

# CHAPTER ONE | CONTEXT

## SITUATING MY RESEARCH

It is important to begin my thesis with an explanation of how this work is situated within anthropology. Without such an explanation, I fear the many layers of ethnographic research that you will soon encounter will not clearly present themselves. *Applied anthropology, science and technology studies (STS) and design ethnography*, are the most prominent of the layers to be discussed below, all of which have contributed to one another and overlap in many instances.

## APPLIED ANTHROPOLOGY

While the debate over the use of applied anthropology is long and treacherous, I aim to follow a positive path that acknowledges anthropology's ability to successfully merge theory and practice in a way that is meaningful to a particular society or social group.

Past debates have centered on applied anthropology's history, which are rooted in colonial encounters, tainting the work of anthropologists. However, the fact stands, as it does for many disciplines, anthropological practices were the product of colonial encounters, serving as a liaison between contacted population groups (Rylko-Bauer et al. 2006: 179). Thus, accusations of deep-seated inequalities rooted in the methodologies of applied anthropology, while should be taken seriously, cannot be dealt with separate from the discipline as a whole.

As a result of this negative connotation a variety of applied subfields have emerged (public, engaged, critically-engaged, action, participatory, collaborative - anthropology), many of which have developed their own methodologies and histories with applied anthropology as the overarching discipline. For this research I will be placed under the umbrella of applied

anthropology as an area of anthropology that denotes the practice of anthropological theory to find a cause or solution to particular issues.

I find Rylko-Bauer et al.'s definition of applied anthropology to concisely cover what I hope to achieve with my study:

We argue that contemporary applied anthropologists cannot simply be assigned to a particular stance *vis a vis* dominant social systems, historical processes, or social classes. It is more accurately conceived as a complex and broad “anthropology in use”, united by the goal and practice of applying theories, concepts and methods from anthropology to confront human problems that often contribute to profound social suffering. [2006: 179]

Although the consequence of my study will most likely not be reduced social suffering, I hope to contribute to the understanding of technology use as a deeply personal experience that can alter a particular goal or outcome for its user.

James L. Peacock (1997) reintroduces the “synergy between theory and practice”, where theory can grow from practice much in the same fashion as clinicians who treat patients, educate residents and conduct research all in one setting. Anthropologists possess this opportunity in fieldwork as I will demonstrate in volunteering as a web designer for nonprofits, while simultaneously studying my own methods and the organizations' relations to involved persons, processes and technology.

Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995) adds to this discussion through her work on militant anthropology, as Peacock argues for a practical combination of practice and theory, but leaves out the relationships that are built in a work and/or fieldwork environment. Scheper-Hughes brings to the light the necessity of acknowledging and valuing the relationships built through fieldwork rather than dislodging one's role as a participant observer, especially when a situation requires one to take sides. While I was not required to take a precarious activist stance (where Scheper-Hughes often finds herself), I participated in the

struggles of nonprofits through discussion of their goals and technology needs, and contemplated the status of the web design industry in various technology networking events and interviews. Working as a web designer and volunteer for two nonprofits to fulfill my participant observation experience, excusing myself when struggles emerged would have weakened my relationships and thus decreased the value of my work (Scheper-Hughes 1995: 411).

Finally, Scheper-Hughes makes a call for accessibility in applied anthropological work; writing for the people that we aim to represent (1995: 420). In order to satisfy this suggestion, my work will be placed online for access by wider audiences and broken down into digestible amounts, separating theory from recommendations, for a more readable document. Readers should be able to easily identify what is of interest to them, as I am not just writing for the inside, but writing for web designers, nonprofits, the Wordpress community, design ethnographers and anthropologists (Peacock 1997: 4).

#### SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY STUDIES and ACTOR-NETWORK THEORY

The history of changing views in user-technologist relationships and the movement toward greater use of ethnography in design originates in the work of those involved in science and technology studies (STS). This movement is seen from the study of technology as an isolated object, to the study of the relations involved in the object's creation. STS assumes that the process of creating knowledge and building technoscience<sup>1</sup> is one that is inherently social. Those involved in technoscience are both members of a social organization and must be socialized into functioning within the organization, therefore abiding by a certain number of created rules and regulations. It is these relations many users are unaware of whilst using a piece of technology or accepting any given scientific fact (Sismodo 2004: 12).

Actor-network theory (ANT) has proven to be the most visible theoretical backdrop of STS, cementing the idea that technology and sociology are

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<sup>1</sup> Latour's forging of science and technology (1987: 29).

inseparable, as neither technology nor the associated social vision will come into existence without the other (Sismodo 2004). Bruno Latour (1987), through ANT, describes a movement from trying to unpack the *black box*, or technological object and all its relations, in favour of following a process from conception to intended final form. This requires both human and nonhuman actors to be capable of building relations and dependent on each other for growth.

While STS may be a view of how to study science and technology more holistically, what this has done is gradually informed those working within such organizations on how aspects of their design process could be altered to produce better design and/or technology. Specifically, the constructivist nature of STS, described by Sismodo as, “...the study of how scientists and technologists build socially situated knowledges and things” (2010: 71), challenges the positivistic view of members of the technoscientific communities.

Diane Forsythe (1993) also found these positivistic or self-evident views of knowledge working with engineers in the field of artificial intelligence. These engineers believed because they were trained in a hard science, their certain level of expertise was outside the realm of social relations or culture and therefore could not be challenged. Forsythe argues that the lack of recognition by the engineers of the significance of social relations embeds their own systems of knowledge and power within the final product. In a later article she expands upon this idea, identifying the lack of acknowledgement of the many involved relations, as a system of “deletion” (1999). Engineers “delete” major aspects of the workflow by categorizing social or “nontechnical” interaction, as unimportant work. This view will be revisited in the chapter *Web Designers and Workflow*, as the design and technology industry are equally affected by such positivistic beliefs.

My work can be placed within STS as a portion of the research centers around the workflow and processes of web designers in the nonprofit sector. Through semi-structured interviews, web design networking events and my own experiences as a web designer I am further able to decipher the reasoning

behind many decisions made on the path to a website's creation; decisions often impacting the successful utilization of technology at a later date. This is where ANT becomes particularly relevant, as in order to understand the role of technology, I must understand that there are a series of relations attached to both technological artifacts as well as the people involved in their creation and use.

#### DESIGN ETHNOGRAPHY

Lucy Suchman (1995) has stated that designers are at a disadvantage due to their separation from those they were meant to be designing for. As a result of this mindset, design ethnography has become integrated into many web design workflows for its methods' abilities to build strong relationships with clients and/or end-users and to understand technology in individual contexts. For the purpose of this thesis, design ethnography will be defined as the process of using ethnographic methods to both better understand end-users and/or technology prior to development to in order to inform better practices in design, as well the study of a technology currently in use to improve the artifact at a later stage. Both paths benefit from using ethnography to also look at the structure of organizations where the technology is to be implemented to gauge the potential for different levels of technology maintenance (Macaulay et.al. 2000).

The crossover of ethnography into the design industry has sparked debates over the validity of implemented anthropological methods due to changes in time spent in the field, a lack of theory and (mis/re)interpretation of many methods' definitions. These rifts partially a result of individuals not trained in anthropology now conducting ethnographic research based on their own personal knowledge and assumptions about ethnographic fieldwork, and not being held to the standards of academic anthropology, but the requirements of their own industry.

Forsythe (1999) views these misconceptions as the making out of ethnography to be *invisible*. Often web designers do not realize that the results of ethnographic work are not the interview transcripts or audio/visual recordings, but simply the data. Anthropologists are trained specifically to interpret this data, with a solid grounding in theory and methodology to create ethnography. Forsythe outlines six misconceptions about the use of ethnography in design<sup>2</sup>, of which I will highlight, “To find out what people *do*, just ask them!” (1999: 130) and alter slightly, “To find out what people *want*, just ask them!” The technology sector often does not allow ample time for ethnographic research and designs are created based on short term research that takes what people say they want, or what design ethnographers have seen people do a few times as truth.

In my role as participant observer, volunteering as a web designer required me to practice the current methods of the design industry. Therefore design ethnography served as the framework for research done in developing websites for two participating nonprofits. Here I was able to experience the occurrence of ethnographic misconceptions and provide a personal account of the successes and failures of utilizing design ethnography for web designers and the nonprofit sector (see Chapter 4).

## SUMMARY

First and foremost, I am a social anthropologist, conducting research in the subfield of applied anthropology while utilizing STS and ANT to study the effects of design ethnography and Wordpress on nonprofit client – web designer relationships. STS and ANT allow me to research the relations formed between human and nonhuman actors and how their relationship is then manifested in the sustainable use of a website.

In order to study client – web designer relationships in the nonprofit sector, I utilized participant observation on two levels: the first participating as a

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<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 4 for full discussion.

nonprofit web designer in the technology industry; the second, as a volunteer/web designer with the nonprofits I was working to build a website for. The first level is where I will be connecting with ethnographic methods and theory tied to academic anthropology, allowing the framing of this research project. In the second, I was forced to separate myself as an anthropologist seeking to comprehend web designers who work with nonprofits, from the web designer using design ethnography (with participant observation as the primary method) to understand the nonprofits' structure and website needs. Therefore the websites created for the nonprofits are not in themselves anthropological, but black boxes to be unpacked as a product of my participant observation. Thus my work as volunteer/web designer will be framed through the context of the web design industry and then evaluated by myself the social and applied anthropologist.