Chapter 1

Why Is Information System Design Interested in Ethnography?

Sketches of an Ongoing Story

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ABSTRACT

The chapter reviews the main stages of the collaboration between ethnographers and information system designers, highlighting the reasons and motives for their mutual relationship. Is it possible to consider the ethnographic approach to information system design a “success story”? How is it that information system design—a field seemingly distant from the concerns, history, or tradition of ethnographic research—is today so interested in the approach, the methods, and the “philosophy” of ethnography? What has ethnography to offer information system designers?

INFORMATION SYSTEMS AND ETHNOGRAPHY

The study of information systems is a field of inquiry, which encompasses various disciplines, ranging from management to artificial intelligence, from informatics to software development. This article is devoted to the interest that information science—in particular, the design and evaluation of systems—has for some time shown in ethnography. Indeed, over the past twenty years the analysis of information systems has been one of the fields in which ethnographic approaches have received most attention, been subjected to serious consideration, and obtained the most significant results. But how has this happened? In what does the ‘success’ (if
it can so be called) of ethnography consist? How 
has a field so apparently distant from the history 
or tradition of ethnographic research been ‘in-
fected’ by the philosophy, methods, and ‘gaze’ of 
ethnography? How does a ‘hard’ discipline like 
informatics consider a ‘soft’ one like ethnography?
Does ethnography have something to offer to
informatics? What in particular? Moreover, how
can this interest among information technologists 
concern the disciplines that have traditionally
drawn on ethnography? Is this a merely ‘sec-
torial’ or ‘niche’ interest, no more than a passing 
intellectual fashion, or does it reveal something 
profound concerning the value of ethnographic
methods. Can it challenge what is often termed,
with a certain emphasis, the ‘interdisciplinarity’
(in the weak sense) and sometimes ‘hybridization’
(in the strong one) of disciplines? Can discussion
of such topics be made in a journal addressed to a
broad audience and diverse academic communi-
cies, or must it be confined to specialist journals 
and conferences? The aim of this introduction is
to clarify these questions.

The first novel feature of the interest shown
by information engineers in ethnography is its
direction, for it is information engineers who are
interested in ethnography, not the other way round.
There is long tradition of ethnographic studies on
organizations, work in scientific laboratories, and
technology where the social or anthropological
(and similar) disciplines have concerned them-
svselves with the world of engineering and technol-
ogy. Yet it is now the managerial and engineering
disciplines, which are interested in the work of
ethnographers. Of course, informatics deals with
ethnography because it needs it for practical rea-
sons: this concerns, not ethnography by engineers,
but ethnography for or with engineers, which
entails interdisciplinarity (a somewhat worn-out
term but which seems to have acquired new cur-
rency). As Baba (2006, p. 37) writes:

Designers are considered ‘creatives’ (i.e., there
is an artistic aspect to their work), and their

marriage with intellectuals and researchers
(anthropologists) is an interdisciplinary chal-
lenge. The creation of ‘design ethnography’ thus
represents the birth of a new interdisciplinary
subfield that joins together anthropology and/or
other qualitatively-oriented social sciences with
the design profession.

Engineers have always constituted an interesting
case for study with ethnographic methods. But
anthropological and sociological accounts have
frequently failed to consider the actual work of
engineers (Bruni & Gherardi, 2007). In these cases,
ethnographers (sociologists, anthropologists) are
interested in describing phenomena such as the
construction of identity or the self in the profes-
sion, or in reflecting on the boundaries (mobile,
rigid, or mutable) that separate technology from
‘humanity’. In the case considered here, when
information engineers design information systems
jointly with anthropologists or sociologists, the
ethnography examines the organization of knowl-
edge and information. Yet the problems—and their
technical, technological and expert solutions—
cannot be ignored, for they constitute the core
itself of the ethnography to be pursued. Whilst
this approach may involve ‘technicisms’ difficult
for a layman to handle, it should not bother an
ethnographer, trained as he or she is to know all
the ‘technical details’ of building a canoe or the
‘technical details’ of navigation by the natives of
the Western Pacific (Malinowski, 1922).

This article reconstructs the phases of collabo-
ration between ethnographers and the designers
of information systems, seeking to show the rationale for such collaboration. Of course, this
introduction starts from the social sciences. It
consequently represents the return of questions,
which first arose within studies on information
systems to the social sciences: it therefore conducts
a reconstruction ‘situated’ in the social sciences,
not in computer science.