The EPIC 2011 Conversation

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> *EPIC seems to be a group of people who share a way of thinking. And I wanted to be a part of that.*
> Raph D'Amico,
> student at IIT Institute of Design

EPIC was created as a place for industry-based ethnographic practitioners to come together and take part in a conversation. Attendance is intentionally kept to fewer than 400 people so that we all can engage in the same conversation. Each year clear conversational themes have emerged, but these themes have never been tracked. Up to now, only those that have attended are close to the conversations. This year we captured the meta-conversations: (1) to extend EPIC2011 to a broader audience of those who were unable to attend; and (2) to push the EPIC community forward by documenting our evolving conversation and understandings of ourselves. New features introduced this year are conference presentation podcasts (http://epiconference.com/2011/podcasts) and video recordings of our keynote speakers (http://epiconference.com/2011/program/keynotes).

EPIC2011 marks a turning point, with less questioning about how to prove one's value and be heard, and more focus on pushing the boundaries of where and how our skills can be applied. EPIC was intended as a safe space for practitioners to come together to learn, grow, connect, feel comfortable; throughout the years EPIC has grown in its meaning to us and what binds us has, perhaps, changed. As Bruce Sterling noted in his closing keynote, we are building a bigger tent.

This year's theme was evolution and revolution. It is therefore fitting that as a community we agree that "we have evolved beyond [descriptive] ethnography" and that "the sum of us is greater than any one of us" (Mack & Squires). The EPIC community is bound by more than a methodological and analytical approach, but more a "worldview based on people…a sensibility about understanding people" (Mack & Squires). We produce knowledge by generating possibilities, possible futures of what could (or should) be from a deep understanding of where people and institutions are now (Dubberly, anderson & Bezaitis, Sterling). It is within this knowledge production that our value lies, not in our

ability to tour clients to meet their customers (Schwarz), our abilities to describe people and their contexts, not even just our ability to interpret experiences. As Suzanne Thomas highlighted, we come from different disciplines, different books, different theoretical frames, but "we are people that thrive on interpreting what others may see as mundane … we relish in the "a-ha" moment" – we are therefore bounded by orienting ourselves to others' realities, but with a point of view.

As in past years, about half of this year's attendees were first timers to the conference. Many were looking for their home base. Many found it. At first glance EPIC appears to be a place where multiple companies come together to share. However, it is really about the individuals, not just the companies on our name badges. EPIC is not just a conference. EPIC itself is a representation of that which ultimately binds us – a way of thinking. Here we try to highlight themes of how our shared thinking manifested within the four days we spent together in Boulder Sept 18-21. And we hope this piques interests so readers dive further into the papers, podcasts and keynote videos.

1. A Call to Move from "Could" to "Should"

From the conference opening to the closing, we were confronted consistently by the question of whether we have an ethical obligation to use our skills to drive change. The EPIC 2010 closing keynote speaker, Michael Shanks had left us with a call to action to move away from a pigeon-holed definition of ourselves as ethnographers, design anthropologists or design researchers, and reframe ourselves as strategists and interventionists. This year's opening keynote speaker, Hugh Dubberly, picked up where Michael left off, by challenging us in the EPIC community to view ourselves as agents for change whereby our data and produced knowledge stand for what "SHOULD" be, rather than hiding behind what "could" be. Many presenters observed that we as practitioners are shifting in our role and our value away from "just" being an ethnographer (one who studies and descriptively records human culture) to that of being a change agent (Mack & Squires; Beers, Stinson & Yeager; anderson & Bezaitis; Blomberg; Radka & Margolis; Peinado, Jarvin & Damoisel). We were provoked by presenters: "How can ethnographers create change in addition to observing, validating, disqualifying?" (Alice Peinado). "We must begin to frame our recommendations beyond how to redesign the product, service or user experience system" (Rich Radka). "Raising awareness is not enough. Ethnographers must DO something. So we also design, engineer, architect…" (Rijsberman). The call was clear: We can and should do more than describe and analyze the experiences of our participants. When we look for clues about how we get from "here" to "there," we have a choice as to where we're headed. However, there was an overwhelming sense that as a group we are committed to taking a stronger point of view, especially if done in the name of health and well-being. At EPIC 2010, Tony Salvador shared an iconoclastic 'Hero's Journey' narrative ("Heroic Complexity in Strategic Innovation"), in which he challenged us to reconsider whether we each can or should position ourselves as the one person who could solve all the problems of the world (or at least the problems of our company of employ). Bruce Sterling closed EPIC2011 by reminding us that we each have an obligation to help make these changes happen, but since these changes are complicated, he set the bar just high enough: each of us must do one seven-billionth of the work.

2. Ethnography / Ethnographers Being Utilized and Engaged in Different Ways

The conference theme of "Evolution / Revolution" set an expectation that as a group we would explore changes in praxis models as well as changes in the domains of households, communities, organizations, institutions, networks where our work is situated. The outcome of these explorations is clear: Ethnography is maturing in its domains of application. Many practitioners are experiencing and driving the use of ethnography in different ways. Where once EPIC was dominated by product design, a clear shift is underway to spaces like generating new business models and transforming business organizations. Many papers examined how we can help organizations understand themselves better, not just their products (Madsbjerg, Krenchel, Ramsey-Elliot & Hesselholt; Beers, Stinson & Yeager; Blomberg; Radka & Margolis; Nave; Barrett). In addition we learned that some of our mainstay activities and defining roles are leaving us unfulfilled. For example, we are no longer satisfied to serve as a tour guide for clients to directly experience customers' lives with no ask for interpretation of what is being witnessed, is no longer (Schwarz) And yet, while we were treated to a versatile array of domains in which our work is situated, from Hyderabad's urban slums to hospital waiting rooms to corporate boardrooms, something warrants further explication here: is the tempo, scale, and direction of changes in these domains best understood as 'revolutionary' or 'evolutionary'? We need to remember that 'revolution' is teleological – intentional, goal oriented, precipitated, and directional. 'Evolution,' by contrast, is contingent and diffuse. The mechanisms of adaptation, mutation, genetic flow and drift do NOT result in any necessary outcomes except adaptation to changing conditions and inter-generational resilience. Going forward, we also need to be clear on whether our models of change are descriptive, relying on analogies, or predictive, identifying actual causal mechanisms with demonstrable positive predictive value.

3. Continued Role for Models

Hugh Dubberly's opening keynote argued the necessity of models as a foundation for making ethnographic research (any research, for that matter) truly part of the Design dialectic: "Models transition research to designers. … A list is not a model. Saying one understands a system means one has a model. So no model means no understanding." Hugh filled our minds with multiple ways to *show* our value and challenged us to embrace the modeling tradition as a way to bridge research into business and technology. Ensuing conversation encompassed a sense of déjà vu: Did models ever really go away? Or have they become embedded into our work in a way they are no longer called out as directly? In 2005 Rick Robinson called out for 'theory debate'. Could this be viewed as a cry for 'model debate'? The Twitter feed lit up around the value of, limits of, and so forth of models. Models as a theme was constantly reinforced because there were models ethnographers have created presented throughout the conference (Radka, Ortlieb's Concentric model of Social Distance, Kitner's Social Viability Measure), as well as discussion about interaction with other models out there in the world (Blomberg; Pensri). Furthermore, staying true to the conference theme of evolution and revolution, explicit attempts were made to articulate models and mechanisms of evolution (Barrett, Nave, among others), and courageous explorations of how these models and mechanisms might apply to praxis (anderson, Wakeford, Ortlieb, Patel).

Going forward, any discussion about models will have to wrestle with whether the models we use are descriptive or predictive. Models that predict the continued success of ethnographic praxis will need to shift the conversation among ourselves from "How can our praxis survive by adapting to changing environmental conditions?" to "How does our praxis replicate itself, project by project, practitioner by practitioner, organization by organization?" We heard plenty of suggestions for where to look for answers to this question: the material circumstances and organizational settings in which praxis takes place that constrain or promote the persistence of particular techniques; changes in how evidence is (or isn't used) to support actionable decision-making; changes in the position of stakeholders in the activities of data collection, analysis, and reporting.

4. Quantitative Part of our Norm and Theory Generation

The maturing of ethnographic praxis within industry was a theme in and of itself at EPIC 2011. Neal Patel's talk adds to what is now a series of EPIC papers around the use of quantitative data as a companion to ethnographic practices, leading to the conclusion that quantitative data is becoming a key part of daily work for ethnographers, rather than the exception. Likewise, the field seems to be maturing as soon through the highlighting of theory in practice, rather than just theory (EPIC 2005 & 2006) or just practice (EPIC 2009 in particular). The range of papers here included those from Google, Olson, Goldsmiths, Claro and Intel. If EPIC is a marker, the field is slowly moving away from descriptive to generative work, which a grounding in theory enables. The trajectory from descriptive to generative was also present in how traditional media, like video, was used by PARC as being about generative action, rather than descriptive scenes from the field.

5. Change and Contest

We were reminded once again of how our work navigates between the power of history as it confronts forces of disruption. The Pecha Kucha presentation format, introduced in Tokyo at EPIC 2010, provided visually arresting highlights of the past year, including the Japanese tsunami and the Madison, WI protests. Something striking and important was on display through the ethnographers' bearing witness. Our attention was directed to the diversity and multitude of voices that are part of such events, often over-simplified in media accounts. Bearing witness to people's experience moves us from sensationalism to empathy, and on a much more practical level shows how fundamental resilience and resourcefulness helps people repurpose technology and social institutions to help mark and move past trauma, change, and contest. These presentations served as a reminder that we are not only bound by our orientation around studying humans, but that we ourselves are human, and that in our work we are given the great honor of connecting with people at moments when they need connection, which can reinvigorate our passion for the work we are doing. (Ugai: What an Earthquake Changed; McGlenn, Evolution in Revolution: a chat about Madison protests; Kageyama: Cheerful Humors: Changes in Japan after the Disaster).

In short, the EPIC-2011 conversation has been equal parts inspirational and aspirational. We've been reminded of the important changes in business, service design, and public policy in which our work has collectively resulted. Through case studies and conceptual models, we savored how

ethnographic work gives life to the numbers, examines critically the distribution of power and decision-making, and illuminates the arc of change. And finally, we were challenged to think about our relationship to change: are we merely observers? Sense-makers and predictors of change? Or do we have a responsibility to choose to be change agents, and if so, to what ends? While we raise more questions than we answer, isn't that what helps keep a lively conversation moving?