**Cumulus Open Design / Ethnography Paper – Open Data**

**What could open design mean to Ethnography?**

“It could mean anything. It is so open that I have no idea what it could mean honestly. It could apply to so may things. Um. If you want me to take a guess, it could mean that it is kind of an ultimate co-creation type design, where it’s about everyone acting as a designer. So you’re opening up the act of design. It could be about transparency, and making the design process more visible, because design is so often a black box. You know, so opening that up.

Well, I’m certainly familiar with open source, but I’ve never heard of open design before. So I mean. For me. It’s something to dissect a little bit. So I’ll just do this out loud.

So if I think about the criteria that I would kind of set out: I would pick that openness of transparency. Because part of open source is both about it being free, but also about that contribution back, and building through community, where everyone is invested in it. So if I imagine a site where people post their designs on a site, and people commented on it, that’d be open design.

So in regard to ethnography. One of things about doing ethnography is people going out and pulling—through observation and other activities—pulling that out of people. But you could reverse that and say, “okay, this is about opening up my problem, what do I want to learn, and having ethnography come to me”, basically. Maybe even showing me or telling me about aspects of their life, or the way they work, or things like that. So it’s more of, like, a community-contributed ethnography. The interesting thing, though, is that the power of ethnography is that the person who’s doing it should be neutral, and trained to observe, and people aren’t all that good at observing themselves in a way that’s neutral enough. They have all of these biases about the way they think and they way they work, so would that collaboration, going that way, work or not.”

“I really don’t know what open design might mean. There come all sorts of phrases become popular in our sorts of work, and lots of them don’t mean very much. Although reinvention, I’ve seen these things come around before. It’s the nature of academic life, these ideas get circulated, it’s just that, they’re actually circulating a lot faster than they used to.

Ok, well, yea, I’m familiar with open source because I did some research on it, and on open source design. All it meant was, this idea of massive contributions… I mean, essentially I got interested in open source because I was in a project on dependability. The idea was: maybe designing things using open source would be better than the traditional methods because in traditional methods, mistakes aren’t easily picked up by single design teams. Whereas open source development has many eyes looking at the code and checking it for issues.

So, what would it mean in terms of design? I suppose it’d be nice to throw open… you know, I don’t really know enough about the world of design. When I think about design, I think about people like architects or city planners, who have ideas about how things should be and design things that have both a functional quality and an aesthetic quality.

Well, I think anybody could do an ethnography. If you do an ethnography on something, and somebody else works in that area, and they could read it, and then provide their own data, I think that would be interesting. So, for example, if I was to do a study of academics, I could do some observational studies, I could collect my own, I could write my own diary, and then if other academics found it interesting, they could submit their own diary… is that what, I assume that’s what open design would be. And from that, we would gain some idea of what academic life was like, and we might design some better way in which academics could work, or resources should be shared.

Going back to earlier, we talked about everyone becoming an ethnographer. If everyone can collect their own data, it probably comes back to how people treat their own data.

Yea, I mean. I suppose. There’s two things. 1) Whilst it is generally true that anyone can do an ethnography, it’s no special skills. But not everybody possesses those skills. Because the job of an ethnographer is to keep your mouth shut, and to observe. And I don’t think everybody has got those skills. They’re skills. You have to be prepared to be bored for enormous lengths of time. I’m sure everybody can do it, but I’m not sure everybody has the temperament to do it, which is what I think a lot academics do. Rather than waiting for things to emerge, they impose their own views on it, they say ‘well, this is clearly what’s going on here’ and they start sticking it in their theoretical boxes. And those boxes dictate both what they look at it and how they interpret what they see. Everybody can do it, it’s just that sometimes they lack the personal qualities required.”

“I’ve heard of open innovation. Does it play in?

I have not really head about open design and none of us has done this sort of work relating to coding to justify that. But we do do quite a lot of the open innovation trying to bring people together to support companies and social enterprises to do work with their communities to design services and systems and products. In my head, this is what open should mean. It should not just mean to other specialists. But should be open to the people who will affected by the service and will use it.

So there is one interesting angle that I can imagine, so in the ethnography of the patient groups that we worked with. The woman did the ethnography, it’s a group of people with lupus the auto immune condition. The women we commissioned she also has lupus, so she joined this group, she was up front that she is an anthropologist that knows ethnography. She also could completely honest and say that I am here as a lupus patient as well. So she really became close with them and she even stayed with them after the money ran out and we couldn’t keep funding her. So she got to know them and she went to a lot of meeting, she interviewed them, she followed them, all the things you’d do at the beginning of an ethnographic study we had hoped would be much longer. But then, when the money ran out for that what we really hoped we could do was work with the people she met and bring them together with a couple of open source projects who are looking for users. So there was some collective intelligence tools, most of which are open sourced. They have been funded by an earlier EU project. There is one that supports people to collaboratively write a document, a manifesto or even it’s gone up to writing a book. It allows you to basically have a forums and administrates can rearrange the the forums so discussions get grouped together and there is also another level of administration that you can bring idea from that and synthesise them into large chunks of what has happened as so on. At the moment they are using forums where they should just exchange information really high level medical informations but that was never being captured. So the idea is that they can use this tool to write up those conversations with very little extra effort on their part. And then produce document could be online that could help people with hyperlocal instructions of … if you are looking for lupus services and.

What would be useful there… we also want to get them involved with.. So intel has this project wanting to build a platform, they want to go beyond quantified self. They produce tools to look at patterns in health data. They wanted use cases to challenge them. So we wanted to include this lupus group. If the money had been there, rather than doing an ethnography of… a lot of the problems with ethnography was the idea, it’s often a top down approach. You kind of coming in, and you study this community, you take from it and you never give it back. But in this particular case the hope was that we could justify the spend on the ethnography by bringing the group in working with them on these tools and they had from the very beginning a very strong opinion and ideas of which tools will be useful for them and their lives and how they want to evaluate that. So hopefully it will be mutually beneficial.  So they want developers, they were gonna be able to look at this projects being developed that were sort of half finished at that point. So that idea that you might be doing ethnography with people that also have very strong opinions about what they want to study to what they want to achieve out of it, that sounds like an idea of open design, open ethnography, open design for ethnography. My worry is when you say open design for ethnography, it sounds quite amusingly like someone who is trying to develop tools for ethnographers. That you can make any ethnographer kind of use tools in a kind of predictable… you are trained to use yourself as an experimental instrument.

like if ethnography could be co-designed with the people. Possibly even opening up it further, what other people want to learn. Unfortunately that project didn’t go ahead, but if the project had gone forward the idea would have been to have an anthropologist, as the kind of the partner and the ethnographer who is embedded in the group and the software developers encounters. So all of them started from the very beginning, the more balanced needs and ideas.”

“Open design? I have no reference point for open design so I have to give my interpretation of what I think you mean.  Maybe, I would say, what I would want open design to be is de-coupling of practices that stand from traditional methods in design but kind of get abstracted and applied to other practices. So you’d extrapolate the essence of a designerly approach to things and using that or applying it in different ways and finding a way that other professionals and make the best of a designedly mindset. That’s what I think open design. Sort of Open source as a core logic of design.

I think it would allow people to connect the ways that they are using something that’s in alinements with that already. And give it a simplified langue. I think openly designed ethnography, we’d have to look something like legitimate peripheral participation. You don’t want to de-value the practice, because it has enormous value. But that’s not to say it should be something that can be legitimately participated in by all sorts of people. Also people working in various different fields should have a connecting strategy, should understand how to work with ethnographers and to get the values from these people. So starting a conversation that cross disciplines how a fluid methodology could be used to understand mindsets and motivations, that’s very useful. Come down to crossing barriers, I think “

**What are some challenges when applying ethnography in multi-/inter- disciplinary contexts?**

“In terms of the treatment of data, that’s what kind of annoys me. People spend all this time collecting the data, and then start pouring it into theoretical boxes (ANT, distributed cognition, etc). And you think, where is it in the data where it tells you to start pouring things into these triangular boxes. Which is the whole point of the deconstructing ethnography book.

If you’re an ethnographer, you need to take what you do seriously. You’re supposed to be revealing the social nature of work. Of how people go about doing their job. All these other fancy tools, like design fictions and cultural probes, and you know, the postmodern turn, all these, basically, they ignore the data in order to support already established academic positions. The data is a kind of bogus body of dumb data that supports already established theories. For me, that’s the opposite of an ethnography.

An ethnography is supposed to reveal something about what social life is like. “

“One of the challenges of ethnography is that you get so much data. So you almost have to structure it so that it’s manageable. But how would you do that if you had no control over what’s coming in. So. I mean, you could put out a structure of what you want to learn. How you do note-taking. You could out that structure. Otherwise, it would be unmanageable.

It feels very risky when you’re paid for a skillset, and you give away that skillset. Um. What we found, though, was that was an initial feeling that that was a risk. That you will lose credibility, that people will think that anyone can do that job, that it doesn’t take much skills once you make it easy. Um. What we found, though, was that actually did, though, was that it made more visible the skill sets of people who were creating this structure. And also it freed them up to do more challenging, demanding ethnography that couldn’t be done in a more cookie-cutter style. So that risk was mitigated at that company. Maybe not elsewhere.

Certainly, data quality is an issue. No matter how many guardrails you put in place, people blindly follow the process, but miss something, and then don’t realise they’ve missed something, and they get upset when they don’t find anything or it’s not as good. Whereas someone with training would realise they’ve missed something or they wouldn’t miss anything.

It’s one thing to gather ethnographic information, but it’s no good if you don’t do something with it. In the corporate world. That translation into actionable insights from research like that I think takes a lot of skill. And I think would be much harder to open up. So that’s a risk, too.

It takes trust on management’s side to fund something like that, where it doesn’t have an immediate product impact. Where it’s going to be further down the line. I think that’s one barrier to ethnography in industry. It has the furthest impact. That’s one barrier. Umm.

I mean, I have been a part of some programmes where it’s ethnography for the masses. Everyone goes out and does ethnography. The intent of it gets lost because of the skill and pressure.

Can’t really think of anything else.”

“One of the interesting things about any kind of ethnography is the it’s so easy to get people talk about themselves for almost no motivation. People really like to talk about themselves and you don’t need to promise them much in return. But if you could come up with the system that enables people to feel that they are gaining from this reflections of themselves that would be incredibly interesting. So I did this project with synthetic biologists, where for two years I was working with them and attending a lot of meetings and interviewing them all those things you are supposed to do as an ethnographer. Of course, they have commissioned me, they paid me to be there to deliver them ideas about how they can work together better. So this is the idea, doing ethnography while someone else’s interest is involved can he hugely productive. I found that very motivating and useful. But the idea that I am theorising their behaviours of someones that is going to really, theorising the value systems and their daily practices, then the people are going to read what I say about them. Everyone says that ethnography is always a betrayal, you are always simplifying, you are always summarising you are alway reducing people’s lives into these theories. So they also, almost with a base on personal relationships and friendships so that combination makes it incredibly scary to put your ethnographic work in front of people it’s about. On the ones case, if you are all working together to develop something maybe you can get over that. So for medical anthropology, where the anthropologists should work with the community and has specific goals, people want to be studies so that their community becomes visible. So that in a way is an open ethnography process. But it does not have tools, design and codes. I don’t know if this is helpful but I have worked in ethnographic project for medical devices being developed. It was so close. The patients were being paid to participate. The intellectual property was so precious. There was no way for me to talk about, or for them to reveal to the participants what was going on. So if someone was hugely interested in what was learned there, it might create some awkwardness maybe. There was a lot of tensions around that as I can recall.

It’s also how interested people are. Some of them really want to be self reflexive and think about why they think the way they do. In particular if we were designing a system or an institution, why we want to design it the way we do. A lot of people in their daily lives, they don’t care that much.  ”

“I think there’s a barrier that is entailed in the word of ethnography. It’s a quite exclusive and quite an obscure term. You can break it down relatively easily, but it still does not give you a better clue what it is. And it’s such a broad church of different practices. And it’s used in so many different ways and so many different approaches to it and I would say it already is kind of an open method.  So open design apply to ethnography would be reducing some of the barrier of access to ethnographic methodologies. Making it a little bit more amenable to use in different context by people who aren’t necessarily skilled anthropologist or ethnographers. To make it useful. A good example of that would probably be, application in human centred design method, you might be a coder you need to understand your user base and you use ethnography to do that. But ultimately if they are wrapped up academic languages, then you are not going to use it in an agile way. Use it as fluidly as you might. Coz ultimately the core practices of anthropology is trying to understand the motives, and organising concepts of other people. That’s my approach or my sense of it.”

“I think there’s two ways that you can go. Let’s give worst case scenario and best case scenario. So worst case, it can be valued a practice, making in a way from this dilute form of itself. Becomes somehow attenuated as a practice. Best case scenario, it will become something that central to design methods in general. Something that sits up, possibly like the research development phase of all design, requires some kind of ethnographic structure of insight building. First searching aspect of any design process has to do with tapping into different communities of practice, different ways of seeing the world, different perspective and gathering value from those perspectives. I think ethnography can do very well at it. At the minute, it’s not just raw collections of the fact there are different perspectives. And you go deeper into what those perspectives are and how you can gather value from them. What the value of those different perspectives are. So in a way, the thing you are suggesting, I think this is also my personal research bias, it would work as a system to intergrade knowledge. That would be a win, the best case scenario. Possibly some of the linguistic barriers and the concepts that are used in ethnography, needs to become clarified in order for people really engage with it in a meaningful way. Not to end up with an attenuated form where everyone does it but nobody does it properly.

Often it can be a ‘What’s that?’ It’s sort of the formulation of itself can be the barrier in it’s own right. A barrier of engagement not a practice of engagement. I like this idea that ethnography can be used in a critical way to engage and solve problems. So in a way, it supports the end of design as a general practice not a designing methodology or a designing artefact or classic design. It’s a way of understanding, tuning your understanding of a given situation. It’s a situated methodology. It’s like an interpretive method, so it can be used as a research method to make sense of complexity. I have a very fluid definition of what it is. I am a person that’s in the legitimate peripheral of participation rather than it is my core profession.  ”

**What is the future of openly designed ethnography?**

“I suppose, the truthful answer is I have no idea. It would be nice. Do an ethnography, have the public send me their data.

I can see tremendous opportunities. It’s difficult to do that. To get that level of support. It’d be really nice. In the work we’ve done, we’ve seen how hard it is to get people to participate because there’s nothing in it for people. Whereas I’m getting paid, there’s lots in it for me, but there’s nothing in it for them. But it would be really nice.

The other thing I really worry about is, you know, the privileging of the academic viewpoint. In ethnomethodology, the academic, the sociologist, is just one view. It shouldn’t be privileged. So when I analyse a setting, that is simply my view of it. I can point to data that supports it, but other people can come up with their views, too.

I have a horrible feeling that what would happen with open design is that you’d have the analyst’s view, the academic’s view, and they would merely cherry pick amongst the other academics who contribute to open design to support the view that they have. I mean, it’d be nice to point to things that support them, but nice to point to contributions that contradict what they say. But that’s not the nature of academic life, really. Nor does it lead to any better design recommendations.

I mean, it seems fairly feeble to say: I’ve spent two years studying this, and my recommendations are that if you introduce technology, you do X, Y, and Z; however, diaries from my participants suggest that X, Y, and Z suggest could be disastrous. Academics just aren’t going to say that kind of thing. It’s not very helpful.

This is a problem of moving from a value-free, neutral ethnographic viewpoint to one where you need to make design or policy recommendations. Where you can’t afford to be open and neutral and waffly. You have to say, ‘you should do this.’ Or ‘don’t do that.’ You can point to your data that support that, but often.

Moving from how things are to what ought to be, you can’t necessarily cross them. But if you’re going to be a designer, you have to say that.

Which is why it’s important to change hats.

I think ethnography became established in CSCW and in computing generally. Started employing anthropologists. Most big companies employ ethnographers because companies will always need to understand their users. The future would seem bright. One caveat: I’ve noticed over the years that the nature of the ethnography has changed. It’s gotten shorter and shorter because commercial companies can’t afford the times academics want. All you can do in that case, is say, “this is what I’ve found in a week… blahblahblah, if you want more, you’ll need to hire me for longer.”

Many ethnographies can be done in a shorter time because they’re about routine work. Sometimes you only need a week.

Here’s an advantage of doing open design. Spend a week as an ethnographer in a place, do your work, hand in a report, and then say ‘go ahead and get the employees to add more’. They’re under different pressures than I am, both in terms of writing the report and reporting honestly what they do. You find people don’t always do things in the right order, often for good organisational reasons.”

“The longer I’m in my career, the more ethnography is practised. So I still think that it’s on an upwards trajectory in corporate life. I think it’s still early in its days in corporate life. I think most companies still don’t practice it. Uhm. So I think there’s a lot of future ahead of it. Um. I also wonder, I don’t feel like there’s necessarily a good feedback loop between new practices being discovered in what I would say is academic ethnography, and how that gets back into the corporate environment. In the corporate environment, you aren’t exposed to outside skills and opinions. You get training, get your job, and then practice your work, and you could be practicing it in the same way five or ten years later. There could be new practices in ethnography that could radically improve the way you practice it, but that loop between more academia and the corporate world is not very good.

That’s a problem for a lot of disciplines.

It just seems like a huge opportunity. I think those practices can stagnate in a corporate environment.”

“I really like the idea of ethnography being a collaborative tool. And although, I know a lot of anthropologists get quite understandably upset with the dilution of ethnography through the ideas of mini-ethnography. Actually I get quite impressed by the idea of it as a way to localise solutions, things like medical services and policy stuff. Particularly ideas, simply by getting staffs who are delivering services be part of ethnography, the idea that they might see their client, see them as part of this rich cultural things. Even if one of the manifestations is  that people in one part of the city struggle to walk to the other one, because they are terrified of territory and gang fights, because they  are poor and they struggle to afford to travel. Even if they are relatively benign  things, ethnography as just a practice that is, the value of time spent on simply understanding a local community, a set of values, and a set of practices is quite precious. The future, I think, seems to be more valuable to a lot of tech and other kind of companies that are looking for…. they are not just looking at optimise the old work but to find new ideas for what to do. For that you need to learn whys and you need to learn details. You can’t just learn what and optimise that. So I think ethnography as a set of skills can be redeployed in different circumstances and for lots of reasons. Rather than being a project, it can be a long lived study like five years of time spent in a different area. Maybe tools can be developed to support that.”

“Human centred agenda in design is a process finding its anchors. There’s the threats to exclusion and threats to it being diluted. The future of ethnography, it needs to be an expended theory of making sense of change and making sense of complex circumstance. Feeding a coherent identity for how it is valuable to different groups of communities of practice. It’s almost like, spreading it out but keeping it reasonably coherent.”