



The EPIC 2013 Conversation

MELISSA CEFKIN

IBM Research

MARIA BEZAITIS

Intel

ALEXANDRA MACK

Pitney Bowes

KEN ANDERSON

Intel

Oracles, fear, wonderment and magic graced the Faraday Theater of the Royal Institution of Great Britain once again. They appeared, appropriately, intertwined with the story of the advancement of science, and of technologies of knowledge. At the 9th annual Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference, the very fundamentals of humanity, from senses to mediation, were explored and questioned. What an honor to be hosted at this esteemed organization to engage in the exploration of ethnographic praxis in industry!

Experimenting with a theme-less program, the conference exposed the breadth and range of current ethnographic practice. In this year's conversation we note just some of the threads and themes we observed to play out. But before that, we want to offer a reflection on the very existence of EPIC and its mission at the cusp of its 10th birthday.

The ethnographic marketplace matures with new challenges ahead

A couple of years ago we realized the Board faced a rather extraordinary and humbling problem. We had an over-abundance of opportunities to grow in new and compelling ways – by adding regional events, by broadening the market share of participation, by teaching ethnographic methods to practitioners and business stakeholders alike, by extending our channels of communication. These are just some of the creative and enthusiastic ideas brought forward. As EPIC continues to develop, to respond to shifting social and business climates, and to benefit from the energies of so many creative and thoughtful participants, we are sure to encounter even more.

This problem signaled, we believe, a maturation of the scene of ethnographic practice in industry. A scene evidenced especially by the extension of the practitioner-base to include attendees from more business and academic settings and from around the world. Along with

LETTER FROM THE BOARD

this expansion, however, we see new kinds of challenges. The introduction of user research into many organizations has not been accompanied by an investment in more exploratory forms of research. While new business realities have heightened a focus on customers, users and stakeholders, these shifts have not necessarily resulted in research investments that value exploratory work seeking to challenge underlying assumptions of product categories and business directions. Even organizations that have had long-standing commitments to user research and ethnographic methods continue to keep those investments extremely small-scale. In other words, the maturation that we've witnessed remains entangled with an ongoing tension regarding the value and role of ethnography in industry.

This maturation has invited a lot of reflection about the specific role of EPIC given the growth and the new accompanying challenges in this diversifying ecosystem of practice. One is tempted to read the setting of the Royal Institution as sign we have arrived. But exactly who has arrived and what kind of setting is it? How secure are those positions? What is EPIC's role in this shifting landscape? These are questions we hope to continue to explore and address over time.

It's useful to remind ourselves that EPIC's aim is two-fold. First, the organization is committed to illuminate social phenomena through theory and practice, and to explore and debate those phenomena. Second, we are committed to linking this knowledge work to an agenda of change inside the business contexts in which we work. What makes us unique is not only that we can interpret and comment on the social phenomena that we investigate, but that we are often positioned in ways that make us accountable for using this understanding to make change in industry. This unique position that we occupy in our organizations and with respect to our business partners also makes our work fundamentally problematic. More often than not, it is the case that the gravitational pull for business is to not change, making us minority voices.

The EPIC London program offered an abundance of discussion on these two related points of engagement. The varied program expertly curated and executed through the capable hands of Simon Roberts, Tim Malefyt, Rachel Singh, Cat Macaulay and a slew of volunteers and program committee members has provided us with a range of content on the state of knowledge and practice in the world of ethnographic praxis in industry.

Given EPIC's overarching aim to understand and to drive change, the annual conference program focuses less on teaching methods for doing ethnography and social research and more on the knowledge, understandings and implications that come out of the research that gets done. These kinds of understandings are formed through ways of doing work. They are made and constructed. They have histories. They need to be debated and discussed. They are the basis for engagement with our business partners and for the kinds of transformations that may or may not follow. We aspire to appeal to critically engaged practitioners and scholars who are dedicated to going beyond the 'just so' stories we encounter so often in business, and for EPIC to be a place for these discussions and debates to occur. Here we summarize some of the key conversations and points of engagement from this year's conference.

Some themes in and around the EPIC program

The opening and closing keynotes, Tricia Wang and Genevieve Bell, provided us both ambitious and yet grounded reference points for considering the work that we do and the challenges that we face. Tricia Wang's indictment of methods for prediction and the explicit message that we as practitioners are often called upon to answer the question of "what's next" led to an exposition of the ways in which the historical shift to metrics enabled a basis for prediction that was later assumed by computing. Genevieve Bell reminded us of the ways technology captures the socio-technical imagination, and our role in navigating toward advancements that bring wonder and new extensions to what it means to be human.

Data, death and the delight of senses

An entire curated session focused on **data**, as a central shift that our businesses grapple with and that we as ethnographic practitioners struggle to approach. Kim Erwin approached the topic less in terms of the new forms of data propagation and more from the standpoint of big qualitative data and proposed "small packages" as a set of design principles for analytic support. John Curran asserted an ethnographic re-appropriation of the term "big," citing Malinowski and his notion of big claims. We struggled with our own language—what do we mean by big data? what is personal data?—and sought to surface potentially useful means to frame the problem. Brittany Fiore usefully proposed the enticing notion of "data valences" as a way to consider the meaning-making capacities of data with people. Clearly at the early stages of our own discussion, we fully expect the debates on data to continue into the coming years.

Death made a surprising, if at times delightful, appearance at numerous points across the program, including the recounting of a theoretical deathmatch! Responding the reality of their fast-paced, highly results driven context of practice (surely the reality of every practitioner present) and the common lament that it is difficult to draw actively on social and cultural theories that we know animate our thinking, Daughter and his colleagues at Ricoh sought to find a way to engage existing theory for their work. They devised a game to explore the implications of a select group of works from chosen theorists on their current project. Their mode of making theory less abstract reminded us of the concrete role of theory in our approach to social phenomena.

Death was also a theme for Megan Bannon of Sapient Nitro, who explored people's ways of making sense of Facebook profiles that live on beyond people themselves. In a reminder of how conceptions of death are socially constructed, discussion afterward brought attention to the varying cultural responses to death, and the differing implications for social media management that could be drawn.

We noticed a welcome inclusion of explorations of **senses**, of sensorial forms of experience beyond the dominance of sight. Prior EPIC presentations have called for attention to the senses (such as Cefkin in 2006 and Tunstall in 2006). A number of Pecha Kucha presentations over the last few years lean towards this sensibility, and this year was no exception. J Paul Neeley's encouragement to "consider everything" meant just that – consider all that you consume, experience and endure for its effects on your state of health.

LETTER FROM THE BOARD

His telling of his year dedicated to extensive self-tracking offered a deeply experiential sense of change. Paul Ratliff's exploration of the joy of ordinary moments likewise delighted the audience while prompting deeper self reflection. Han Pham highlighted how trust is intimately connected to our senses.

David Howe's Day 2 opening keynote address was titularly about senses in marketing, but delved much deeper into how senses are our means to *make sense* of the world. It was also another reminder that the import and "sense" placed on them is often socially and culturally determined.

Value of ethnographic engagement

In his Day 2 closing keynote address, Danny Miller wove a tour-de-force argument against claims on both sides of the spectrum that the mediating effect of technology was changing humanity either for better or worse. Echoing Tricia Wang's compelling assertion in the opening keynote that it is less the precision of metrics driven by computation and more the communicative extension enabled by technology, Miller argued that it is connectivity that makes us human. And he developed this point through the telling of his dip into applied ethnographic work in a hospice center, exploring the social dimensions of end-of-life experience. Both Miller and Wang also made impassioned and compelling arguments for the value of ethnography.

Dynamic ecosystem

Still a few presentations, particularly those by Alice Peinado and ken anderson, surfaced the challenge of the shifting business landscape, our accountability to business and how we navigate it. ken anderson challenged us to consider that perhaps the fundamental assumptions that drove our work in the 90s and early 2000s had shifted and that the models we used to explain behavior do not remain stable over time. anderson proposed that perhaps it was time for us to consider new forms of engagement with the people we study, new types of interventions and, by extension, new types of subject positions for the people we represent back to our businesses.

EPIC epistemologies

As EPIC and the ecosystem that revolves around dimensions of linking understandings of social phenomena to change in industry grows, confronting the various ways of knowing that underlie these understandings will become necessary. While hints of the varieties of epistemological traditions informing EPIC participants' ways of thinking were evidenced throughout the program, the final session, curated by Martha Cotton, served a particularly rich demonstration of this variety. From empiricist (Arsel and Bean) to postmodernist (Arnould and Cayla) to nearly phenomenological (Gonçalves and Fagundes), the varying ways of knowing brought to EPIC and evidenced in this year's conference set the scene for conversations to come to the fore in the future. We welcome this opening and look forward to these conversations.