Course Description:
Introduces ethnography as a social science methodology and way of knowing with which to study information and its social contexts. Places ethnography in relation to other research methodologies relevant to the production of the Informatics knowledge base. Trains students in the use of a broad range of ethnographic techniques relevant to study of automated information technology in use. Designed to be open to students from other programs with sufficient methodological and substantive background.

General Rationale for an Ethnography Course in Informatics
In the first instance, “ethnography”—literally, “a picture of a people—is used to refer to both
a) A kind of writing that aims to account for some major aspect or even the majority of major aspects of a people’s way of life, and
b) To a research paradigm, one also known as participant observation, that aims to produce the knowledge that allows one to produce such writing with confidence.

This research approach has long been practiced in some social sciences (especially anthropology) and humanities. Recently, ethnography has developed greater cachet, not only in these academic fields but in professional fields like Informatics as well. The renewed interest in ethnography is at least in part due to the allegedly considerable and diverse social implications of new information practices, as manifest in notions like that of an “Information Society.” Querying such notions, some information ethnographers have also attended to the many ways in which social and cultural contexts structure information and the automated information and communications technologies (AICTs) recently developed to deal with it.

To do this work, ethnographers have had to extend their approach, figuring out how to do trans-local fieldwork on “cybercultures” (the social spaces enabled and often gendered through use of digital technologies, or “cyberspace”) or how to gain sufficient expertise to gain entree to the desired field. They have developed “hybrid” approaches that combine on- and offline fieldwork, identified proper modes of online participation and mediated performance, and set standards for ethical electronic research. In the process, they have come into close dialogue with computer science and information science, as well as media scholars and those in fields like telecommunications and business. Initially, AICT ethnographers worked primarily in North Atlantic social formations, but they are now developing a corpus of studies of AICTing in non-Western social formations as well.

Ethnography is now commonly used to think about massive multiplayer online games, social networking sites, on-line classrooms, and work processes in “virtual” organizations attempting to implement new IT systems. Those doing participant
observation who may not think of themselves as studying “information” nonetheless find their informants “going digital” in ways that need to be taken into account.

As these developments indicate, ethnography’s ambit now extends beyond the methodological preoccupations of particular academic disciplines and incorporates lots of methodological innovation. In the current situation, nobody “owns” ethnography. The danger in such a situation is that, cut off from the deep methodological discussion in disciplines, “ethnography” will become an empty descriptor or be reduced to a synonym for mere observation.

This course is designed for PhD and research-oriented masters students studying information in any of its many guises and who see themselves either using ethnography or working in close dialogue with it (what will be referred to as “exercising the ethnographic gaze”).

As an Informatics course
As this is to be a course in Informatics, of the many forms of information, those mediated or affected by digitization will be of central but not exclusive interest. As a field of study, Informatics addresses digital technologies in use contexts rather than in development. The professional informist studies and solves problems with and/or caused by AICTs. Informatics draws together people who have studied AICTs deployed in distinct fields, so its students and well as faculty are drawn from a number of different disciplinary backgrounds. Thus, the methodologies considered relevant to the new discipline are diverse and a matter of some controversy.

Hence, any informatics methodology course must address the issue of the appropriate research methodologies for Informatics. Since Informatics is based on understanding how computing is actually done in “real life” situations, the methods developed by social science to investigate organizations and communities in context have much to contribute to the knowledge base of the new field. Because ethnographers typically stress the broader social correlates and cultural contexts of AICTs, their work has increasingly influenced how new forms of information are conceptualized. Via work at organizations like Xerox PARC, for example, informists have become interested in the understandings of information developed by ethnographers. They are perhaps even more interested in using ethnographic and related qualitative techniques in the design and deployment of information systems. Data from existing Information Ethnography is already used in two key curriculum areas at the IUB School of Informatics, Human Computer Interaction Design and Social Informatics; its use will likely expand as we bring on new curricula in things like health informatics. Simultaneously, the grounding of ethnography in Informatics holds out the hope of creating a truly multidisciplinary ethnography, one that is conversant with disciplinary discourses but also transcends them. Arguably positioned at the “cutting edge” of research innovation, Informatics ethnographers need to grasp the range of new developments in ethnography and participate in the discussion about them.

As on Information
In addition to making sense of the new meanings and forms of ethnography, this course also requires a reflective specification of the information domain. I choose to do this by focusing on information’s continual relations to data, knowledge, and wisdom.
My working definition of “information” is data with some context; that is, data that we think has relevance but to what is not clear. Information is, importantly, also different from knowledge, or information embraced by a social group as “true” or “valid”; that is information whose significance the group believes it knows. Wisdom, at least for some, is information whose validity has been demonstrated through lived experience. (A similar set of distinctions can be made Post-modernistically, where knowledge is always embodied in an individual or group, information is knowledge separated for its embodiment, and data is information so abstracted from lived experience as to be treatable only as “data points” with little or no interpretive context attached.)

So defined, in what sense is information something of which ethnography can be made? As “information” is not a people with a way of life, can information be a proper object of ethnography? Implicit in the previous paragraph is the idea that an informational moment is characteristic of all human social formations. Thus, the ethnography of information is in the first instance the ethnography of the informational moment in human cultures. Further, because we all do it, but we do it differently, information is a good topic for comparative research, what anthropological ethnographers call “ethnology.”

I wish to argue for a still stronger notion of the ethnography of information. That is, as social formations have evolved toward more complexity, the informational aspect or moment of the data-information-knowledge continuum has typically increased at the expense of data, on the one hand, and knowledge, on the other. Very broadly speaking, in the past, data was gathered to produce knowledge. As data were gathered, patterns in them were perceived by the wise, whose job it was to make knowledge out of the patterned data (information). Of course, not every bit of data found a knowledge home, but it was gathered in the hope that such would be the case.

In contrast, the importance of the moment of “informing” has increased as means for cultural construction of sensory input have grown and forms for mediation increased. We humans have today come to terms with living both with

a) With massive amounts of information, much of it in new, unfamiliar forms, and

b) Without knowing the real meaning or import of most of the information with which we deal.

That is, as means of mediation increase the ambiguity of signs, each of us confronts an information deluge. The development and deployment of AICTs has enabled a substantial increase in means of manipulation and therefore ambiguity with which we are required to live. It is precisely in this sense that ours is indeed an “Information Age.”

Early in the class, this approach to information will be compared to and contrasted with others of relevance to Informatics. These include the signal-oriented approach to information developed by Claude Shannon, on the one hand, and the focus on culture as representation fostered in the humanities, especially by Post-Modernism, on the other.

Ethnography of Information as Theory

As suggested above, its practitioners generally think of ethnography as more than a way to describe things as they are—we want to account for why they are as they are. Consequently, it is very difficult to think ethnographically without an empirical focus. In this class, information is that focus. Thus, much of the reading, lectures, and discussions
in class will address what ethnographers think they know about it, especially about our
Information Society, and the two main forms that this knowledge takes. These two are
created via field study of:

a) Humans whose practices focus heavily on information, including systems
developers, techno-scientists, lawyers, and “users” of software; and
b) Information “itself,” including of course the documents and visualizations in
which it is represented and the codes with which it is enframed.

This attempt to develop an ethnography of the informed as well as those doing the
informing follows from the equivalency methodological strictures of STS.

Ethnography of Information as Practice

In general, my aim will be to help advanced students committed to doing
ethnography to do it well, and to help those who wish to draw upon the ethnographic
tradition and contemporary information ethnography literature to do so in a more
informed manner. While learning to assess critically extant information ethnography, the
student will also be learning to do it. In addition to learning how to study informing itself
through a systematic introduction to the various approaches in use (including on-line, off-
line, and hybrid), students will also apply the Information Ethnography gaze to issues like
how to promote user involvement in systems and "ICT4D" (AICTs for development).

Every effort will be made to present course materials in a manner that makes them
accessible to graduate students in other fields where ethnography, information, and
AICTs are becoming important disciplinary concerns, including anthropology, business,
sociology, SLIS, telecommunications, education, and communications and culture.

Course Objectives

To prepare students to engage actively in the epistemological and methodological
debates surrounding field study of information and digital technologies in use; and
To train students to use ethnographic methods effectively in studying contemporary
information.

To accomplish these objectives, our time in class will be divided roughly into
thirds. The initial third will consist of discussion of assigned readings, some posted on
Oncourse but the bulk from the two course texts, selected because they are indicative of
what ethnography currently looks like:

The second third, taking up most time in the early parts of the course, will be more
lecture-like, intended to contextualize current ethnography historically and disciplinarily.
The third third will be devoted to your experiences using various ethnographic methods
to study material related to your own research.

Student Activities:

Thus, each of you will be responsible for:

1. Completing assigned readings and participating in discussion of them; and
2. Carrying out various assigned exercises and periodically reporting on their results,
   including inter alia what if anything was learned of relevance to you chosen research
topic; and
3. Preparing an initial proposal for submission to, hopefully, the new Social Informatics Review panel or to the IU Bloomington Institutional Review Board;

4. Writing up a research report as a final course product. This report will include:
   a. Identification of an information research problem, justifying interest in it and specifying some of the ways in which it is of interest and amenable to ethnographic study;
   b. A brief review of Literature relevant to this problem;
   c. A statement of all the methods whose use you think likely to produce information on this problem;
   d. Results of the range of ethnographic methods you used to investigate this problem presented as a preliminary attempt to account for the dominant patterns relevant to your problem;
   e. Analysis of what the data you obtained suggests about how to account in general for the current role of information in social formation reproduction; and
   f. A statement of your conclusions about ethnography as a way of knowing more about both your problem and information problems in general.

Additional Information
Some “Classic” ethnographies:
   Lynd, Robert M and Helen. 1925 Middletown.
   Levi-Strauss, Claude Tristes Tropics.
   Malinowski, Bronislaw (1922) Argonauts of the Western Pacific.
   Turnbull, Colin (195?) The Forest People.

"AICT" ethnographies:

Information Ethnographers whose work will likely be of interest to you:
   John Anderson, anthropology, Catholic University (Arab informatics)
   Steve Barley, management, Stanford (Researching engineers in Silicon Valley)
   Genevieve Bell, anthropologist, Intel (Cross-cultural study of technology, especially Asia)
   Tom Boellstorff UC Irvine Anthropology; (recent work on games)
   Pablo Boczkowski, MIT (Sloan School of Management)
Gabriella Coleman, New Media at the New School University (Open Source and the Cultural Imaginary)

Andy Crabtree, Sociology, University of Nottingham, UK (organizations, systems development; rapid ethnographic assessment)

Joe Dumit, anthropology, (Director of STS program, UC-Davis)

Jan English-Lueck, Anthropology, San Jose State U. (Silicon Valley Project)

Joan Fujimura (Sociology, University of Wisconsin)

Keith Hampton, MIT (Department of Urban Studies and Planning)

Penny Harvey, anthropologist, University of Manchester (UK) (Museum informatics)

Stephen Helmreich, History of Consciousness, MIT (Artificial Life, Bioinformatics)

Adrienne Jenik, UCSD, (Computer and Media Arts)

Lori Kendall University of Illinois Urbana/Champaign (Sociology)

Jean Lave, Education and anthropology, University of California at Berkeley

Gustavo Mesch, University of Haifa (Sociology and Anthropology)

Bonnie Nardi (Informatics, UC-Irvine)

Carsten Oesterlund, Information Studies, Syracuse University (health informatics)

Wanda Orlikowski, management, MIT (organizational informatics)

Bryan Pfaffenberger, anthropology in the School of Engineering, University of Virginia (technology; also a writer of Open Source manuals)

Sandeep Sahay, Informatics, University of Oslo (development informatics)

Susan Leigh Star (deceased) School of Information, University of Pittsburgh (Classification; science informatics)

Lucy Suchman, anthropology/ethnomethodology, University of Lancaster (UK)

Sharon Traweek, UCLA (science informatics)

Sherry Turkle, MIT (Sociology)

Nina Wakeford University of Surrey (Sociology and INCITE)

A Brief bibliography of recent works in the ethnography of information:


Forsythe, D. 2001 Studying those who study us: An anthropologist is the world of
Golub, Alex 2004 “Copyright and Taboo.” Anthropological Quarterly 77(3).
Kelty, Christopher M. 2004 “Culture’s Open Sources: Software, Copyright, and Cultural Critique.” Anthropological Quarterly 77(3).

Class Schedule

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<td>Syllabus</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<td>2. 1/19 History of Ethnography</td>
<td>Stocking and Malinowski (Oncourse)</td>
<td>Behavior Observation</td>
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<td>3. 1/26</td>
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<td>4. 2/2</td>
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<td>5. 2/9 No class</td>
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<td>6. 2/16</td>
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<td>9. 3/9</td>
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( no class 3/16; Spring Break)
10. 3/23 Ethnographic Intervention

11. 3/30 “Hanging out”

12. 4/6 Content analysis

13. 4/12 (to be determined, maybe “rapid” ethnography?)

14. 4/20 (to be determined, maybe “quick and dirty” ethnography?)

15. 4/27 Final research report due