

Critical Ethnography for Information Research

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INTRODUCTION

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 humans (users), technology, and society. In other words, information research is social in nature and it asks for the search for affordances¹ which bring forth, for example, user needs and technology uses. 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.

¹ See Day and Ma (2009) for a discussion of affordances in terms of Heidegger's reinterpretation of the Aristotelian four causes and their relations to technology and technique (*techné*). This paper will be presented on Wednesday, February 11, 2009, at Redbus.

WHAT IS CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY?

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, they must also be aware of the 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 or subculture of interest.

Analysis of Human Interactions and Meanings

The very strength of critical ethnography is its capability in explicating ideology and power relations by reconstruction of meanings and conceptualizations of social systems. 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 analysis of interactions and the reconstruction of meanings involve the understanding of validity claims, interaction dynamics, position-taking, pragmatic horizons, power relations, and so on.

Validity Claims and Ontological Realms

Validity claims are usually referenced by actors with every social act, usually in a tacit manner. An awareness of these claims is central to the analysis of interaction. Three basic ontological categories are:
(1) the objective realm—characterized by the principle of multiple access; "the" world

Many Possible Meanings of An Act

Hi Adam, how is your critical ethnography project going?



Professor



Adam

Possible meanings of the professor's question:
1. He is just saying "hi."
2. He wants to know the progress of my dissertation.
3. He is interested in critical ethnography and wants to discuss it with me.
4. He dislikes critical theory and wants to challenge me.
5. He wants to discuss something else with me, but uses "critical ethnography" to catch my attention.

Critical Ethnography

- Many possible meanings
- Validity claims
- Pragmatic Horizons
- Hermeneutic inference: position-taking, etc.
- Semantics and pragmatics
- Power relations
- System analyses

- (2) the subjective realm—characterized by the principle of privileged access; "your," "her," or "my" world
- (3) the normative/evaluative realm—implicated in position taking; involves cultural understandings of what is proper, right, wrong, good, or bad; "our" world

Pragmatic Horizons

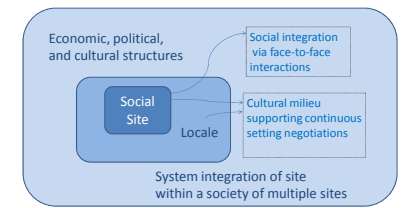
A meaningful act is expressed through symbols, linguistic symbols in particular. Understanding an act means that we have a shared understanding of the symbolic system. However, while the 'point' of an act is foregrounded, researchers should be aware of the layered and complex background that bring forth the act, which involves the understanding of social and power relations within a cultural milieu and the differentiation of semantics and pragmatics.

Hermeneutic inferences

Possible meanings can be formulated from an act because we are communicative beings, which means that we are able to position-take and act according to certain cultural typifications.

Conceptualization of Social Systems

The analysis of interactions brings forth recurring patterns of interactions depend not only on 'localized' observations and other methods such as interviews, focus groups, and so on, but also take into account the 'context' of such recurring patterns. 'Context' can be analyzed by the differentiation of site, locale, and social systems within the concept of 'setting.' 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 and the reproduction of values and norms.



THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS IN INFORMATION RESEARCH

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 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 systems 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.

POSSIBLE APPLICATIONS IN INFORMATION RESEARCH

Information Behavior / User Studies

Critical ethnography is potentially useful in many research areas in library and information science, particularly those involving human-human interactions and human-computer interactions. For example, we can gain a much deeper understanding of "information seeking" and its relations to users, institutions, and economic and political systems because critical ethnography provides the framework for the analyses of the interactive dynamics of information systems and their users, on the one hand, and the conceptualization of social systems, on the other. In other words, a critical ethnographic study goes straight to the core concepts such as information needs, context, and so on. For example, Benoit (2001) has argued that information systems design can greatly benefit from the theory of communicative action.

Human-computer Interaction (HCI)

Research in information science (e.g., information representation, seeking, and retrieval) often involves an understanding of human-computer interactions. The investigation of the possibility and impossibility of human-computer interaction in turn requires a good knowledge of how human beings interpret and interact with each other and how meanings are created—a critical-ethnographic framework makes it possible to study such things.

Social Informatics

Critical ethnography is a theoretical and methodological framework for social research. So, there are many possible applications in social informatics. Ethnographic studies have recently emerged in this area, such as Shankar (2007).

Scholarly Communication

Cronin (2005) suggests in his book, *The Hand of Science*, that in the study of scholarly communication, epistemic cultures in particular: "[w]hat is missing from the larger literature is a compelling analysis of the structural dynamics of the scholarly communication marketplace, one that focuses upon the array of stakeholder relations, technological drivers, and competitive forces (and their interactions) that are reconfiguring the ecosystem" (p. 33). Critical ethnography is capable of investigating the interrelationship of the issues raised above.

CONCLUSION

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 and social situations together, 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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