design and business strategy; it is not clear that such movement into business roles creates any additional opportunities or scope for ethnography. This is also not just a question of critical reflexivity: the goal is not to study up, but to study out. A recent effort in this direction is Intel's program on consumerization:

> "Our new stakeholders, who range from government affairs, to corporate responsibility roles, to education and health groups, to marketing and branding, are not necessarily interested in the ways in which ethnography as a specific practice could inform their design and business decisions. They do, however, have reasons to figure out how their own actions and decisions had (or would have) an effect on these socially-constituted worlds. They do not, of course, put it quite this way, but suddenly, the groups who work with governments and multilateral development organizations became very curious indeed about how Intel's messages get interpreted, and where market opportunities were mixing with economic development efforts." (Nafus et al 2009)

An effort like this is a direct examination of the socio-political context of the corporation's customers, and is capable of providing powerful forms of envisioning and leverage. (For the same reason, of course, a values discourse is necessary and relevant: it provides checks on corporate action at this scale.) This ultimately considers the entire corporation as instrument: reflexivity at scale.

Problem Scales – To return to the question of problem scales: user/consumer research has largely been working at a small scale: that of shaping individual behaviors. The promise that ethnography

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holds is of both understanding factors of relevance at other scales, and understanding one's place in it critically.

A brief introduction to problem complexity scales: a widely used formulation divides up complexity into Simple (*predictable with heuristics*), Complicated (*predictable with analysis*), Complex (*unpredictable, and knowable only through action, experimentally*) and Chaotic (*unpredictable, and impossible to act with guarantees*) domains; this is often known as the SCCC model. (For an in-depth analysis, see Graves 2011.)

Corporate ethnographic research as currently practiced in its user/consumer research incarnation is well suited to the Simple and Complicated domains: its descriptive and analytic orientation is appropriate, as is the concern with truth and validity. Operating in the Complex and Chaotic domains, however, has different demands. To be useful, descriptive practices of knowledge production must keep ahead of the pace of change in the domain: in order to do this, we will need to produce knowledge even faster than we already do, and under conditions where it is unclear that we will be able to establish research programs which build on constituent projects to create continuously aggregated knowledge. And, as noted earlier, certain kinds of problems and problem features will never become visible under this framing, and consequently the knowledge produced by the user research framing will always be contingent and incomplete. A truth orientation is not useful here.

On the other hand, a utility orientation is far more appropriate. Under this paradigm, instead of attempting to document and describe the 'real', we attempt to create a multiplicity of maps of the domain. This does not mean that truth concerns are irrelevant, but that they are secondary to uncovering gaps and holes in institutional knowledge, which, naturally, cannot be done without some level of knowledge of the 'real'. This is primarily an exercise in empirically informed speculation and synthesis, much closer to design fiction than design requirements, and its purpose is to reveal avenues of investigation not hitherto considered. It consequently foregrounds sensemaking and creative abilities over fieldwork methods – an entirely different toolkit of skills than those traditionally prioritized in user/ethnographic research. This form of knowledge practice is currently labeled 'foresight'; the opportunity for ethnographic practice here is to inform the empirical content of inputs into foresight practice, in ways more nuanced than trend reports and quantitative measures of problem domains.

The Complex and Chaotic domains are also particularly suited to methods of knowledge production that adopt an experimental attitude: not in the traditional sense of experimental research methods, but in the sense of performing design/business experiments to reveal knowledge about reality. An important emergent practice here is that of Critical Making (Ratto 2011): doing design as a way to throw light on a domain; not design trying to solve a problem, but design trying to discover its shape, and uncover the set of linked issues. Again, this has a utility orientation: the critical design process does not attempt to move down the product development pipeline; unlike with a truth orientation the resultant designs are not early versions or prototypes of eventual products. In other words, critical making is largely an exercise in problematization, something that aligns well with ethnographic practice. This points to a need for engagement with designers, so we can move from question/problem framing to reification and back.

There are other ways of mapping complexity: the SCCC model is merely one of the most basic and oldest. What is relevant to note here is the sparseness of ethnographic meta-methodological theories and approaches that incorporate problem complexity scales. Complex-domain techniques need complex domain practices, knowledge-orientations, values and institutions to function

successfully. The challenge facing most of us is how to create those practices, orientations, values, and institutions in organizations that face complex-domain problems.

Corollary: organizations that design at different scales have different forms; our roles won't change unless our organizations do.

There are numerous other forms of knowing from a variety of disciplines: historical analysis to reveal patterns of change not visible in a single 'deep dive'; theatrical and improv techniques to learn by enactment; museums for materialist exhibitions of insight; art to produce changes in perception; science fiction to produce synthesized and provocative visions of possible futures, and so on. Compared with these, videos, Powerpoints, and posters – the stuff of the dominant communicative parlance – seem rather limited as means of teaching/learning and transformation.

None of these forms of knowing are relevant for those practitioners who wish to define their work and roles primarily in terms of the origins of ethnographic practice in anthropology and sociology. For those of us wishing to define ourselves in terms of potential impact instead, engaging with these forms of knowing is necessary, and is already happening (see for instance VanPatter 2011.)

Armed both with the ability to build layered, reflexive, value-laden pictures of the operating context and to engage in/with other forms of knowing, we will be in a much better position to have or shape impact; we term this 'strategic incitement': the act of selectively problematizing and inspiring action in ways that encompass the context not just of users/consumers but also that of the producers themselves.

A PROGRAM OF CHANGE

Any speculation on disciplinary futures must of necessity speak to emerging movements and problems in our field. Keeping this in mind, we suggest a program of change focused on 5 contextually relevant pillars: collective creativity, problematization discourse, engagement with society, de-commoditization, and alternative learning/knowing orientations.

Collective Creativity

Get better at reframing the work. It will be tough to leave the "experience" narrative frame. Doing it well will require the ability to produce and manage frames for others; this means we have to be equally good at describing, interpreting, and contextualizing the project team as well as the data and the research insights.

Develop a variety of cognitive architectures for innovation: Reframing our work involves shifting scales. It is unclear that the same set of methods and processes we use to produce insights from descriptions of human behavior will scale to society-scale problems. We'll have to get better at knowing how to select methods for research, analysis, sense-making, designing, prototyping, collaborating and so on. Ethnography is a methodology; we need to wrap it with a meta-methodology.

Encourage critical consciousness: It is one thing to take clients into the field, and give them exposure to the context/site of study. It is another to turn that experience from an observational tour to a process of critical inquiry, something that is essential to having an empirically-based discussion of values. We'll have to get better at helping others do analysis.

Problematization Discourse

Produce problems in addition to insights: Insights – esp. in their 'opportunity' form suggest solutions; problems suggest directions for exploration. We are often under pressure to direct us to immediate and actionable solutions; while this might be appropriate in many situations, the sheer complexity of innovation practices suggests that we need to be smarter about when we introduce questions as well as answers, even when only the latter is explicitly requested.

Convince clients that problematizing context is valuable. It produces different kinds of implications for product development than studying user experience alone. Problematizing context is an avenue for bringing corporate values into alignment with the values of the people and communities whom they serve and impact. This broadened focus contributes to the recognition of socially beneficial outcomes as a category different from market outcomes, but equally as important and compelling.

Engagement With Society

Find ways to talk about values: It will neither be appropriate nor useful to foreground personal values as instigations for values discourse in a corporate context. In order to create a values discourse, we'll have to find ways to formally include them into our processes, as well as bringing up questions of values in times & places outside formal project contexts.

Encourage corporate research sponsors to innovate not just product or service value, but moral and social purpose. This requires crafting insights that go beyond immediate consumer needs or economic benefits to the organization. This will enable corporations to think about *how* they can fit into forms of social renewal that go beyond corporate social responsibility, to create shared value throughout the extended value chain to which they belong.

Produce work for the commons: Many of the 'invisible problems' we've described cannot be engaged with successfully without the cooperation of multiple institutions. Producing insights and other outputs of ethnographic work for the public domain (or at least available for purchase) will make it more likely that otherwise disconnected or competitive institutions will collaborate. Precedent for this in the EPIC canon is recent (Radka and Margolis 2011), but this is a well-established model in the trends/market research industry, and there are plenty of organizations working on nation-scale, civic issues to engage with.

De-Commoditization

Counter commoditization and de-skilling by shifting from methods to methodology and meta-methodology. Methods are easily copied: if we want the continued adoption of ethnography, and not merely the continued adoption of ethnographers, we must present the value of our work more in terms of our ability to adapt methods and theories to different problem and organizational spaces, and less in terms of the methods themselves. This will have the additional advantage of reducing the commodifying effect of new technologies and tools and the standardization of methods and techniques.

RENEWING OUR DISCIPLINE

Devise a power strategy: Previously published literature in the user-experience/ ethnographic research canon have made visible power structures operating in our workplaces. What we need next is a power strategy for the discipline that speaks both to tactical techniques we use to establish influence, as well as how a power strategy should play out across careers and teams.

Build up a body of examples of values-driven innovation. The best way to prove to disciplinary outsiders (i.e. our clients) that an approach is valuable is to show that is has already worked elsewhere. We need a library of examples we can point to and use as inspiration for championing values-driven approaches to large-scale problems.

Alternative Learning/Knowing Orientations

Engage with makers; produce knowledge through made objects and experiences: ethno*graphy* might be a good starting point, but to engage with the 'invisible problems' we'll also need an ethno*techne*: exploring the emic/etic through making, not describing. This is not the same as the well-established use of projective methods with research study participants and eliciting knowledge through expressive acts: this is the use of creative and critical construction to understand a problem domain, as an alternative to fieldwork.

VERY INCONCLUSION

We are calling for an evolution of our practice: from the description and explanation of human behavior to a position of strategic incitement that is animated by a sense of values. We believe that, at least for some portion of the ethnographic practitioner community, this evolution is necessary for sustained impact, and for another portion, necessary to resist commodification. At a more personal level, we believe this evolution is necessary to bring about some sense of consonance between the ethnographer as employee and the ethnographer as citizen.

A polemic on such issues as this paper presents is necessarily incomplete and inconclusive. While observations we have made will – given the diverse nature of our community – not apply to everyone, our intent is to draw attention to some fundamental aspects of the nature of our practice. We have also skipped over much nuance and detail: a more exhaustive analysis will be required before a clear picture of possible disciplinary futures emerges.

In sum, we may not be right about everything, but we hope to at least be usefully wrong.

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