

Critical Ethnography for Information Research

Lai Ma

School of Library and Information Science

Indiana University Bloomington

1320 E. 10th St., LI 011

Bloomington, IN 47405-3907

lama@indiana.edu

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Poster Abstract

Research in Library and Information Science (LIS) often involves the use of various types of information and of information technology. As such, it is primarily concerned with problem-solving in social spaces (e.g., as manifested in user studies) and in designing and troubleshooting of technological systems (e.g., research in information retrieval in general). Although most information research is oriented towards some kind of problem-solving, its nature is not purely technical as many have perceived; rather, it requires analyses of the interrelationship among human (users), technology, and society. In other words, information research is cultural and social in nature and it asks for the search for “affordances” (which can be analyzed in terms of Heidegger’s interpretation of Aristotle’s four types of causality) which bring forth, for example, user needs and technology uses¹. The widely and commonly used quantitative methods, however, are not sufficient for comprehensive analyses of cultural and social phenomena or affordances because quantitative methods are teleological in nature (often in a hypothetical-deductive manner). The search for affordances begs for a critical and conceptual space in research, on the one hand, and empirical approaches in which the understanding of the cultural and the social are central concerns, on the other. Critical ethnography is a critical and empirical research methodology that encompasses these two criteria.

Ethnographic methods are not new in information research—researchers who investigate human-human and human-technology interactions (e.g., those in the area of ‘information behavior,’

‘user studies’) are well aware of the importance of qualitative research and have adopted methods such as observation, interview, focus group study, and so on in their research projects. How is critical ethnography different from more traditional qualitative social research, then?

Methodologically, critical ethnography uses a form of hermeneutic-reconstructive analysis: researchers make use of the hermeneutic circle to attain intersubjective insider views for their analyses of observational and interview data; at the same time, researchers take into account their pre-understanding and pre-judgment during the interpretative and reconstructive process. That is to say, they must be aware of their initial interpretative frameworks that may enable and also restrict interpretations. The circular feature of the process leads to alterations in initial interpretative frameworks so that they encompass those of the culture, subculture of interest.

The very strength of critical ethnography is its capability in explicating ideology and power relations by reconstruction of meaning and conceptualization of social systems. In his book, *Critical Ethnography in Educational Research* (1996), Carspecken has provided a practical guide for doing critical ethnography, with easy-to-understand explanations of philosophical and theoretical backgrounds throughout the text. His approach includes an application of Habermas’s differentiation of three formal-ontological categories: subjective, objective, and normative-evaluative for the analysis of meaning and human interactions, on the one hand, and the differentiation of sites, settings, locales, and social systems, on the other. The theory of meaning core to this approach makes it possible to reconstruct meanings at various levels, from meanings that are obvious and discursively expressible for the members of a cultural group (e.g., producers and users of information) to levels that have significant effects but escape explicit awareness. The theory of social sites and systems makes it possible to find explanations for the prevalence of certain cultural and social forms of, for example, information production and use, and to discover both overt and latent functions served by these cultural and social forms.

From a more theoretical perspective, critical ethnography opens up ways of reconceptualizing “information.” For example, critical researchers can look at information in the sense of “information as thing” (Buckland, 1991), such as books, journals, cataloged objects (such as the antelope described in Suzanne Briet’s *What is*

¹ For a more detailed explanation of Heidegger’s analysis of the four causes and their relations to technology and technique (*techne*), see Day and Ma.

Documentation?) and so on. “Information as thing” is not an objective entity (e.g., ‘facts,’ raw data, etc.) in the empiricist sense; rather, they are cultural products resulting from a process of objectivation and decontextualization. These processes are associated with social practices of different cultural and professional groups. As such, the production of information is seen as part of the modern social system that serves certain economic and political functions. The use of information, on the other hand, may be viewed as the recontextualization of information corresponding to the forms of life of different cultural and professional groups of users. In sum, both the production and use of information may be located within a theory of social system and are related to the economic, political, and cultural features of that system. The manner in which information is produced, the type of “information” produced, as well as the possible types of information that are not produced, can be studied in terms of the cultures of producers and the relation of these cultures to the economic and social locations of production. This means, among other things, that information production must be studied with a critical perspective. Similarly, information use can be studied in terms of socially constructed needs, in terms of “overt use” and “covert/latent” uses that escape the awareness of users, but serve various system functions. A critical-ethnographic framework makes it possible to study such things.

Thus, from a practical perspective, critical ethnography is particularly useful for information behavior research and user studies because it goes straight to the core concepts of these types of research, namely, information needs, information seeking behavior, context, and so on. Further, the conceptual framework of critical ethnography can be used to research other areas of information science, such as “epistemic culture” in the area of scholarly communication, human-computer interaction (HCI), and, of course, social informatics.

To conclude, I argue that the practical concerns of information research are not merely technical problems; rather, they are social in nature—the working of a system or the successful retrieval of

relevant information involves an understanding of users and their relationship with contexts. Context, in turn, needs to be addressed in terms of cultural affordances, including an examination of the cultural horizons by which certain material forms and expressions are considered to be “information.” In other words, we need to understand the interrelationship among human (users), technology, and society.

Critical ethnography is a critical and an empirical research methodology. Its approaches are based upon a solid theoretical framework grounded in social critical theory. The methodology can stand alone as a research method, as well as complement other methods (both qualitative and quantitative) for social research.

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